Can We See Queerly Now?
from the 1940s until Today

MASTERARBEIT
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
Master of Arts

Studium der Anglistik und Amerikanistik
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt
Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften

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Februar 2015
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(Anne Eizinger) Villach, February 2015
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1 Introduction

“What do you mean you don’t believe in homosexuality? It’s not like
the Easter Bunny, your belief isn’t necessary.”

– Lea DeLaria, US-American comedian and actress

Tolerance. It is almost impossible to not come across this term in popular media. Parents aim to ‘teach’ their children tolerance, Conchita Wurst calls for more tolerance towards minority groups at the Eurovision Song Contest 2014 and the city of Los Angeles even has its own ‘Museum of Tolerance’. At first glance, tolerance seems to be a good thing. Everybody wants to be seen as tolerant, but who wants to be tolerated? In connection with gay men and women, we often hear sentences like “I only want to be accepted” or “I just want to be tolerated like everyone else”, but is that really what gays around the world should be striving for – to be tolerated? I have become rather cautious with the use of the word tolerance, as well as with the concept of integration. This paper will illustrate that tolerance is simply not sufficient. On the contrary, tolerance sets the bar too low and implies and that it is enough if society does not hate gays anymore but just gives them a minimum of ‘acceptance’ (Walters, 2014: 10).

To understand my argument, it is necessary to examine the early uses of the word tolerance. In the past, the term was used in pharmacology and toxicology, dealing with how much poison a body can ‘tolerate’ before it succumbs to a certain toxic substance (ibid.: 1). Today, we talk about tolerating minorities, tolerating different religions and beliefs and about tolerating others’ sexual orientations. Inversely, nobody speaks of tolerating a good book, a day full of sunshine or a nice talk with a good friend. Hence, to tolerate something almost always assumes something negative. It does not make sense to people to say they tolerate something unless they expect it is wrong or despicable in some way (ibid.: 1-2). Therefore, saying that we tolerate gays, is alarming on multiple levels, as author Suzanna Danuta Walters points out:

To say you “tolerate” homosexuality is to imply that homosexuality is bad or immoral or even just benignly icky, like that exotic food you just can’t bring yourself to try. You are willing to put up with (to tolerate) this nastiness, but the toleration proves the thing (the person, the sexuality, the food) to be irredeemably nasty to begin with (2014: 2).
In this paper, I argue that the aim of US-American TV should be to *include* gays in significant ways. I deliberately use the term of ‘inclusion’ instead of saying that gay men and women should be integrated into heteronormative ideology. The concept of integration suggests that the minority (in this case gays) needs to be added to the dominant culture but also entails that the people belonging to this group are still viewed as ‘the others’. Within the concept of inclusion, on the contrary, the minority is no longer seen as a separate group within the group, but the members of the minority and the dominant culture coexist and interact with each other. Also, while integration always implies that people from ‘the outside’ have to be brought to the inner circle, inclusion does not see one group as superior to the other, but simply postulates their co-existence. Consequently, within this paper, I will not speak out for the integration of gays on US-American TV, but for meaningful inclusion and portrayal of gays in these shows.

![Integration vs Inclusion](image)

Fig. 1. The difference between integration and inclusion

Concerning the structure of this thesis, I have divided the paper into two main sections. The first part will be the contextualization of my research, which can be considered the theoretical part of my work. Within this chapter, I will first examine the origin of the sitcom genre on US-American TV as such. I will give a historical overview of this development from the traditional radio sitcoms of the 1940s to some of the most popular examples of the sitcom in the 1980s. It will be illustrated how the early sitcoms of the 1940s and 1950s mainly took place in the ‘family room’ and primarily portrayed the perfect suburban nuclear family. However, I will also point out how other shows contributed to the emancipation of women in US-American society and how the sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s finally introduced a more realistic portrayal of family by depicting new kinds of family structures. Shows of that time were greatly influenced by social and political movements of the 1960s and often made use of odd characters in order to subtly address social wrongs. During the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, networks started to establish niche marketing
strategies, and minorities that had long been hidden on television were gradually made visible. This also applied to the gay community and gay characters. I will indicate that the issues of visibility and representation are not synonymous and that an increasing number of gays on TV does not automatically guarantee the absence of heteronormativity (Ott / Mack, 2010: 229). In other words, visibility only refers to the number of queer characters or personalities presented on TV, but it does not reveal in which ways gays are represented in these shows.

In the second part of the contextualization chapter, I will then ‘open the closet’ and explore the history of gays within the genre of the sitcom. For this, I will look at various US-American sitcoms within the timeframe from 1989 until 2015 and illustrate how gay men and women are portrayed in these shows. I will start with the famous coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and her sitcom character Ellen Morgan that remarkably changed the US-American media scene. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, although Ellen DeGeneres had played the first openly gay lead character in a US-American sitcom, this was only a starting point. During the 1990s, many sitcoms featured gay characters, but the majority of them had offensively stereotypical roles to play. Also, numerous supposedly ‘gay shows’, such as WILL & GRACE (NBC, 1998-2006), situated their characters in a heteronormative framework, thus implying the supremacy of heterosexuality. Gays on US-American TV became even more visible at the beginning of the new millennium. While some formats of that time still featured offensive and stereotypical images of gays, I will illustrate that other shows of the 2000s, such as QUEER AS FOLK or THE L WORD, openly criticized heteronormative patterns and thus successfully managed to present realistic images of gay men and women.

In the analysis chapter of this paper, I will then focus on the gay male protagonists of three contemporary US-American sitcoms and explore the ways in which they are represented in these shows. I will mainly work with the sitcoms HAPPY ENDINGS (ABC, 2011-2013), THE NEW NORMAL (NBC, 2012-2013) and MODERN FAMILY (ABC, 2009- present), but I will also compare these shows to other US-American sitcoms to reveal certain repetitive patterns in the depictions of gay men. I am fully aware that it is equally important to consider the portrayal of lesbians and bisexuals in US-American TV, but in order not to go beyond the constraints of this paper, I decided to concentrate on male gay characters in the analysis part. Within the
analysis, I will draw attention to gay characters ‘beyond the closet’. I will also raise the question how openly gay characters on US-American TV have influenced straight male masculinity or, in other words, “what it means to be a straight man in a gay-friendly world” (Becker, 2009: 122). Moreover, I will look at how gay men on US-American TV have cleared their way from “dark, sweaty dance clubs to the sanctified homes of American suburbia” (Doran, 2013: 95) and have arrived at the domestic sitcoms of the 21st century. In this context, I will also examine the issues of same-sex parenting and the queer family structures presented in current US-American sitcoms.

The aim of this paper is not only to give the reader an insight into the development of gay visibility in US-American sitcoms, but also to point out that making gays visible is only the first step of a process towards gay equality and that it takes more than just a great number of gay men and women in these shows to be able to speak of something like a victory of the gay movement. What it takes are gays who go unmarked, and who do not get the viewers’ laughs because of their stereotypically gay or ‘campy’ behavior. Furthermore, it takes viewers who do not claim that they ‘tolerate’ gay characters in US-American sitcoms, but who embrace and cherish these characters for who they are and not for what their sexual orientation is. As Walters argues, tolerance allows bigotry to stay in place and homosexuality to remain considered as ‘less than’ heterosexuality’ or, in other words, tolerance is a language both too weak to address the real evil and to vague to address real inclusion (2014: 10-11).
2 Contextualization of Research

2.1 *The US-American Sitcom – Development of the Genre*

2.1.1 Video Stole the Radio Star – Early Sitcoms on Radio and Television in the 1940s and 1950s

Today, at a time when the Internet and TV dominate the media scene and have become indispensable elements of our everyday culture, it is quite difficult to imagine that television itself is relatively young. Also, considering the fact that many of the most famous current TV shows belong to the genre of sitcom, it is even harder to conceive that the term ‘sitcom’ was not integrated into the English language before the year 1964 (Marc, 2005: 16). Looking for the roots of the US-American situation comedy, one has to go back to the time when radio was the most influential medium in US-American society. This interval was rather short – maybe even too short to develop any genres of its own (ibid.: 21). When the ‘wireless telegraph’ was introduced just before the turn of the 20th century, it was mainly used to enable two-way communication for ships. In 1910, it was for the first time possible to carry along analog sound – a circumstance that induced numerous hobbyists to perform for each other, using this new system (ibid.). Thus, people started telling jokes, doing little sketches and inventing imaginary characters (ibid.). Radio became especially celebrated in the USA at the beginning of the 1920s, when the first commercial radio stations were put on air. However, it took some time for the medium to fully develop its reputation as America’s number one conveyor of news and entertainment. Interestingly, radio enjoyed most of its popularity during particularly troubled times, as Marc affirms:

Radio achieved a position at center stage of American culture during the national traumas of the Great Depression and World War II but went into decline after 1948, as the three major network broadcasting companies (NBC, CBS, and ABC) accelerated their commitment of the medium’s profits to the development of another medium – television (2005: 21).

After the war, the primary focus of the main radio networks was the promotion of television. Although this medium had already premiered in the early 1930s, it was not until the end of World War II that more and more families decided to switch from radio to television (Metz, 2008). Hence, it is no surprise that the structure of early
television was almost identical to the one of radio, even introducing similar programs (Morreale, 2003: 1). Still, the genre of sitcom would not instantly rule television, and between 1946 and 1948, TV programming was dominated by sports and theatrical drama (ibid.).

Two of the longest-running radio sitcoms, AMOS’N’ANDY (WMAQ / NBC BLUE NETWORK / CBS RADIO, 1928-1960) and THE RISE OF THE GOLDBERGS, later shortened THE GOLDBERGS (NBC BLUE NETWORK / CBS RADIO, 1929-1950), were adapted for TV and are thus among the first sitcoms in television history. Both of them had all the important characteristics that would become significant to the genre, such as laugh tracks and duration of about thirty minutes (Marc, 2005: 16-17). THE GOLDBERGS started off as a weekly half-hour TV series on CBS in 1949. Written and produced by its leading actress Gertrude Berg, the show revolves around the Jewish Goldberg family, their Jewishness being signified by their name and the Yiddish-inflected English dialect (Shandler, 2009: 87).

Created by two white men, Freeman Fisher Gosden and Charles J. Correll, AMOS’N’ANDY tells the story of two black men and their African-American friends living in Harlem. As Gary Burns argues, most of its success was based on the stereotypical stupidity and shiftlessness of the title characters, somewhat reminiscent of former minstrel shows (2001: 37). AMOS’N’ANDY proved to be both enormously popular and controversial when it debuted as a half-hour episodic TV series on CBS in 1951 (ibid.). The characters who had been voiced by Gosden and Correll in the radio version were now played exclusively by black performers. Since the employment of black artists was a great rarity back then, AMOS’N’ANDY is said to have paved the way for future African-American TV productions (ibid.). Still, it does feature a number of black stereotypes that we have since realized are disgraceful. While the male characters are often portrayed as stupid, lazy and corrupt, women are most of the time depicted as feisty, loud and aggressive. Hence, many critics agree that AMOS’N’ANDY contains some of the worst stereotypes from the minstrel show era (ibid.). The root of the problem was the fact that in spite of having an all-black cast, the actors were still under the direction of white men – at the same time, AMOS’N’ANDY was one of the few shows that actually embraced blacks in respectable positions such as doctors or judges (ibid.). While the format was
entertaining an audience of millions – whites as well as blacks – it was also accused of being racist and offensive towards African-Americans. After its TV premiere, several civic organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) heavily criticized the series’ stereotypical portrayal of blacks. Gosden and Corell, however, affirmed that it was not their intention to hurt anybody, but that they were “performing the same type of dialect humor in their depiction of ‘Negroes’ as other sitcoms used in their comic depictions of any number of ethnic groups” (Marc, 2005: 17). Although AMOS’N’ANDY had been a huge success at first, it was gone from television in two years as it was cancelled in 1953 (ibid.: 19). Today, its cancellation can be seen as one of the first battles won in the post-World War II civil rights movement (ibid.).

In fact, most of the early radio sitcoms were built upon a primary use of ethnic dialect comedy and the exploitation of certain character stereotypes (ibid.: 17). Even CBS’ number one hit I LOVE LUCY added a stereotypical character in the form of Lucy’s husband Ricky Ricardo who has a very strong Hispanic accent. Other TV examples would be LIFE WITH LUIGI (CBS, 1952-1953), a short-lived sitcom that deals with newly arrived Italians trying to build a life in Chicago, MAMA (CBS, 1949-1957) which follows Norwegians in San Francisco and BEULAH (ABC, 1950-1952) that centers on African-American servants in the suburbs (ibid.: 19). While some of these shows had been a great success on radio, many of them proved to be inappropriate for TV – all of a sudden, the heavy use of dialect humor seemed to irritate viewers:

The exaggerated accents and malapropisms of radio comedy may have become more embarrassing than funny to a significant segment of the early television-viewing audience, which was located almost exclusively in large metropolitan areas (ibid.: 19).

Until 1955, most of the sitcoms that were based on dialect humor had vanished from the screens and suburban US-American families started to dominate the genre (ibid.). From the very beginning, sitcoms have been built around one primary theme: the family (Sedita, 2014: 9). Sedita mentions two different sets of families, the ‘Immediate Family’ and the ‘Family of Friends’ (ibid.). The ‘Immediate Family’ usually consists of a mother and a father with their children as in FATHER KNOWS BEST (CBS, 1954-1960) or THE COSBY SHOW (NBC, 1984-1992) or a single parent with kids as in FULL HOUSE (ABC, 1987-1995) or SUBURGATORY (ABC, 2011-2014). Many ‘Immediate Family’ sitcoms also have the ‘other’ family member, in the form of an in-law as in KING OF QUEENS (CBS, 1998-2007), a nanny as in
THE NANNY (CBS, 1993-1999) or even an alien as in ALF (NBC, 1986-1990) (ibid.). The ‘Family of Friends’ sitcom, on the other hand, takes the concept of the ‘Immediate Family’ and places it into a group of friends. Famous ‘Family of Friends’ sitcoms would be FRIENDS (NBC, 1994-2004), HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER (CBS, 2005-2014) or THE BIG BANG THEORY (CBS, 2007- present). While the protagonists might be roommates, co-workers or neighbors, there will always be at least one parental figure in each show as can for example be seen in the character of Monica from FRIENDS (ibid.). Thus, the topic of the family is absolutely essential for each and every sitcom.

In the sitcoms of the 1940s and 1950s, this family image was first and foremost characterized by a clear distribution of roles. Shows such as THE ADVENTURES OF OZZIE AND HARRIET (ABC, 1952-1966), LEAVE IT TO BEAVER (CBS, 1957-1958 and ABC, 1958-1963) or THE DONNA REED SHOW (ABC, 1958-1966) take place in the ‘family room’ and portray what was considered to be the ‘normal family’. A patriarchal working dad is the sole breadwinner while a generous and devoted stay-at-home mom spends most of her time in the kitchen and with the children. In essence, most 1950s sitcoms presented a normative image of the middle-class white US-American suburban nuclear family (Kooijman 2005: 79). These programs reflect a decade where men returned home from the war and just wanted to settle down with their families and live the American Dream (Sedita, 2014: 10). Presenting happy families living their perfect lives in their spotless homes, postwar sitcoms also induced people in front of the TV sets to rethink their possibilities and believe in the concept of the American Dream, as Lynn Spigel explains:

Indeed, the nuclear family, living in a private suburban home, was a potent utopian fantasy that engaged the imagination of many men and women. While the actual lived experience of domesticity was fraught with problems, the family ideal still promised material benefits and personal stability in a confusing social world (1992: 34).

The children of these sitcom families belong to the early generation of the so-called ‘Baby Boomers’ which refers to children born between 1945 and the beginning of the 1960s. Especially in the USA, the postwar years were marked by a considerable rise in births. In strong contrast to what would later become known as the ‘Post Boomer Generation’ or ‘Generation X’, the ‘Baby Boomers’ were to be raised in a postwar society of economic upswing and prosperity. Jauntiness is a primary quality of the
children in 1950s sitcoms and most of them appear innocent, well-behaved and happy. There is no allusion to serious family problems whatsoever.

I LOVE LUCY (CBS, 1951-1960) and THE HONEYMOONERS (CBS, 1955-1956) are the most popular examples for the ‘Family of Friends’ sitcom. Sedita submits that these two programs actually introduced the subgenre and paved the way for many future ‘Family of Friends’ sitcoms to come (2014: 10). I LOVE LUCY centers on Lucy Ricardo and her husband, Ricky Ricardo, along with their best friends Fred and Ethel. The roles of the ‘Immediate Family’ are often shifted: while Lucy and Ethel are portrayed as childlike enthusiasts, their men Ricky and Fred represent the parental figures (ibid.). However, I LOVE LUCY was not only one of the first ‘Family of Friends’ sitcoms, it can also be described as the paragon of family life of that time. In the 1950s, America was characterized by change in many respects and I LOVE LUCY truly depicts this era of revolution. After World War II, the whole country seemed young, energetic and full of possibilities (Edwards, 2011: 7). Due to the ‘Servicemen’s Readjustment Act’ of 1944, known informally as the ‘G.I. Bill’, veterans were given access to education, jobs were available and well-paid so that it was possible for average families to afford houses, cars and trips to foreign countries (ibid.). The characters in I LOVE LUCY were part of this affluent society and the show comprises numerous aspects of life during that decade. One essential aspect of the 1950s was the changing role of women. During the war, females had driven Jeeps and flown planes – now that the war was over, they also started to discover these new facets in ‘real’ life (ibid.). This is also the case with Lucy and Ethel: in the sitcom, they look for work outside home, drive the same cars as their men and spend their money on expensive dresses and hats. Moreover, the ‘girls’, as they are called in the show (ibid.: 8), desperately try to become part of the high society and seize every opportunity to get closer to their favorite Hollywood stars. In short, I LOVE LUCY was innovative and progressive, as Lori Landay explains:

Seen in this light, I Love Lucy resonated so loudly in the early 1950s because the show suggested the failure of the domestic ideal – based on the rigid gender roles portrayed in popular culture – to match up with people’s real experiences in everyday life. The gap between domestic ideology and social experiences was larger in the 1950s than in the earlier half of the twentieth century (2005: 91).
Fig. 2. I LOVE LUCY was one of the first 'Family of Friends' sitcoms

Surprisingly, although taking liberties, Lucy Ricardo is not a feminist. The women on the show do have a foray into the world of equal rights on the one hand, but on the other hand they still expect their husbands to pay for their meals (Edwards, 2011: 8). Lucy and Ethel want to be “treated equally, just not that equally” (ibid.). Thus, I LOVE LUCY can be considered a show on the move in which women take their first steps towards equality, yet holding on to the traditional image of the homemaker and mother. This can be seen in Lucy turning down offers from Hollywood in order to stay at home with her family – even though she always wanted to become famous. Ultimately, she chooses the role of the housewife to make her family happy (ibid.: 9). Edwards describes this ‘in-between state’ of Lucy Ricardo as follows:

She had nothing against feminists; she just wasn’t one herself. She was like most women of her generation – raised to be housewives and mothers, given a glimpse of the world outside that bubble, but not quite ready to change everything they had been taught and every cultural tenet of the day (ibid.).

Still, I LOVE LUCY did contribute to the emancipation of women in US-American society. Although Lucy Ricardo sees herself as a housewife and mother for the main part, she reserves the right to escape from this domestic space into the magical realm of celebrity whenever she wants to (Austerlitz, 2014: 13). There was no need for the show to radically speak out against traditional gender roles since “comedy in American culture in general and in television sitcoms in particular is a major forum for reflecting and shaping cultural ideals” (Landay, 2005: 91). By calling attention to power relations of the sexes in everyday domestic life and by transforming the
domestic ‘prison’ of that time into an easily escapable terrain, I LOVE LUCY definitely participated in a proto-feminist movement and paved the way for many other modern women of television comedy to come (ibid.: 96-97).

2.1.2 Social Relevance vs. Escapism – Sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s

While the majority of 1950s family sitcoms served as weekly models for raising children and depicted perfect families with their white picket fences (Davis, 2001: 4), the 1960s introduced a more realistic portrayal of family. The new programs featured widowers as in THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW (CBS, 1960-1968), patch-work families as in THE BRADY BUNCH (ABC, 1969-1974), and single parents as in JULIA (NBC, 1968-1971). Nonetheless, most of them did not directly address social or political issues of that time but rather worked as a cultural ‘antidepressant’ and an escape from the six o’clock news (ibid.: 7-8). For that reason, other producers made use of a more fantastical approach and included witches as in BEWITCHED (ABC, 1964-1972), aliens as in MY FAVORITE MARTIAN (CBS, 1963-1966) or even monster families as in THE ADDAMS FAMILY (ABC, 1964-1966). It seems that with these new elements, the audience was offered a kind of compensation for all the things that went wrong in America. An exception was THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW (CBS, 1961-1966) that deals with the work and home life of television writer Rob Petrie and his wife Laura. As mentioned by Walter T. Davis Jr., Dick van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore were supposed to mirror the presidential couple as the show reflects the Camelot years of the Kennedy presidency (ibid.: 8). Rob and Laura are a modern and stylish couple, and even though Laura is the one taking care of their son and home, she is also interested in the world beyond her front door (Watson, 1990: 44). The character of Laura definitely shared these attributes with the First Lady Jackie Kennedy who was said to be a caring mother, supportive wife and a fashion icon all at the same time. The show itself became a number one hit for CBS and ran for five seasons, finishing near the top of the Nielsen ratings (Davis, 2001: 8). Also Joanne Morreale describes THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW as revolutionary in many respects:

The Dick van Dyke Show (1961-66) clearly represented the liberal political climate that came to characterize the Kennedy era. Not only was this one of the first sitcoms to give equal space to home and work, city and suburb, but it modernized the television image of the sitcom family. It attempted to represent the everyday life of the middle-class suburban family in a more realistic manner than typical domestic sitcoms (2003: 88).
The 1960s were above all years of social turmoil. There was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 that led to a national trauma in US-American society, the country was going through changes in the course of the Civil Rights Movement and there were race riots in numerous U.S. cities. In April 1968, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., anti-war activist and key figure in the struggle for equality of African-Americans, came as another shock to an already disturbed nation. This was followed by the shooting of John F. Kennedy’s brother Robert F. in June of the same year.

Fig. 3. Dick van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore mirrored the presidential couple

However, despite or maybe even because of these events, most networks still held on to a rather escapist programming and THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW remained one of the few ‘adult sitcoms’ of the 1960s (ibid.). CBS maintained its course of producing small-town sitcoms and gave birth to ridiculously optimistic shows such as THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES (CBS, 1962-1971). The format revolves around a poor backwoods family that discovers oil in their backyard and promptly moves to Beverly Hills to live the life of the rich and famous. The production immediately became a tremendous success. As claimed by Leslie Dale Feldman, this was predominately due to the wishful thinking of many US-Americans at that time:

We want to believe there are good rustic backwoods Americans, like those who founded the country and the West, who still have traditional American values of family, neighbors, and community – hard work, thrift, independence and honesty. We want to believe people can be happy living in a mansion but not caring that they do. And we want to believe that we can put these people in a mansion in Beverly Hills and they’ll keep their traditional ways, they’ll reject consumerism, materialistic values (2014: 111-112).
While THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES was just another depiction of the ‘rural family’, in this case the countryside people making it to the big city, the networks NBC and ABC decided to take a different path. The change in the overall strategy of sitcom programming was primarily the result of financial considerations. Advertisers wanted to know who watched their commercials and which format reached what kind of target group. Thus, it was necessary to evaluate specific demographical consumer data. Marketing research revealed that numerous recipients were older and lived in rural areas, while the most dedicated viewers were the ones living in bigger cities or suburbs belonging to the age group between eighteen and thirty-four (Davis, 2001: 9). One crucial quality of this group was the fact that they were spending more money than those living in the countryside (ibid.). During that era, networks learned that “it did not matter how many eyeballs watched their programs; they must be the ‘right’ young urban and suburban eyeballs” (ibid.). While CBS refused to make use of the provided demographical information, ABC and NBC concluded that it was time to produce more diverse situation comedies.

In 1968, NBC developed a show named JULIA (NBC, 1968-1971) which was the first black sitcom since the politically incorrect AMOS’N’ANDY. The series became especially notable for its depiction of an African-American woman without stereotypical facets. Before JULIA, there had been other series that included female black characters, but most of them were servants or maids working for white people. In JULIA, the protagonist is a single working mother whose husband has died. While many describe the show as groundbreaking, others claim that it ignored the racial conflict outside the sitcom as it “presented an uncomplicated world with trivial problems that were easily resolved at the end of each episode” (Morreale, 2003: xvi). Morreale sees JULIA as a bridge between the light domestic comedies of the 1960s and what came to be known as socially relevant sitcoms in the 1970s (ibid.).

At the same time, ABC aired a sitcom called THAT GIRL (ABC, 1966-1971) which was innovative in certain ways. THAT GIRL is the story of a small-town girl who moves to New York City to work as an actress. Although the production can be seen as an acknowledgement of the women’s movement of that time, Davis notes that the female protagonist, Ann Marie, can only partly be considered an independent working woman since her father and boyfriend constantly have to march out to
rescue her (2001: 9). Still, THAT GIRL was one of the precursors of sitcoms presenting more emancipated women in the 1970s.

Until the end of the 1960s, CBS resisted the development of such ‘modern’ and diverse sitcoms as they had the most to lose. The majority of their highly rated shows belonged to the category of rural comedies. However, by 1970, new CBS president Robert Wood took drastic action as he feared that other networks were simply more progressive. If CBS did not change their program in time, they would lose young urban audiences, or as Davis points out:

In a drastic reversal, CBS cancelled its rural ratings winners in favor of dramas that soon sank in the ratings. This move at first seemed regressive for the number-one network; however, the time had come for CBS to overhaul its lineup. When the dramas failed, a new breed of sitcoms ushered in the 1970s (ibid.).

One of these new sitcoms was THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW (CBS, 1970-1977). Finally, the network was ready to incorporate contemporary social issues into a family sitcom structure (Morreale, 2003: 151). Mary Tyler Moore, who had already enjoyed great popularity for her role as Laura in THE DYK VAN DYKE SHOW now played the character of Mary Richards, a single woman in her thirties who successfully works as a television news producer in Minneapolis. In strong contrast to many other single female sitcom characters, Mary is not divorced or widowed but represents an independent young woman who does not need a man to protect her. The show also brings in two different ‘Family of Friends’ ensembles: Mary’s colleagues in the newsroom and her roommates at the apartment building (Sedita, 2014: 12). Although the character of Mary Richards does seem more independent than Ann Marie in THAT GIRL because she has a steady job and does not rely on the men in her family, head writer James L. Brook stated that THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW is not necessarily a strong feminist statement (Davis, 2001: 11). While Ann Marie is dependent on her father and boyfriend, Mary looks for support from her colleagues at work and describes them as her family that makes her feel less lonely. The series was one of the first programs to show the workplace as a second home and co-workers as family (ibid.). Moreover, previously avoided topics such as divorce, alcoholism, drugs and death were discussed (Morreale, 2003: 152).

Another famous, yet controversial sitcom of that period was ALL IN THE FAMILY (CBS, 1971-1979) that premiered on CBS only one year after THE MARY TYLER
MOORE SHOW. It can be seen as a revolutionary ‘Immediate Family’ sitcom since it not only elaborates on relevant issues of that time, but also brings a new realism to sitcoms in general (Sedita, 2014: 11). ALL IN THE FAMILY deals with the everyday life of conservative father Archie Bunker and his family. Presenting a bigoted patriarch who is constantly trying to dominate his wife and daughter, the show also takes up subjects such as racism, abortion, rape and homosexuality. Still, there was an eye-of-the-beholder phenomenon about the program. While CBS expected the most criticism from conservatives and the Bible Belt, protests actually came from liberals who claimed that the show was promoting racism and bigotry (Davis, 2001: 10). While for some Archie Bunker became a national hero, others were disturbed by his points of view regarding gun control, interracial marriage or politics, but were still tuning in every week. As stated by Marty Gitlin, ALL IN THE FAMILY changed the US-American sitcom as a whole:

The show forever changed the medium, opening the doors for plotlines dealing with issues of social and political relevance. And it also helped Americans to feel freer to discuss and express sometimes unpopular opinions on those same topics (2011: 8-9).

The great success of ALL IN THE FAMILY motivated the other networks to develop more innovative sitcoms as well. Norman Lear, producer of ALL IN THE FAMILY, created NBC’s counterpart to Archie Bunker. In SANFORD AND SON (CBS, 1972-1977), Fred G. Sanford is a widower and junk dealer living in Los Angeles with his son. Furthermore, black sitcoms increased in number. Also created by Lear, GOOD TIMES (CBS, 1974-1979) deals with the struggles of a poor black family. THE JEFFERSONS (CBS, 1975-1985), on the contrary, focuses on the problems of a newly rich black couple. However, there was hardly any sitcom as much debated as M*A*S*H (CBS, 1972-1983). The series follows a team of medical officers stationed in South Korea during the Korean War. With its 255 episodes, M*A*S*H was on air for eleven years and hence lasted longer than the Korean War itself. While it was a typical ‘war comedy’ in the first year, its themes became more complex over the course of time (Morreale, 2003: 152). It contained a morbid sense of humor, making it one of the few so-called ‘dramedies’ of that time. While nearly all sitcoms featured the obligatory laugh track, M*A*S*H decided to go without it at least for certain scenes which dealt with the seriousness of war. Moreover, it was among the first sitcoms to let a protagonist ‘die’. As one of the actors quit the show, the producers had him killed when his plane was shot down in the war zone (ibid.). The finale that aired in 1983, remains among the most watched episodes in U.S. television history.
According to Morreale, both “its dark humor and political cant may have especially appealed to audiences demoralized by Watergate and the inconclusive end of the Vietnam War” (ibid.)

Television during the 1960s and 1970s offered its audience both relevance and escapism in situation comedies (Wittebols, 1998: 11). On the surface, some of the programs mentioned in this chapter appear shallow or even boring in content. At the same time, many of them employed traditional gender roles or made use of odd characters such as Archie Bunker in order to subtly address social wrongs. Other shows included more fantastic elements such as witches or monsters. Although these did not deal with real-life issues directly, “metaphorically they asked white Americans to question their fears of minorities” (ibid.: 4), and they can thus be seen as socially relevant. Generally speaking, this era of television stands for a gradual shift from a highly idealized view of US-American life to one that was strongly influenced by the movements of the 1960s (ibid.). This edgier and more realistic approach would also be significant for future sitcoms.

2.1.3 Television Redefined: From Bill Cosby to Al Bundy – Sitcoms of the 1980s

"Love, hate... look, we're a family, what's the difference?"
– Al Bundy (S05E02, 00:13:07)

Although throughout the 1960s and 1970s, sitcoms had had a great influence on US-American culture and many of them had been among the top rated programs on television, in the 1980s even some of the most popular formats began to show signs of age. While at the end of the 1970s, nine out of ten of the most successful series were sitcoms, at the beginning of the 1980s there was only one of them left in the Nielsen top ten, KATE AND ALLIE (CBS, 1984-1989). The audience seemed to be saturated with these programs and was longing for something new and different from what they had been watching over the past years. However, it was not only the viewers’ weakening demand, but there were also significant changes going on in the television industry at that time. By the mid-1980s, almost half of the US-American population received cable, and the original three networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, had to face fierce competition as viewers could now choose from a much greater variety
of channels. Additionally, a fourth network, FOX, emerged in 1987. But there was not only a shift in what people watched, but also in how they did it. Videorecording suddenly enabled everybody to record their favorite TV shows and access them whenever they wanted to. The only chance for networks to survive this era of change was by coming up with innovative programing and new stories (Morreale, 2003: 209).

Just in time, the ‘Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters’ that had voluntarily been adopted in the 1950s, was dismantled in 1982. Before, TV producers had to stick to a set of restrictions with a special emphasis on language, sex and violence. The code prohibited the use of negative family images or profanity and also put limits on the number of commercials that could be aired during one hour (ibid.). Now that it was suspended, creators of TV shows had much more freedom in respect to what they presented their audience with and how certain topics would be dealt with. As Morreale explains:

The result led to more advertisements per program, as well as to an increase in sexual language and themes. Relaxed censorship, though limited by the networks’ fear of offending advertisers, was particularly well suited to the production of programs aimed at an urban, sophisticated audience (ibid.).

Some even believe that the 1980s can be seen as the beginning of what is today known as Quality TV. The term refers to shows that strongly differ from traditional US-American TV-series in content and form of representation. These programs are no longer produced for a mass audience, but try to reach small but relevant target groups (such as young single parents living in cities) as well as racial, ethnic, sexual or age minorities. Robert Blanchet mentions HILL STREET BLUES (NBC, 1981-1987), ST. ELSEWHERE (NBC, 1982-1988), MOONLIGHTING (ABC, 1985-1989) or THIRTY SOMETHING (ABC, 1987-1991) as examples for 1980s Quality TV, as these did not seek to appeal to the masses, but to a sophisticated audience with a certain degree of media literacy (2011: 37).

However, the 1980s offered a wide range of shows – from Quality TV to mainstream programming, from series about happy parents with their clean houses and well-behaved children to sitcoms about dysfunctional families and the problems they had to face in their everyday lives. Both approaches seemed to work out well for television producers.
In 1984, NBC’s flagship, THE COSBY SHOW (NBC, 1984-1992), first aired, and it was different in many respects. It portrays an African-American family living in Brooklyn. That alone would not be something new, but Cliff Huxtable working as an obstetrician and his wife Claire being a successful lawyer makes the Cosby family an upper-middle-class African-American family and that definitely was groundbreaking at the beginning of the 1980s. Instead of giving them blue collar jobs as did most other sitcoms, the show’s producers decided to not only make the Huxtables a ‘non-poor black family’, but on top of that, Cliff and Claire are wealthy parents of five with their children attending private schools and elite universities. While most new sitcoms were moving away from family life and towards workplaces, groups of friends and childless couples, THE COSBY SHOW had returned home (Austerlitz, 2014: 177). Cliff Huxtable portrays the perfect father who is constantly inculcating his children positive values, but without making it sound like a boring sermon. His wife is just as successful as he is and makes clear that being both a mother and a businesswoman are not mutually exclusive.

Despite its comedic tone, THE COSBY SHOW does bring up serious topics such as teenage pregnancy, drugs or dyslexia. Also, it features African-American issues such as the Civil Rights Movement, but in contrast to other black sitcoms it rarely addresses racism directly. Bill Cosby as Cliff Huxtable became the number one dad and the Huxtables the quintessential US-American family that does have problems, but nothing too serious that it could not be solved within one episode. The series received numerous awards and is one of the most popular sitcoms of all time, not only among black viewers. In fact, it also changed the white community’s perspective of African-Americans. At least, everyone in the country seemed to have an opinion on the show. While many viewers praised the series for breaking racial stereotypes, others argued that it reinforced the notion that racism was dead and did not pose a problem anymore. Either way, THE COSBY SHOW was a step in the right direction as it opened the doors for other successful black sitcoms to come. The great success of THE COSBY SHOW “demonstrates that television comedy was uniquely positioned to reach a mass audience across racial boundaries in spite of the highly polarized political situation” (Krabill, 2010: 114).
Besides the Huxtables, the 1980s also introduced some other sitcom families. In the same year as THE COSBY SHOW, a sitcom called WHO’S THE BOSS (ABC, 1984-1992) premiered on ABC. Starring Tony Danza and Judith Light, the show revolves around a retired and widowed baseball professional and his daughter Samantha. Looking for a better environment for his child, Tony moves to the countryside and finds a job as a live-in housekeeper and male nanny at the house of advertising executive Angela Bower who has a son the same age as Samantha. It does not take long until the two families grow together and Tony and Judith get involved romantically. Although the show’s theme might sound boring, WHO’S THE BOSS at least represents an innovative example of the female breadwinner and a stay-at-home dad who is taking over the household chores – a job that in the past had primarily been assigned to women. GROWING PAINS (ABC, 1985-1992) features a working mother and a stay-at-home psychiatrist father, FULL HOUSE (ABC, 1987-1995) is about news reporter Danny Tanner whose wife has been killed in a car accident, raising his three daughters with the help of his brother-in-law and his best friend.

Although appearing trivial at some point, the above mentioned shows were not only of great success in the ratings, but most importantly, they offered an alternative to the typical ‘father-mother-child constellation’ that did not apply to all viewers. Even more than sitcoms of the 1970s, programs of the 1980s took a much more realistic approach – storylines, characterization, jokes, and even acting styles were less exaggerated than in the past and sitcoms started to deal with the real issues of raising an 80s everyday family (Sedita, 2014: 12-13).

Needless to say that some producers wanted to set an example and introduce a completely divergent family image. It was time for a show to present edgy, crude characters whose houses are not clean, whose children are spoiled and whose problems do not get solved that easily, if at all. The first to seize this opportunity was FOX. In 1987, it aired the pilot of MARRIED…WITH CHILDREN (FOX, 1987-1997), a show in which father obviously does not know best. It follows shoe salesman Al Bundy, his obnoxious wife Peggy and their scatterbrained children Bud and Kelly. The format was one of the first dysfunctional family sitcoms – a subgenre that would become quite popular during the 1980s and 1990s. MARRIED…WITH CHILDREN definitely did benefit from the dismantled TV code as the language used in the show
was rough, sexist and often offensive, especially to women. While there was a public outcry on the one side – a woman called Terry Rakolta from Michigan even organized a boycott after viewing an episode that she considered too sexist (Silverman, 2007: 24) – the show did have a loyal fan base. For ten years, MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN followed burned out Al Bundy who hates his job and considers himself “the only guy in the world who has to wake up to have a nightmare” (S04E13, 00:02:06). Never before had a sitcom been that provocative. It was offensive but innovative, and the audience seemed to like its edgy humor. Soon, Al Bundy would have millions of devotees throughout the country who felt that, even if their lives were miserable, the life of Al Bundy was worse. FOX defended the show by playing the freedom card – since there no longer was a code to prohibit indecent utterances on TV, MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN was simply the result of the writers’ creative freedom. At that time, networks figured that if a part of the audience did not like one of their shows, they could always change the channel. However, producing programs that were outside the mainstream seemed to work for most of the networks. Today, the legacy of Al Bundy can primarily be seen in animated sitcoms such as THE SIMPSONS (FOX, 1989- present), FAMILY GUY (FOX, 1999- present) or SOUTH PARK (COMEDY CENTRAL, 1997- present).

The 1980s also brought numerous other popular sitcoms such as FAMILY TIES (NBC, 1982-1989) that draws laughs from the generation gap between young Republican Alex, played by Michael J. Fox, and his ex-hippie parents. GOLDEN GIRLS (NBC, 1985-1992) centers on four older women living together in their Florida home, discussing all types of issues, most of the time over a slice of cheesecake.
In 1988, another dysfunctional family sitcom emerged in the form of ROSEANNE (ABC, 1988-1997), starring Roseanne Barr. To some degree, the role of Roseanne can be seen as ABC’s response to Al Bundy since the show also concentrates on a white working-class family and “teeters ambivalently between a critique of the middle-class paradigm and a confirmation of working-class inferiority” (Rowe, 1994: 104). Interestingly, the character of Peg Bundy from MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN was supposed to be played by Roseanne Barr who turned down the role before landing her own sitcom.

That decade had sitcoms about happy families such as the Huxtables, sitcoms about dysfunctional families like the Bundies, shows that relied on a soft tone and positive images and others that rebelled against exactly these depictions. In any case, the 1980s proved to be a challenging time for the ‘Big 3’. They had to compete with the new network, FOX, as well as with the increasing success of cable TV that enabled US-Americans to access hundreds of channels offering tailor-made programs for each target group. TV in the 1980s seemed to become more personalized than it had been before. The turmoil of the late 1960s had left marks on the media landscape in general, as Ron Becker states:

The turmoil of the late 60s seemed to splinter America’s common purpose; Vietnam, hippie culture, and the identity politics of black power, second wave feminism, Chicano nationalism, and gay rights seemed to fracture the nation along numerous lines (2006: 84).

In such a fragmented culture, advertisers understood that uniform messages would be less effective and that it was necessary for them to concentrate on particular target groups rather than on the masses (ibid.). Also, the networks realized that shattering the mass audience into different clusters with respect to gender, age, race and sexuality was the only way to go. Consequently, during the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, TV started to establish niche marketing strategies, and minorities that had been hidden on television for so long, were gradually made visible. This especially applied to the gay community. In the course of the following years, gay characters would play an important role in US-American television, as pointed out in the next chapter.

2.2.1 The Pre-ELLEN Years – From Revenue Poison to the First Openly Gay Lead Character

“I love you in a way that is mystical and eternal and illegal in 20 states.”
– Scott from ROSEANNE (S08E11, 00:19:17)

Two bare-chested men wake up next to each other after a sexual encounter the night before. Back in November 1989, that picture created a public outcry among the viewers of ABC’s television drama THIRTY SOMETHING (ABC, 1987-1991). Moreover, it motivated several sponsors to pull their ads, causing a loss in advertising revenue of about $1.5 million – months later, ABC even refused to rerun the controversial episode titled Strangers (ABC, 1989), because they feared an even heavier image damage (Becker, 2006: 138). Although the bed scene does not display any physical contact between Russell and Peter, it did induce hundreds of people to call the network and complain about the gay content of the episode (ibid.).

Becker identifies gay-themed programming at the beginning of the 1990s as “particularly troubling for the networks” (2006: 140), especially because since the 1980s, homosexuality had been strongly associated with the Aids virus and thus with the risk of contagion and death (ibid.). In the face of the anti-gay atmosphere during the 1980s, ABC broadcasted several shows that included recurring gay characters or dealt with gay-related issues, as for example the prime time soap opera DYNASTY (ABC, 1981-1989), the medical drama HEARTBEAT (ABC, 1988-1989) or the comedy-drama HOOPERMAN (ABC, 1987-1989) – all of which got cancelled in 1989 (ibid). Despite several attempts by producers to include gay material, it still seemed as if sponsors fled from topics such as teen drinking, violence, abortion and – above all – homosexuality and forced networks to stick to ‘traditional’ programming without stepping out of line (ibid.).

Walters remarks that back in the days, US-American TV “avoided the subject of homosexuality as much as it embraced the image of domestic womanhood à la
June Cleaver” (2001: 60), and also states that paradoxically it was the tragedy of the Aids epidemic that led to more visible depictions of gay characters on TV (ibid.: 61).

Yet, society’s general anxiety about HIV throughout the 1980s also brought along distinctive stereotypical portrayals of gays who were suddenly characterized as either victims or villains. Stories about Aids have featured both of these stereotypes. While drama series often depicted homosexuals as “objects of pity” (Gross, 1994: 146) having a hard time coming out to their families or talking about their condition, other shows presented gays as villains who were willing to spread their disease among innocent victims. (ibid.: 146-147)

At the beginning of the 1990s, producers continued to be particularly nervous about featuring gay-related material in their programs – the fear of revenue losses because of sponsors pulling their ads was omnipresent. Nevertheless, in February 1991 NBC aired an episode of L.A. LAW (NBC, 1986-1994) that contained the first on-the-lips kiss between two women. In the show, bisexual C.J. Lamb kissed her straight co-worker Abby. While sponsors again raised complaints, the reactions to the lesbian kiss were not exclusively negative (Becker, 2006: 141). The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD1) even “encouraged positive responses to NBC for making visible – however briefly – lesbian desire” (Mayne, 2000: 100). However, due to the fact that most gay-themed episodes had proven expensive, gay material was still considered a money loser in Hollywood (Becker, 2006: 143).

In April 1991, ABC’s top-rated sitcom ROSEANNE (ABC, 1988-1997) introduced a recurring gay character. Leon Carp, the boss of the diner where Roseanne works, is an openly gay man. Throughout the nine seasons, Carp represents a remarkable character and – what is even more important – he would not remain the only gay person in the series.

1 Author’s note: From now on, the abbreviation GLAAD will be used within this paper to refer to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.
By the end of the 1991-1992 season, a general shift regarding the portrayal of homosexuality on TV was noticeable and the number of gay characters slightly started to increase. As Becker states, this was also due to the cultural prominence of gay rights politics:

If the first three years of the decade were marked by intense industry anxiety over gay material, the next three years were a transitional period in which network executives increasingly realized that gay material, if incorporated correctly, could be a valuable programming tool (2006: 146).

In the summer of 1992 the prime time soap opera MELROSE PLACE (FOX, 1992-1999) premiered. The show revolves around the lives of several young adults living in the same apartment complex in West Hollywood, also including one gay male character. Matt Fielding appears as a regular character on the program from its beginning in 1992 until the start of the sixth season in 1997, when Matt leaves Los Angeles in order to work at an Aids research facility in San Francisco. Hence, he simply disappears, “taking the visibility of gay characters with him as he departed” (Hart, 2003: 604). Later, the group learns that Matt has been killed in a car accident.

Walters describes the person of Matt Fielding as exceedingly frustrating for gay viewers. Not only because he is probably the most flat and boring character of MELROSE PLACE as he does not undergo any substantial change within the whole show, but also because – in strong contrast to his oversexed straight friends – he is not allowed to have a love life. Although Matt does have several relationships with men, his sexuality always seems to be invisible, whereas the heterosexual characters on the show live in a world of sexual purity (Walters, 2001: 65). Walters goes even further when she declares Matt “the unkissed in a world of endless kissing” (ibid.: 66). Then, in the show’s second season, Matt is finally called to action while on a date with a gay friend.

Episode 31 of season 2 opens with sex-hungry Kimberly Shaw who is shown in bed with her boyfriend, begging him for ‘another round’ (S02E31, 00:02:36). It seems as if it is not of great disturbance to display a heterosexual couple kissing and having a post-coital conversation. Later, another female character, Sydney Andrews, gets brutally beaten up by prostitutes in the streets (S02E31, 00:15:30). She is threatened with a knife, punched in the face and then, already lying on the ground, the other women kick her with their feet. The audience can watch this act of violence towards a
woman from up close, as the camera does not fade out during the whole attack. Yet the producers of the series did feel the need to fade out during another scene in the very same episode. When Matt comes home from a bar with his gay friend and leans over to kiss him goodnight, one does not see the meeting of their lips. Instead, the camera shows the face of Matt’s shocked hetero friend Billy who observes the gay kissing (S02E31, 00:37:26). The audience, on the contrary, does not get to witness any physical contact between the two men whatsoever. For Walters, this lack of sexual expression is not an isolated case, but it seems to run like a common theme through most 1990s TV programs:

Matt’s lack of sexual expression was only part of the problem. Matt’s gayness, like that of so many others in the televisual world, was both everything and nothing as well (2001: 66).


Other programs did not include regular gay characters, but featured almost obligatory ‘gay episodes’ in which they dealt with homosexuality. This was the case with NBC’s hit sitcom SEINFELD (NBC, 1989-1998). In the episode entitled The Outing (NBC, 1993), Jerry and his friend George are mistaken for a gay couple. Jerry feels uncomfortable with this assumption and points out: “We’re not gay! Not that there is anything wrong with that” (S04E17, 00:07:15) – a line that would forever be associated with the show and the character of Seinfeld. Many 1990s shows added references to gayness in order to point out “the evils of homophobia and the hipness of homosexuals” (Becker, 2006: 189-190).

The producers of ROSEANNE followed quite a similar approach, not only by including the gay character of Leon Carp already in 1991, but also by featuring a lesbian kiss between Roseanne and bisexual Sharon only three years later in the famous episode titled Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (ABC, 1994). In its course, Roseanne goes to a gay bar with her sister Jackie, her bisexual friend Nancy and Nancy’s new
love interest Sharon. Roseanne is having a good time until Sharon kisses her in absence of Nancy. Roseanne stays cool, but the next day she realizes that the kiss makes her feel uncomfortable. When she tells her husband Dan about it, he first seems to get angry thinking that Roseanne might have cheated on him with another man. However, when he learns that his wife kissed another woman, the thought of it immediately turns him on (S06E18, 00:21:36). Already before the broadcast, right-wing groups pressured ABC to cut the lesbian scene or to even cancel the entire episode. Consequently, the network asked Barr to follow their instructions. Barr refused to accept this request and declared she would change networks if the episode was not shown (Walters, 2001: 69). Then, in March 1994 the episode aired just as planned and became especially notable for “its unrelenting parody of stereotypes about lesbians and its up-front critique of homophobia” (ibid.: 70).

During the eighth season, Roseanne organizes the wedding of her boss Leon and his boyfriend Scott in the episode December Bride (ABC, 1995). Later in the show, also Roseanne’s mother and her homophobic sister Jackie turn out to be gay. By including several gay characters and making fun of heterosexuals’ homophobic presumptions, the series sends out a clear message that the gay characters themselves are not the problem, but that “heterosexual leads are here the problems: it is their discomfort, homophobia, bigotry that must be confronted” (ibid.: 74).

The sitcom FRIENDS (NBC, 1994-2004) also registers a great deal of gay material, but not always depicted in a positive way. Tijana Mamula, Assistant Professor of Communications at John Cabot University in Rome posted a YouTube video titled Homophobic Friends, claiming that the sitcom is “the one with all the
gay jokes” (Mamula, 2011). The video comprises fifty minutes of gay jokes and homophobic comments taken out of ten seasons of FRIENDS (ibid.). In fact, homosexuality is dealt with throughout the whole show. The second season even features a wedding between Ross’ ex-wife Carol and her lover Susan. After ROSEANNE’s December Bride episode, this was the second same-sex wedding in the 1995-1996 season. Although the kiss between the two women was intentionally left out, the display of the lesbian wedding caused controversy again. Two of NBC’s 220 affiliates even refused to air the episode (Becker, 2006: 161).

What critics at that time did not know was that the closet would be opened again in April 1997 – revealing the first openly gay lead character on a US-American sitcom.

2.2.2 About Puppies and Pioneers – The Coming Out of Ellen

“One time I actually cleaned out my closet so good I ended up on the cover of Time magazine.”

– Ellen DeGeneres

In 2007, Forbes ranked her fifteenth on the list of America’s 20 top-earning TV stars, with an estimated personal fortune of about $65 million, and she is also among the twenty richest women in the entertainment sector (Paprocki, 2009: 15). She hosted the Academy Awards in 2007 and 2014, and her own daytime talk show on NBC counts an average of about 2.74 million viewers per episode, making it one of the most successful programs in the USA (Taylor, 2012: 135). 56-year-old Ellen DeGeneres definitely belongs to America’s top entertainers.

Besides being an actress, a comedian and a world-renowned talk show hostess, DeGeneres can also be considered one of America’s pioneers when it comes to the portrayal of gay characters on US television. Back in the 1990s, DeGeneres starred in the US-American sitcom ELLEN (ABC, 1994-1998) that revolved around bookstore-owner Ellen Morgan and her strange but loveable male and female friends. The sitcom became especially notable for its famous Puppy Episode\(^2\) (ABC, 1997).

\(^2\) The Puppy Episode are episodes 23 and 24 of season 4 of the sitcom ELLEN. The two-part episode originally aired on ABC on April 30, 1997. Its name is based on an inside joke between the show’s producers who suggested that since Ellen showed no interest in dating, she should just get a puppy instead (Paprocki, 2009: 58).
1997) that depicted the coming out of Ellen Morgan. In this episode, Ellen declares that she is a lesbian and openly talks about the feelings she has for her acquaintance Susan. When Ellen accidently makes her confession over an airport microphone, this is the first coming out of a leading character on a US-American TV show and thus a milestone in US media history (Tropiano, 2002: 245). Still, it is not only the coming out of DeGeneres’ “alter ego Ellen Morgan” (ibid.) that would remarkably change the US-American media scene.

DeGeneres also opened a new chapter in the history of gays and lesbians on US-American TV by coming out as a lesbian herself. She did so with the help of a major media campaign that included interviews with ABC’s news anchor Diane Sawyer and talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey, as well as a cover story in *Time* magazine on April 14, 1997, shortly before the *Puppy Episode* aired. Still, the actress received mixed feedback from the audience. While a great number of people celebrated her openness and almost “got swept away by Ellen-mania” (ibid.: 246), right-wing organizations and conservatives criticized ABC’s decision to feature a lesbian character in a leading role (ibid.). Religious groups threatened the network, some advertisers such as *Chrysler* and *J.C. Penney* even pulled their sponsorship (Peterson, 2005: 168).

Ten years after Ellen’s coming out, co-star Laura Dern who had played Ellen’s love interest Susan, gave an interview on THE ELLEN DEGENERES SHOW, stating that her appearance on the show did have a serious impact on her career as an actress.
Producers refused to work with her for more than a year and a half after the *Puppy Episode*, just because she had played an openly gay woman (cf. S2E14).

Without any doubt, DeGeneres can be considered a pioneer regarding the portrayal of same-sex relationships in US-American sitcoms. Nevertheless, the *Puppy Episode* as well as the subsequent episodes that deal with Ellen exploring her new gay life have both been celebrated and criticized. Author Valerie V. Peterson, for instance, argues that the coming out episode “failed to challenge mainstream biases against gays and achieve its imagined persuasive potential because it offered viewers a simplistic process of coming out” (2005: 165). She mentions four discrete stages of coming out, from shared meaning to self-labeling to confiding to announcing, and claims that character Ellen Morgan smoothly proceeds through these stages (ibid.: 165-166), implying a “latent, preexistent, natural, and essential lesbianism” (ibid.: 166).

Although this thesis mainly focuses on male gay characters in US-American sitcoms, the coming out of Ellen Morgan is still of high relevance for this paper as it depicts a historic moment in the portrayal of gay characters on TV. Therefore, in the next chapter I will examine both the *Puppy Episode* and the subsequent episodes of *ELLEN*, dealing with how the show characterized the process of coming out to its viewers. For my analysis, I will use Peterson’s four stages, and I try to answer the questions whether *ELLEN* succeeded in reflecting the coming out process of a gay character and what kind of lesbianism is being presented to the audience.

### 2.2.3 “Good for you, you’re gay!” – The Four Stages of Coming Out in *ELLEN*

Coming out is not easy. It is even harder if one has to stick to a certain schedule, as it was the case for DeGeneres and the team of *ELLEN*. Yet, within the first seconds of the *Puppy Episode*, the producers show that they are perfectly aware of the given time frame and the problems it may cause (Peterson, 2005: 168).
The first scene shows Ellen’s friends waiting for her outside the bathroom, while Ellen is preparing for the date with her old college friend Richard. As the group is getting impatient, Paige tries to encourage Ellen to come out of the bathroom and asks: “Ellen, are you coming out or not?” (S04E22, 00:00:14). Another friend, Joe yells: “Quit jerking us around and come out already!” (S04E22, 00:00:18). These statements by Ellen’s friends acknowledge the challenge of depicting the coming out process of Ellen Morgan within such a short time frame and are intended to invite the show’s audience to take the Puppy Episode with “a healthy skepticism” (Peterson, 2005: 168). This suggestion is reinforced when Ellen replies, “What is the big deal? I’ve got a whole hour!” (S04E22, 00:00:23).

Peterson points out four main stages in which the coming out of Ellen Morgan is accomplished (2005: 169). Using Peterson’s terminology, first there is the stage of ‘shared meaning’ which basically means coming to a mutual understanding about one’s sexual orientation with another person. Secondly, there is the ‘self-labeling’ which involves stating, “I’m gay” to another person. Then she mentions the stage of ‘confiding’ – telling confidants and, finally, ‘announcing’ which includes telling important communities about one’s sexual orientation. Thus, the show follows a fairly simple and pre-structured procedure of coming out. Peterson criticizes the way the program concentrates on these procedural issues instead of dealing with the complexities of homosexuality as an identity. While questions such as “When should I tell that I am gay?” or “How should I tell?” are emphasized, other issues such as “What does it mean to say I am gay?” are simply overlooked (2005: 169).

The first minutes of the Puppy Episode follow Ellen to the date with her old friend Richard. During their conversation, one gets the feeling that Ellen is somehow coming to terms with herself as she indicates: “It’s amazing. I mean, we are both doing what we always wanted to do. Well, except for me” (S04E22, 00:00:55). Even though Ellen’s statement refers to their professional careers, the viewer anticipates that it has to do with the imminent coming out of the lead character, implying that Ellen is not content with the state that she is in at that moment, but that the improvement of her personal situation is yet to come once she will announce that she is a lesbian (Peterson, 2005: 172). Next, the conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Susan, Richard’s co-worker and Ellen’s love interest to be. Ellen invites her to join
them for dessert and it soon becomes clear that she feels more attracted to Susan than to Richard. Still, after dinner Ellen follows Richard up to his room where he is desperately trying to approach her. Ellen, who can no longer stand Richard’s sexual advances, leaves the room under the pretext that she does not want to rush into things (S04E22, 00:06:21).

On her way out she meets Susan in the hallway, and they decide to have another drink in Susan’s room. When Susan declares she is a lesbian and says that she did get the same vibe from her (S04E22, 00:09:41), Ellen freaks out and is outraged by Susan’s assumption that she could be gay. As she is getting nervous, Ellen tries to ‘act’ strikingly heterosexual and even says she would not get Susan’s jokes, because she obviously used ‘gay humor’ (S04E22, 00:10:44). Shocked by Susan’s disclosure, Ellen leaves and returns to Richards’s room where she wants to force herself to sleep with Richard, which obviously does not work out due to Ellen’s interest in women.

The next day, when Ellen enters the bookstore she is working at, her friends want to know all the details about the date with Richard. Ellen, who does not want to admit that she was interested in Susan rather than in Richard, suddenly makes use of a fairly heterosexual behavior as she is bragging about the sexual intercourse between her and Richard. She even creates some remarkably heteronormative images in order to prove her heterosexuality, such as the one of her and Richard enjoying a “well-earned smoke” after having had sex for two hours, or her statement that she wanted to have sex with Richard in every room of the hotel. (S04E22, 00:13:15)

Before she can finish her narration, the storyline changes and Ellen is sitting on the couch of her psychologist, played by famous talk show icon Oprah Winfrey, where she continues her lie. It seems as if the therapist has known her secret all along when she asks: “Has there ever been anyone you felt you clicked with?” (S04E22, 00:16:56).

Ellen nods and when the therapist asks her for the name of the person, Ellen responds that it was Susan. When they look at each other and smile, Ellen obviously has come to a shared meaning with her psychologist (Peterson, 2005: 169).
Peterson describes this moment as follows:

Both recognize she is gay but without saying so. This recognition is as much an achievement for Ellen as it is for the therapist. It is not just that the therapist figures out Ellen is gay but that Ellen figures out Ellen is gay (2005: 169).

For the show this means that Ellen has accomplished stage one of her coming out process by achieving a shared meaning with her therapist. She gradually becomes comfortable with the thought of herself being a lesbian and therefore, she is getting ready to share her secret with other people.

Choosing Oprah Winfrey for the role of Ellen’s therapist has also been a much-debated issue. By 1997, Winfrey had already been the celebrated hostess of THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW for over ten years. The audience loved her and, to some extent, believed in her words. Thus, the producers of ELLEN assumed, if Oprah was supportive of Ellen’s homosexuality, the audience would endorse it too (ibid.: 168). Dava Savel, executive producer of the show, later stated that the crew was very well aware of Winfrey’s wide influence on the US-American audience and therefore intentionally chose her for the role of Ellen’s therapist (ibid.). Still, it was not only Winfrey’s tremendous impact on society that made her the perfect choice for the role. Being the first African-American woman to have a nationally syndicated program (Garson, 2011: xiii), the talk show hostess had also been in situations where she had to stand up for herself, always belonging to a minority. In some way, Winfrey acted as a mediator between gay Ellen and her audience and made sure that “what might otherwise have been overlooked as just another plot twist, personal quirk, or vehicle for laughs appeared politically and socially relevant” (Peterson, 2005: 168).
After the exchange with her therapist, Ellen is ready to come out to Susan as well and decides to drive to the airport where Susan is waiting for her flight to depart. Although Ellen is determined to tell Susan that she is gay, she does not manage to say the actual word. Instead of saying she is ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, Ellen points out that she did get Susan’s joke. Earlier in the episode, when Susan made a joke, Ellen referred to it as ‘gay humor’ and pretended she would not understand it in order to ‘appear’ heterosexual. By stating that she does get the joke, Ellen now announces that she is gay, even though she is not actually saying it out loud. She is stuck between phase one and phase two of her coming out process – she wants to come to a mutual understanding with Susan of her being gay and at the same time aims to access the stage of ‘self-labeling’. Ellen is now able to think of herself as a gay woman, yet she is struggling with actually speaking of herself as a lesbian. The airport scene reaches its climax when Ellen leans over to Susan and inadvertently tells her: “Susan, I’m gay” (S04E22, 00:20:49), over an airport loudspeaker (Peterson, 2005: 169-170).

It is no coincidence that Ellen uses the word ‘gay’ instead of ‘lesbian’ when she is coming out to Susan. By using “the most general label of sexual identity available” (ibid.: 170), Ellen succeeds in including both men and women in her coming out process:

By calling herself gay instead of lesbian, Ellen gives both male and female homosexual viewers the opportunity to live vicariously through her coming out, at least at the level of terms (2005: 170).

Part one of the Puppy Episode closes with Ellen und Susan leaving the airport together. At that moment, the viewer is under the impression that the protagonist of the show is somewhat insecure about her recently gained new sexual identity. Ellen is able to enter the stage of ‘self-labeling’ by announcing her homosexuality to Susan and all the people waiting to board flight 368 to Pittsburgh. However, since the people inside the airport are “not personally significant to Ellen” (ibid.: 171), her revelation over the airport microphone cannot be considered an announcement per se, but it is part of Ellen’s ‘self-labeling’ phase (ibid.: 170-171).

Peterson states that the intercom in the airport scene functions as a comic twist that seems to “usefully complicate the easy progression of the four stages of coming out” (ibid.: 170). Moreover, the microphone demonstrates that speakers do not always
have control over their words once they are uttered and that certain stages can easily be skipped or get mixed up (ibid.).

In the show, Ellen seems to adhere to the chronological order of the coming out process. Once she has managed to label herself a lesbian, Ellen also wants to tell her friends and colleagues about her sexual orientation. Still, the very idea of coming out scares her and she suffers from nightmares in which her sexual preference is the dominant issue (ibid.: 171). In part two of the *Puppy Episode*, Ellen is still working on her coming out together with her therapist who suggests that Ellen should come out in order to get rid of the nightmares and anxiety. During their conversation, the issue of discrimination against minorities is brought up again when Ellen complains that she does not want to be segregated due to her sexual orientation. The following dialogue illustrates that, to some extent, Ellen and her therapist are confederates as they both belong to a minority:

Ellen: You don’t understand. Do you think I want to be discriminated against? Do you think that I want people calling me names to my face?
Therapist: To have people commit hate crimes against you because you’re not like them?
Ellen: Thank you!
Therapist: To have to use separate bathrooms and separate water fountains and sit in the back of the bus?
Ellen: Oh, man, we have to use separate water fountains?
(S04E23, 00:05:30)

With her sarcastic remark, the therapist wants to point out to Ellen that she is not the only person in the world who has to speak up for herself and that being gay does not mean that she will have to live a life dominated by discrimination and segregation. Again, Winfrey functions as intermediary between Ellen and the audience and one gets the impression that she does not only act as a therapist for Ellen, but that Winfrey should also be the approving voice to all the gay people in front of the TV screens.

Ellen’s insecurity becomes obvious when she starts making jokes about her sexual orientation. It seems as if she is desperately seeking somebody’s approval for her new gay identity:

Ellen: I know, I guess. You have to admit it’s not exactly an accepted thing, I mean, you never see a cake that says ‘Good for you, you’re gay!’ Maybe Western Robertson and Eastern Hollywood.
Therapist: OK then, Ellen, I’ll say it. Good for you, you’re gay! So what are you going to do now?
Ellen: I’m going to Disneyland!
(S04E23, 00:06:04)
Ellen’s statement that she wants to go to Disneyland implies that she would like to run away instead of facing her new life as a lesbian. It is her therapist who softly forces Ellen to talk to her friends about her homosexuality and is gently pushing her into the next phase of her coming out, the stage of ‘confiding’.

The first person she tells about her homosexuality is her gay friend Peter whose reaction is positive and approving. When Ellen’s other friends arrive at her apartment, she does not succeed in telling them about her ‘secret’, as she is too nervous. Peter, who is really excited for Ellen, cannot remain silent any longer and tells the group that she is a lesbian. Overall, they appear affirmative and supportive of Ellen’s new sexual identity. Minutes later, Ellen finds out that her friends have made a bet on her true sexual preference and her friend Joe starts collecting the money in front of her. The scene creates the impression that Ellen’s acquaintances have always assumed that she might be more interested in women than in men. By concentrating on the bet rather than on the coming out, it becomes clear that Ellen’s sexual orientation is not of high importance to the group. Thus, the audience gets the impression that Ellen’s “confiding stage goes smoothly” (Peterson, 2005: 171), quickly and without any problems.

The stage that gets the least attention in the show is the one of announcing. Peterson mentions it as the fourth phase of coming out. In the last two episodes of season four, the show follows Ellen telling her parents and her homophobic boss about her sexual preference. When Ellen comes out to her mother and father, they first seem to be shocked by their daughter’s declaration. Her father even leaves the room, because he is too devastated. However, it literally only takes about ten minutes from her parents being completely upset to her mother accompanying Ellen to a gay support group meeting and her father singing out loud: “She’s here, she’s queer. Get used to it!” in front of the group (S04E24, 00:21:30) Therefore, her coming out process again seems to run smoothly and orderly. The only time Ellen does in fact get discriminated against because she is a lesbian, is when her new boss at the bookstore tells her that he does not want her around his children, because he fears that the girls might be influenced by Ellen’s homosexuality. He even equates her with alcoholics and drug addicts and says that he has to protect his daughters from her. Consequently, Ellen quits her job at the bookstore.
Apart from the problems with her boss, the initial insecurity of her parents and some awkward comments with her friends, Ellen does not face any severe problems with her new lesbian identity. On the contrary, she seems to proceed through her coming out without having any major issues. Peterson criticizes that the coming out of Ellen happens too quickly and orderly as throughout the show she never gets outing and can move fluently from one stage to the next (2005: 171-172). Furthermore, she claims that ELLEN depicts lesbianism as part of a gay/straight binary (ibid.: 172). This dualistic understanding of sexual identity suggests that gay and straight are intelligible and mutually exclusive – a person cannot be gay and not-gay at the same time, because the binary does not allow any in-between (ibid.).

In the show, the possibility that Ellen might be bisexual does not exist at all. She was heterosexual before, then she is a lesbian – there is no room for any compromise. For example, at the beginning of season 5, Ellen is experimenting with her new sexuality. She even goes on a date with one of her ex-boyfriends to prove herself that she is no longer interested in men. There is some strange connection between the two of them and, at one point, they start kissing. When her friend Spence enters the room and sees Ellen kissing a man, he is totally shocked and asks her: “What the hell kind of lesbian are you?” (S05E01, 00:10:27). This again emphasizes the gay/straight binary and demonstrates that within the show, Ellen can be either gay or straight. There is no gray area in respect to her sexual identity whatsoever.

This simplistic categorization of people contradicts the postmodern approach of deconstruction as for example presented in the works of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. A binary opposition such as gay vs. straight, is “always a relation of power, in which one term is in a position of dominance with regard to the other” (Storey, 2006: 100). Hence, binary pairs do produce power relations – “hierarchies which deconstruction seeks to question” (Wortham, 2010: 131). Postmodern or post-structuralist approaches, however, consistently aim to dismantle binary structures and the linguistic codes that express these categories (Dillon, 2010: 448).

In the case of the show, the gay vs. straight binary becomes evident in the way Ellen’s new sexual identity is handled. Before the Puppy Episode, Ellen – although not being the maneater type of woman – is portrayed as a heterosexual female in her
early thirties who occasionally goes on dates and has non-committal relationships with men. At the beginning of the coming out episode, she rejects her homosexuality and refuses to out herself as a lesbian. Later, Ellen finds a way to embrace her new sexual identity and succeeds in labeling herself as gay. Peterson denounces this abrupt switch from one sexual identity to another and suggests that “once named, Ellen’s lesbianism exists and any heterosexuality she may have assumed to have had vanishes” (2005: 172). The show depicts lesbianism as an “internally derived way of being” (ibid.: 173) and strengthens the idea that being gay is something preexistent and cannot be socially constructed. As Becker notes, categories such as straight or gay are social constructs, not intrinsic essences (2006: 39).

Even though ELLEN succeeds in making lesbianism “more acceptable to a mainstream audience” (Peterson, 2005: 174), it fails to portray other types of lesbianism, as it focuses on an essentialist kind of lesbianism on the basis of a gay/straight binary. Also, the Puppy Episode presents an immediate shift from straight to gay and features a rather simplistic process of coming out:

This episode suggests lesbianism is part of a gay/straight binary and presents a latent, preexistent, natural, and nonthreatening sexuality. Lesbianism as performance, as love’s outcome, as a political decision, as the result of trauma or abuse, or as a possibility latent in any one of a number of women are not discussed in Ellen (2005: 174).

Regarding identity construction, ELLEN has both modern and postmodern elements. The existence of the gay/straight binary and the fact that Ellen can either be a lesbian or not be a lesbian are characteristics of a modern approach. As argued by Douglas Kellner, modern identity is convertible, diverse and reflexive. Within a modern approach, there are still well-defined social roles the individual has to stick to – one can be a mother, a professor, a US-American, a student or, in Ellen’s case, a lesbian. The modern self is aware of the fact that it can choose between these roles and that one’s identity can be changed arbitrarily (Kellner, 2005: 136-137).

By coming out, Ellen is also well aware that she can change her sexual identity – that she can come out to the world and live her future life as a lesbian. Still, within the Puppy Episode, this sudden shift from straight to gay appears too abrupt and thus, unnatural. Consequently, from a Cultural Studies perspective, the coming out episode of ELLEN definitely features more modern than postmodern aspects with regard to identity construction. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see that with the start
of season 5, ELLEN develops some postmodern traits. During the coming out chapter and the subsequent episodes of the show, Ellen was under serious time pressure. Within less than an hour, she had to come to terms with herself, realize that she was gay, come to a shared meaning with her therapist, label herself a lesbian and tell other people about it. It is hardly surprising that Ellen’s coming out process was smooth and easy. There was simply not enough time to make her face any major issues during her coming out or, as Peterson suggested, to reflect on other forms of lesbianism (2005: 174).

However, in the fifth season, Ellen works on her sexual identity and, in contrast to season 4, here it appears more fluid and natural. Ellen is given a great deal of time to experiment with her new identity – she dates men in order to make sure that she is not interested in them. She also goes on dates with women and has to face the fact that this can be just as complicated as dating men. Ellen suffers from her first rebuffs by girls and has to explain to her friends that not everything is tied to her sexuality (cf. S5E4).

One indication for the use of a postmodern approach can be observed when Ellen tells her gay friend Peter about her kissing her ex-boyfriend and not knowing how to deal with it. As Ellen goes on complaining and making excuses for herself, he explains to her: “Ellen, don’t panic. These things are not written in stone. Some people are always gay and some are always straight. And for others, it changes. I mean, it is based on who you fall in love with” (S05E01, 00:13:27). Not only does this statement sound like an invitation to ignore the gay/straight binary and to blur the lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality, it also makes clear that it was not only about Ellen coming out as a lesbian and then continuing her life as she used to do. On the contrary, ELLEN had become a so-called ‘gaycom’ – a sitcom that revolves around the life of its gay leading character. From now on, the show would reflect on Ellen’s daily routine as a lesbian and portray her in humorous and embarrassing situations with other women and men (Tropiano, 2002: 245).

Season 5 depicts Ellen living in relationships with other women, but it also deals with the problems she has to face with her new sexual identity – with her innermost insecurities and separation anxieties. One could say that once Ellen had come out,
the show mainly focused on her same-sex love life, yet never explicitly showed any sexual intercourse between her and other women.

Still, after the *Puppy Episode*, the show’s ratings began to decrease. Moreover, the network was criticized for dealing primarily with gay issues, prompting it to issue a parental advisory preceding each episode (Cortese, 2008: 49). ABC started interfering with the production of the show and even stopped promoting it (Tropiano, 2002: 248). In May 1998, Stuart Bloomberg, chairman of ABC Entertainment first commented on the issue, saying: “We put the show on and truly supported it in the midst of tremendous pressure, because it was funny. But as the show became more politicized and issue oriented, it became less funny and the audience noticed” (Cagle, 1998). According to Stephen Tropiano, what Bloomberg was trying to say was that the show had become “too gay” (2002: 249). In fact, ELLEN got cancelled the very same year.

The troubling truth is that the show’s once celebrated protagonist got ‘fired’ because she had become too gay, too much of a lesbian, too abnormal. It had been okay for Ellen to come out and announce that she was a lesbian, but that was already enough for the mainly conservative US-American audience. It almost seemed as if it was time for Ellen to “simply slip back into the closet” (ibid.). Even though the show got cancelled, DeGeneres paved the way for other gay sitcoms and can thus be considered a pioneer in the history of gays on US-American TV. By refusing to be “re-closeted” (Walters, 2001: 86), the actress set a strong example against the discrimination of gays in the media. From now on, gay women and men would no longer stay hidden, but rather play an important role in the future of TV: “In a world so adamantly structured around heterosexuality, sexual identity does matter and Ellen’s refusal to allow her gayness to slink into the background is a step in the right direction” (ibid.: 85).
2.2.4 “Nobody wants to see two men kissing on television” – Celebrating Heteronormativity in WILL & GRACE

“You’re gay, Will! Ok? You’re gayer than the day is long. You’re Marvin Gaye. And let me tell you somethin’- ain’t no closet big enough.”

– Jack from WILL & GRACE (S03E08, 00:16:50)

Only two months after the final episode of ELLEN had aired, NBC announced a new sitcom named WILL & GRACE (NBC, 1998-2006) for September 1998. Back then, NBC President Warren Littlefield explained that while ELLEN dealt with the story of an individual, WILL & GRACE follows a different concept, including four main characters – two of them gay (Natale, 1998: 33).

The show mainly revolves around the relationship between Grace Adler, an interior designer living and working in New York City and her best friend Will Truman, a gay lawyer. Will and Grace spend most of their time with Grace’s lunatic coworker Karen Walker and their old college friend Jack McFarland who can be described as the camp gay. While Will is portrayed as a successful businessman who appears to be somewhat reserved and conservative, his friend Jack is the complete opposite. He is loud, outgoing and completely confident with his gay identity. Tropiano even describes his character as the ‘hyper-gay’ (2002: 251). Throughout the eight seasons of the show, Jack sees himself as an actor, dancer, singer and choreographer, but is most of the time unemployed.

In September 2000, two years after ELLEN was cancelled because it had become ‘too gay’, WILL & GRACE won three Emmy awards, including best situation comedy. As a consequence, NBC moved the show to their prime-time lineup (Provencher, 2005: 178). In 2001, GLAAD honored the show’s producers “for their commitment to dealing with gay issues on commercial television” (ibid.). The program soon became a great success and due to its pioneering ways of portraying homosexuality, it was compared to THE COSBY SHOW that “normalized African-Americans on television during the 1980s” (ibid.).

In strong contrast to ELLEN, WILL & GRACE would not deal with the coming out process of its protagonists or the exploration of their gay identities. As Richard Natale
mentions in *The Advocate* of September 1998, the fact that DeGeneres was also a lesbian in real life, might have been co-responsible for the series’ cancellation:  

*Will & Grace* arrives with none of DeGeneres’s offscreen coming-out baggage [...] Will’s character, on the other hand, is described as well-adjusted man who has just shed a long-term lover. And in McCormack’s case, he is only playing gay (1998: 33).

The assumption that ‘playing gay’ is less condemned than actually *being* gay, definitely gives cause for concern.

It could be said that by including two gay leading characters, WILL & GRACE made homosexuality more visible on US-American TV, yet the show did not only receive positive feedback for its depiction of gays. WILL & GRACE “falls short in its visual representations of homosexuality and gay experiences” and, from its very beginning on, “suggests a heteronormative trap” (both Provencher, 2005: 178). In fact, the series offers its viewers numerous male-female character couplelings, while neglecting the presentation of same-sex couples (ibid.).

First of all, there is the male-female relationship between Will and Grace. Throughout most of the seasons, they share an apartment and behave just like a heterosexual couple. This includes holding hands, watching TV together in bed and going on dates with each other – this image is intensified even more with Will and Grace sharing financial expenses (ibid.). Although Will is gay and Grace is straight, their relationship is nonetheless situated in a heteronormative framework (ibid.: 183).

As Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack observed, while they are not a couple in the traditional sense, Will and Grace still “live ‘heterosexually’” (2010: 213). This can for example be seen in the portrayal of a masculine/feminine dichotomy with Will representing the masculine, rational, pragmatic and successful lawyer and Grace being a creative interior designer with the “traditionally feminine traits of creativity, artistry, and ‘right-brain thinking’” (ibid.). Additionally, Will frequently slips into the role of the strong protector who looks after Grace and makes sure she does not get hurt by other men. Most intimate situations between the two of them take place at their shared apartment – a domestic setting that promotes family values (Provencher, 2005: 180).
Secondly, there is another man-woman couple in the form of Jack and Karen whose friendship does not only include regular shopping sprees on Fifth Avenue, but also a great deal of touching, hugging and kissing. At the end of the first season, Jack marries Karen’s foreign maid Rosario to ensure she will not be deported. During their ‘relationship’, gay Jack and straight Rosario even share a bed in order to convince immigration authorities of their marriage. (ibid.: 178)

Finally, there are Grace’s numerous relationships with men. Back in college she was dating Will who had not come out of the closet yet. All of Grace’s attempts to seduce Will and sleep with him fail and she later learns that he is gay. Throughout the show, Grace gets involved romantically with several men, most of whom disappoint her. In the fifth season, she marries her boyfriend Leo, but the marriage fails due to Leo’s infidelity. In the series finale, however, they reunite and raise a baby together.

While all the heterosexual and pseudo-heterosexual couples in the show are allowed to exchange endearments, the same does not apply to gay couples in WILL & GRACE. Although both Will and Jack are openly gay men, they “never appear in affectionate (or sexual) pairings – neither with each other nor with any other gay male character who drifts in and out of the sitcom” (ibid.: 180). As a matter of fact, throughout the program’s first four years, there is only one same-sex kiss between
two men (ibid.). And even this kiss is not marked by passion and the natural affection between two people, but rather emerges spontaneously and without any emotional background.

In episode 14 of the second season, the group is excited to watch their favorite TV show *Along Came You* as the producers promised the first prime-time kiss between two men. While Jack is looking forward to witness this historically important event, the camera cuts away from the couple and does not display the eagerly anticipated kiss. Obviously upset, Jack decides to complain to the vice president of NBC about this issue (cf. S2E14). Will, on the other hand, does not seem to be as disappointed about the censorship of the gay kiss as Jack:

Jack: The network promised we were gonna see some guy-guy lip action.
Grace: You know, for someone who has a gay porn collection that requires its own storage facility you seem pretty upset about one kiss.
Jack: Missing the point, darling. By doing this, they are sending a clear message that the way I live my life is offensive.
Will: Jack, the way you live your life is offensive, but they should have shown those guys kissing.
(S02E14, 00:03:38)

Later in the episode, Jack follows Will to his office, trying to convince him to come with him to the NBC studios. Will, by contrast, supports the heteronormative narrative by stating that the majority of people is simply not interested in seeing two men kissing on television and thus he even appears a bit homophobic (Provencher, 2005: 184). Ironically, Jack complains about the invisibility of gay male characters on TV and hence, takes up an issue that also applies to the show *WILL & GRACE* itself:

Jack: I am outraged by this. Why aren't you?
Will: Because I'm realistic. Clearly, nobody wants to see two men kissing on television. Not the network, not the viewers, not the advertisers.
Jack: That's right, Will. They wanna pretend we're invisible. Well, what about our constitutional right to see two hotties get it on?
(S02E14, 00:07:35)

After a while, Will agrees to support Jack and shows up at the NBC headquarters as well. When they finally get the chance to talk to the vice president of the studios, the man tries to get rid of them and says that they will never see two gay men kissing on network television. As Will and Jack leave the studios, they see Al Roker shooting an episode of NBC’s *THE TODAY SHOW* in the streets. Jack immediately gets in front of the cameras and tells Roker the story about their complaint. During his monologue, he is asking how much longer he will have to wait to see two gay men kissing on TV. All of a sudden, Will pulls him close and kisses Jack on-camera to fulfill his wish. Nevertheless, after the kiss, neither Jack nor Will are happy about its
occurrence. It is immediately pointed out that there is no sexual interest between Will and Jack whatsoever (cf. S2E14).

One might raise the question why the producers of WILL & GRACE decided to have the gay kiss happen the way it did. For Provencher, there is a simple explanation why the kiss between Jack and Will emerges during a television broadcast (THE TODAY SHOW) within the actual show (WILL & GRACE). By using a production within the production, the creators of the series generate several ‘layers of artifice’ between the audience and the two male characters of the show (2005: 186). Thus, the kiss between Will and Jack no longer takes place in the first-level text (Will and Jack in WILL & GRACE), but it happens in the second-level text (Will and Jack in WILL & GRACE in THE TODAY SHOW). Hence, the spectators are “separated from the gay kiss – not only through multiple layers of action that take place, but also through the displacement of viewing pleasure” (ibid.: 187).

Having pointed out the importance of the numerous layers that are created in order to influence the viewer’s perception of the kiss, it is also necessary to demonstrate the general power of the visual (ibid.: 183-184). By repeatedly depicting heterosexual images, WILL & GRACE emphasizes the dominance of the man-woman relationship or, as Judith Butler asserts:

> The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original (1990: 43).

By visually stressing man-woman relationships, WILL & GRACE defines the heterosexual desire as the norm while portraying same-sex relationships as subordinate and less common.

In fact, while the heterosexual character of Grace is allowed to openly live out her sexuality and is shown in bed with men several times, there is almost no display of homosexual affection. For example, during the eight seasons of WILL & GRACE, Will only has one serious long-term relationship with a man named Vince. However, the couple separates in less than one complete season because Vince “loses his job and becomes too burdensome on a professionally successful Will” (Provencher, 2005: 188). The other gay character, Jack, consistently talks about his various flings, but is never actually shown with them. Also, in contrast to Will, Jack does not seriously settle down with anybody. During the sixth season, Jack has a relationship with
Stuart for a few months, but the couple then separates due to Jack’s interest in other men.

Consequently, same-sex relationships remain absent while heterosexual couples (e.g. Grace and Leo) get more attention on all levels of the show. Emphasizing the heteronormative narrative, the gay characters on Will & Grace are not entitled to an open sexuality the way the non-gay characters are. Thus, one might assume that although claiming to be gay-friendly, WILL & GRACE still promotes heterosexual values or as Ott and Mack argue, the “reliance on classic gender norms also introduces a heteronormative veneer onto a supposedly ‘queer’ show” (2010: 213). Furthermore, WILL & GRACE seems to offer different ‘types of gay’. As mentioned before, Jack can be described as the stereotypically gay, while Will most of the time does not appear homosexual at all. Due to his close friendship with Grace and their strong devotion to each other, the viewer might even forget that Will is gay. As Jaap Kooijman states, the character of Will “still conforms to mainstream culture by being the ideal son-in-law who just happens to be gay, inviting viewers to secretly long for Will and Grace ending up together regardless of their sexual identities” (2009: 162).

The heterosexual image of Will is supported by his occasional homophobic behavior towards Jack. In one episode titled Girl Trouble (NBC, 2000) during the third season, Jack and Will get into a fight and attack each other verbally. In the dialogue, Will calls Jack a girl, implying that due to his homosexuality, Jack does not qualify as ‘real man’:

Jack: Queer? Who you callin’ queer, you blouse-wearin’ fairy?
Will: Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! This from the homo who minces around the gym in a lycra onesie.
Jack: Grace wears one.
Will: She’s a woman, you girl!
Jack: Don’t call me a girl! Eyebrow-plucker!
Will: Leg-waxer!
Jack: Lady!
Will: Tramp!
(S03E04, 00:16:45)

Another point of criticism is the fact that WILL & GRACE suggests that by hiding one’s homosexuality, a person might be more successful in professional life than openly gay people. Will, who often conceals his homosexuality, has a spotless career as a lawyer, while camp gay Jack is portrayed as an unlucky man who pursues several professions but is not really good at anything. Although watching Jack failing at most of his jobs might be entertaining for the audience, it still sends out the
message that being gay might go hand in hand with failure, laziness and a lack of consistency.

Moreover, regarding the portrayal of homosexuality, WILL & GRACE focuses on male gays and almost completely leaves out lesbianism. In the Girl Trouble episode, the viewer learns that Jack has a profound aversion to lesbians. Will is organizing a gay sensitivity seminar for the local police and wants Jack to participate in a little stage play. When Jack finds out that he has to work together with two lesbian cast members, he immediately starts to harass them:

   Jack: I understand. I learned a valuable lesson today. Everyone deserves to be treated with a little respect. Even mean lesbian kite sellers.
   Annie: Oh, that's...
   Will: You are this close to losing your post rehearsal yogurt.
   Jack: That's the line, that's what's written here.
   Will: Yeah, that's because you wrote it. In lip liner!
   Jack: At least one of us brought some.
   Terry: I don't think that's funny.
   Jack: Why? 'Cause Ellen DeGeneres didn't say it?
   (S03E04, 00:07:36)

By stating that “at least somebody brought lip liner”, Jack indicates that lesbian women can be defined as masculine, since they do not make use of cosmetics to the same extent as heterosexual women. By assuming that lesbians would only laugh about a joke when it comes from Ellen DeGeneres, Jack creates another stereotypical image.

WILL & GRACE includes numerous factors that promote the image of the heteronormative superiority. While the heterosexual characters are allowed to openly live out their relationships, little visual evidence of same-sex affection appears on-screen. Additionally, the sitcom creates a heteronormative framework between its characters (Provencher, 2005: 183). Due to the fact that they live in a “codependent relationship” with each other (ibid.: 178), gay Will and straight Grace most of the time appear to be a heterosexual couple. Consequently, the audience can never be quite sure whether they are only friends or if they might become a couple. This uncertainty about Will’s sexual identity might contribute to the assumption that being gay is ‘only a phase’ and cannot be taken as seriously as heterosexual desire. Also, the viewer gets the impression that in order to be successful, Will has to lie about his sexuality and pretend to be heterosexual. At the same time, WILL & GRACE presents the stereotypically gay character of Jack who seems to comprise all prejudices about gays in one person. Beyond that, Jack is portrayed as a loser who does not succeed
in making a career. Although the show is often described as a ‘gaycom’, WILL & GRACE mainly focuses on male homosexuality. Lesbianism is not only neglected in its representation, but it is even made fun of by Jack.

WILL & GRACE pioneered the portrayal of homosexuality in some ways, yet it “produces and reproduces gay characters (and their female counterparts) in multiple heteronormative situations“ (ibid.: 188). Ott and Mack summarize this issue quite well be stating that “although the show features queer characters, heterosexuality is certainly the lens through which we understand the characters’ personal sexualities” (2010: 214). However, the following years would bring a great deal of shows that represented same-sex narratives in more visible ways than WILL & GRACE.

2.2.5 Can We See Queerly Now? About Token Gays, Campy Divas and Authentic Images – Long-Term Inclusion of Gays on US-American TV

With the considerable success of programs such as WILL & GRACE at the beginning of the new millennium, many producers decided to include gays in their shows. In fact, TV in the early 2000s was full of gay images. This did not only apply to the genre of sitcom, but all kinds of formats suddenly had at least one gay character. With SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS (CBS, 2001) along came another gay-straight-roommate-story that made the viewer wonder which stereotypes were emphasized more – the ones about gays or the ones about Italian-Americans. However, gay stereotyping would reach a whole new level when a reality show named QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY (BRAVO, 2003-2007) first aired and invited the audience to believe in the notion that gay men are superior in matters of fashion, design and style. In each episode five gay men who are referred to as the ‘Fab Five’, perform a complete makeover on a straight man. While a ‘fashion savant’ helps the heterosexual with styling and clothing issues, a so-called ‘culture vulture’, an expert on interpersonal communication, supports the man in working on his social life. Moreover, the show has a food and wine specialist, a ‘grooming guru’, as well as a ‘design doctor’ who may rearrange the interior of the candidate’s house.

Suddenly, gays on TV were not only visible, but in the case of QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY, they even seemed to be at the center of attention. Still, there
was more than one point of criticism about the show. One must understand that visibility and representation are not synonymous and that an increasing number of gays on TV does not guarantee the absence of heteronormativity (Ott / Mack, 2010: 229). In other words, visibility only refers to the number of queer characters or personalities presented on TV. Yet, the issue of representation – the way gay people act and feel – is a completely different subject. This is also the problem with QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY. The format does feature more gay than heterosexual characters and puts gay men in a superior position by sending out the message that they are the only real men who have to teach their heterosexual fellows a lesson. Nonetheless, it plays with gay stereotypes and reinforces prejudice. While the show strengthens the assumption that all gay men are experts on fashion and lifestyle, at the same time it implies that heterosexuals need the help of gay men in order to get their lives together. In both cases, these gender stereotypes call upon the viewer to ignore the individual and to assign people to two different groups – the homosexuals vs. the heterosexuals. This brings back the conception of the gay/straight binary mentioned by Peterson, the dualistic understanding that gay and straight are mutually exclusive (2005: 172).

The problem is not only that the show creates new or boosts existing gay clichés but that it tends to reduce its protagonists to exactly these stereotyped images. One may even go so far as to say that QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY and similar formats do share some attributes with former minstrel shows or later productions such as AMOS’N’ANDY that made fun of black stereotypes. To a certain degree, the same applies to programs that want to earn laughs by emphasizing gay stereotypes.

What seems to be equally problematic with many so-called reality shows is the fact that most of the time, these formats are far off from real life. While the channels might claim to present real people in their everyday lives, what the viewers actually get to see are scripted conversations and exaggerated stereotyped characters. This raises the question whether gay visibility as such is even desirable if it then leads to a multitude of gay characters on TV who always have to slip into the same stereotypical roles. QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT EYE features five ‘hyper-gays’ whose ‘super powers’ in respect to style and beauty are obviously linked to their sexuality. The men appear as fairylike creatures who have come to help the
clumsy heterosexual. This all happens under the pretext of ‘reality’. What is especially dangerous about these formats is that instead of contributing to a realistic depiction of gay people on TV, they might create new gay stereotypes by affirming the assumption that all gay men are the same. Hence, some may even consider QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY as a step backward in queer history, as Melinda Kanner professes:

> For many decades, some otherwise marginalized gay men have found their way into the mainstream, into the seats and rooms of money and influence, as mascots, mostly for the amusement of straight women. Straight society seems able to tolerate a certain amount of gayness, but only in confined quarters. We need theatre, we need dance, we need hairdressers and florists, after all, to enhance the lives of heterosexual married women and their men (Kanner, 2004).

The show clearly distinguishes between the representation of gays and of heterosexuals. In QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY, we see a great number of gender performances. The fashion expert Carson, for example, will sometimes compare himself to famous female celebrities. Grooming expert Kyan, on the other hand, “regularly attempts ‘manly’ bonding with the heterosexual subject through a proliferation of high fives and the use of the word ‘dude’” (Ott / Mack, 2010: 227). The problem with these various gender performances of the five men is that they give the impression that homosexuals are less clear in their gender orientation than heterosexuals (ibid.). While some scholars argue that the format tries to avoid stereotyping by presenting a wide range of masculinities, Ott and Mack see the danger in the sharp distinction between heterosexual and homosexual individuals on the basis of gender clarity and ambiguity (ibid.).
In the first years of the new millennium, gay characters were particularly frequent in the reality TV genre. However, most of them were incorporated into typically sex-free formats like home makeover shows, real-estate shows and occupational reality shows (Becker, 2009: 126). Jennifer L. Pozner goes even one step further in criticizing the portrayal of gay men and women in reality shows:

Are you lesbian, gay, or bisexual? In the world of reality TV, Americans can see people like you decorating homes (Top Design), designing clothing (Project Runway), cutting hair (Shear Genius), whipping people into shape (Work Out), telling sloppy straight men how to dress (Queer Eye for the Straight Guy), being campy divas (RuPaul’s Drag Race on LOGO), navigating the globe (The Amazing Race), and eating bugs (Survivor), but you can never seek “fairytale love” (2010: 49).

In the early 2000s most producers were – wittingly or unwittingly – trying to desexualize the gay characters of their shows by structurally limiting the carnal climate (Becker, 2009: 126). Even programs that are infamous for exploiting the real or potential liaisons between their heterosexual participants, such as BIG BROTHER (CBS, 2000- present) or SURVIVOR (CBS, 2000- present), denied giving the equal amount of attention to homosexual romances (ibid.).

In July 2003, the first gay dating show named BOY MEETS BOY (BRAVO, 2003) aired. James, a young and good-looking gay bachelor who is referred to as the ‘leading man’, is trying to find a romantic connection with one of fifteen attractive men. What James does not know is that not all of the men ‘fighting’ for him are really gay. Among them there are several straight guys who only pretend to be gay in order to win money. James is dating all the contestants to find out who would be the perfect match for him. It is not until the final elimination round that he finds out that some of the candidates are heterosexuals who are not interested in him, but in the $25,000 they would win if they successfully fooled him. If James selects a gay suitor, the couple wins the money and goes on a romantic trip together. If he chooses a straight guy, James will end up without money and without partner. The show was heavily criticized for its cruelty in exploiting James’ “sincere pursuit of same-sex love for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience” (Becker, 2006: 223). BRAVO tried to defend the format by pointing out that the target audience for BOY MEETS BOY was straight women from 18 to 49 years, not gay men. Hence, the series degenerated into a guessing game of ‘is-he-gay-or-is-he-straight’, completely ignoring the fooled protagonist’s feelings (ibid.).
Watching the pilot, it immediately becomes clear that instead of fighting sexual prejudice, BOY MEETS BOY just creates further gender stereotypes. The format introduces itself as the “world where gay is the norm and straight men have to stay in the closet” (S01E01, 00:00:56) and invites the audience to watch how it will “bridge the gap between gay and straight” (S01E01, 00:01:34). In the first minutes of the show, female host Dani Behr explains its concept and declares that “every romantic adventure has to have a leading man” (S01E01, 00:01:58), before welcoming protagonist James in the studio. This statement alone is problematic in many respects. First, it implies that in every relationship, whether of homosexual or heterosexual nature, there is always one partner that is superior to the other. Second, it excludes lesbian affiliations altogether. Besides, BOY MEETS BOY does not leave space for any ‘in between’ – the suitors can either be gay or straight. At one point, a candidate mentions that he has dated a girl. Because of the way the series is edited, the audience is encouraged to interpret this as a sign of the man’s general interest in women – bisexuality or sexual confusion are not considered at all (Becker, 2006: 224). The assumption that turning the tables by simply putting straight men into the closet would help to improve the situation of gays, is not only wrong, but also dangerous as it supports the idea that one sexual orientation is always dominant while the other one needs to be hidden.

BOY MEETS BOY would not remain the only doubtful reality TV show with gay characters. It soon was to be followed by a reality program named PLAYING IT STRAIGHT (FOX, 2004) in which heterosexual woman Jackie spends time on a ranch with a group of men and has to guess their sexual orientation based on whether they ‘act gay’ or not. Over the course of the episodes, she dismisses all the men she believes to be gay. If one of the gay men pretending to be straight succeeds in fooling the female protagonist, he will win a million dollars and Jackie will go home empty-handed. If, on the other hand, she chooses a straight man at the end, they will split the money. It is alarming to see that while the gay men attempt to renounce their true sexuality by performing presumptions of straight masculinity, the heterosexual men in the show try to turn themselves into the clichéd ‘drama queens’ they believe to know from popular media (Pozner 2010: 51). In addition to creating a whole catalogue of homophobic stereotypes, PLAYING IT STRAIGHT “also unintentionally
crystallized how cultural expectations of masculinity – both gay and straight – are all performative rather than innate” (ibid.).

Other reality programs such as THE REAL WORLD (MTV, 1992 – current) frequently portrayed its gay characters way more promiscuous than the heterosexual ones. Especially gay men were and still are often presented as oversexed individuals who prefer having sex with multiple partners. Here, the issue of frequency is especially relevant. The lower frequency of gay characters on TV in general, coupled with the depiction of them as hypersexual, often results in particularly damaging, stereotypical images (Ott / Mack, 2010: 224).

There were also a few shows that tried hard to convey a more realistic image of their gay characters. Among them was THE L WORD (Showtime, 2004-2009). Created by Ilene Chaiken, THE L WORD was the first prime-time television drama to focus on the lives of lesbian and bisexual women. Showtime compared its new series to one of the most popular programs of that time, SEX AND THE CITY (HBO, 1998-2004), and promoted it with the slogan “Same Sex, Different City” (Maier, 2010: 104). In fact, there are strong similarities between these two in respect to female friendship, and the explicitness of the sex scenes. In THE L WORD, however, the subject of lesbian affection is no longer only touched upon, it becomes the key theme. Producing a show like THE L WORD for a mainstream audience always involves the risk of misrepresentation. Like most other minority groups, lesbians have either not been represented in popular culture at all, or they have been depicted in stereotypical and humiliating ways (McFadden, 2014: 2). This invisibility and misrepresentation have had serious consequences for many queer women, because “they help to sustain and reinforce a culture in which discrimination and inequality are still common” (ibid.). According to McFadden, the creators of THE L WORD were well aware of this history and had to make sure that the format was attractive to the majority of viewers, without constructing stereotypical images of lesbian women:

As they developed the program, they had to navigate between the legitimate desires of a diverse group for honest and appealing representations of their lives, and the need to attract a large enough mainstream audience to keep the show commercially viable. In other words, the show’s creators understood the expectations and assumptions – shaped by a history of stereotypical representations – that different viewers would bring to the program (ibid.)

When the first season of THE L WORD started, critics feared that in order to reach out to as many viewers as possible, the producers would make use of an approach
that is referred to as the ‘male gaze’ (ibid.: 16). Here, the heterosexual male viewer is placed in the position of the ‘spectator’ while the sexual interaction between the lesbian women is needed to satisfy the voyeuristic pleasures of the straight observer. This approach acknowledges the fact that the most common representation of lesbianism in US-American popular culture is the one we know from straight male pornographic film (ibid.: 18). In these scenarios, lesbian sex is only happening to precede the ‘real action’. In most of these films, the heterosexual man watches the lesbian encounter as a kind of ‘warm-up’ and then moves to heterosexual sex with one or both of the supposedly lesbian females (ibid.). THE L WORD responds to the concern of some viewers that the show would once again exploit lesbian desire to appeal to the straight male viewer by connecting the ‘male gaze’ to the violent, real-world oppression of women (McFadden, 2013: 104).

This can be seen in the fictional character of Mark Wayland. In the second season, Mark moves in with two of the female protagonists, Shane and Jenny. Assuring that he is making serious documentary films, he asks his new roommates to participate in his latest project that allegedly is a kind of personal journal of him living together with two lesbians. He affirms that the film will have an informative aspect as well when he asks the girls to “think about how educational this is going to be for people who don’t know anything about people like you” (S02E05, 08:18), obviously referring to their sexuality. Shane and Jenny agree and let him interview them, but they immediately recognize his intrusive approach. Mark, however, says that he just wants to gain an insight into lesbian sex life (S02E05, 11:37). In the show, Mark functions as the
embodiment of ‘the others’, meaning all outsiders to the lesbian community who are unlikely to understand how lesbianism is represented accurately (McFadden, 2014: 22). When Mark realizes that his ‘documentary’ might not contain as much lesbian sex as he was hoping for, he decides to install hidden cameras in the house to observe what is happening between the girls and their visitors. When Jenny finds out about the secret videotaping, she openly confronts Mark:

What I want is for you to write “Fuck me” on your chest. Write it! Do it! And then I want you to walk out that door and I want you to walk down the street. And anybody that wants to fuck you, say “Sure, sure. No problem!” And when they do, you have to say “Thank you very very much”, and make sure that you have a smile on your face, and then, you stupid fucking coward, you’re gonna know what it feels like to be a woman (S02E11, 23:23).

THE L WORD directly addresses problematic issues related to representations of lesbianism by cleverly using a voyeuristic approach to emphasize sexism and heterosexism (McFadden, 2014: 18). For the creators, the character of Mark supposedly represents most straight people, as he is “unable to escape his own prurient sexist and heterosexist perspective, and the narrative anatomizes his very real failure to understand and to represent” (ibid.: 22). THE L WORD can be considered one of the first television formats to push the envelope regarding the portrayal of gays and lesbians by including explicit depiction of nudity and same-sex intimacy (Becker, 2006: 175).

Other examples for series that provide a distinctive queer text are QUEER AS FOLK (Showtime, 2000-2005) and SIX FEET UNDER (HBO, 2001-2005). Both were shown on basic or pay cable channels. Even though numerous commercial broadcasters had turned to gay material to a certain degree in order to prove that their program was not ‘too safe’, they still could or would not compete with cable TV. The edginess of their gay content was and still is one way that cable differentiates itself from the networks (ibid.). At the beginning of the 2000s, numerous channels were struggling to find the right balance between narrowcasting and broadcasting, as Becker mentions:

The networks’ limits regarding gay material underscores the fact that even in an era marked by niche marketing, broadcasting principles still held some sway as far as prime-time network programming was concerned. Although the television landscape had become so fractured, cultural associations that gave prime-time network TV the aura of the nations’ shared living room remained [...] (ibid.).

Dana Frei understands both QUEER AS FOLK and THE L WORD as cultural forums in which the issues of sexuality, gender and normativity are being
discussed (2011: 314). Both shows build their narrative focus around gay characters and thus create a ‘homonormative’ environment in which heterosexuals play a minor role (ibid.: 299). While productions such as WILL & GRACE or QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY depicted gay men (and, to a smaller degree, also lesbians) in a way that was rather innocent, de-sexualizing and most of all stereotypical, QUEER AS FOLK and THE L WORD not just implicate homosexuality, but explicitly display it. For example, already in the pilot of QUEER AS FOLK, the audience witnesses one of the protagonists getting orally satisfied by another man in the middle of a club (S01E01, 00:04:25). Beyond that, the show’s first episode also comprises unvarnished sex scenes between gay men. This explicit representation of gay affection is constantly being repeated in each episode. The steady repetition contributes not only to an increased visibility of gay characters, but moreover it helps to abolish the status of homosexuality being inconceivable, ineffable and disgraceful (ibid.: 305). QUEER AS FOLK and THE L WORD criticize and deconstruct hegemonic approaches and call upon society to question heteronormativity (ibid.). The disbelief in heteronormative ideals is made clear in the following statement of Brian, one of the main characters of QUEER AS FOLK:

Look, I don’t believe in love, I believe in fucking. It’s honest, it’s efficient. You get in and out with a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of bullshit. Love is something that straight people tell themselves they’re in, so they can get laid. And then they end up hurting each other, because it was all based on lies to begin with. If that’s what you want, then go find yourself a pretty little girl… and get married (S01E01, 01:20:38)

Taking place in a homonormative microcosm, QUEER AS FOLK emotionalizes its viewers by presenting authentic, endearing protagonists that the audience immediately feels connected to. Thus, it is possible for the series to effectively level social criticism since people in front of the TV screens actively perceive iniquities that the characters in the show experience (Frei, 2011: 303-304). Nonetheless, QUEER AS FOLK is not free of stereotypes. More likely, they occur on various levels. The show also contains stereotypical conceptions of heterosexual relationships that are often described as hypocritical or dishonest. One might even say that the format reveals some heterophobe characters (ibid.: 310), such as when Brian explains:

There’s only two kinds of straight people in this world. The ones that hate you to your face, and the ones that hate you behind your back (S01E01, 01:02:50)

By stating that all straight people hate gays, Brian implies that all heterosexuals are the same and, beyond that, all of them are ignorant and imbued with hatred. The series portrays the majority of heterosexual people as homophobic and ignorant, but
at the same time it compares these storylines to others that again relativize the accusation of one particular group (Frei, 2011: 310). Homophobia is also emphasized visually in the pilot episode. In one scene, Michael catches two neighborhood boys writing the word ‘faggot’ onto Brian’s jeep with pink spray paint. When Brian sees it, he does not seem to be very upset, but instead he proudly drives the car:

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Michael: You better get this thing repainted before you’re going to the office.
Brian: I am not having it repainted.
Michael: What?
Brian: I like it this way.
Michael: Are you crazy?
Brian: No, they are. Well, I say, fuck them. They can write it in neon across the sky. Faggot!
(S01E01, 00:43:30)
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What sets QUEER AS FOLK apart from other programs is the fact that it avoids creating an all too problematic environment (Frei, 2011: 300). Serious issues such as Aids, drug abuse or violence are examined within the show, but the gay characters not necessarily take on the role of the victim.

![Vandalized jeep in QUEER AS FOLK](image)

Although both QUEER AS FOLK and THE L WORD are socio-critical and rebel against heteronormative patterns, they still allow their characters to participate in more than one system of values. The formats question dominant heteronormative ideologies, but instead of presenting biased images, they offer strategies to explore a multiplicity of perspectives (ibid.: 309). These shows work on multiple levels to make their argument that viewers must learn to see familiar images anew (McFadden, 2013: 104).

Deconstructing stereotypes is an essential first step in understanding the representation of sexuality in the media (Ott / Mack, 2010: 227). As already pointed out earlier, it is important to differentiate between the visibility and representation of
Beyond the Close – Gay Men in US-American Sitcoms Today

3 Beyond the Closet – Gay Men in US-American Sitcoms Today

3.1 The Status Quo or: Why Staying in the Closet is so last Season

Tom Cruise, this is Park County police! Please come out of the closet. Everybody here just wants you to come out of the closet, Tom. Nobody’s gonna be mad, everything’s gonna be alright. Just come out of the closet.

– Sergeant from SOUTH PARK (S09E12, 00:10:30)

Not so long ago, I had an interesting yet serious conversation with my father about his youth. He told me that back in the early 1980s, one of his best male friends was gay. However, the circumstances of that time kept this young man from coming out of the closet. Not even his own family knew that he was interested in men. As a matter of fact, he also got involved with girls in order to support the image of the straight male womanizer and he truly ‘mastered’ his heterosexual disguise. Ultimately, the repression of his homosexuality claimed his life: before his thirtieth birthday, he hanged himself in his student dorm. While I was listening to this truly sad story, I caught myself thinking of homophobia as something that is firmly rooted in the past. Dealing with Queer and Gender Studies on a regular basis, I should, of course, know better. I should be fully aware of the fact that bigotry and homophobia are concepts that still do exert influence on today’s society as well. Yet, as recipients of the 21st century, we tend to be blinded by the latest achievements of the gay rights
gay characters on television, as these are two different concepts. The growing number of gay personalities on screen “does not necessarily result in an increase in politically potent images” (ibid.). Some series use token gays that should help to broaden the appeal of the program by offering the gay community protagonists they can identify with, but very often these characters are highly questionable and offensive. Some formats of the 2000s, however, openly criticize heteronormative patterns and successfully manage to present realistic images of gay men and women, such as QUEER AS FOLK or THE L WORD. Generally, gay visibility in the media is ironic. As some aspects of queer life become more prominent, others become ignored again, or in others words, visibility results in invisibility (ibid.).
movement, like the Supreme Court decision in the case of ‘United States vs. Windsor’ in June 2013, to only give one example.

Acts of violence against gays are often considered a dark chapter of the past. It has almost been seventeen years since the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay student from Wyoming, shocked the United States and the world. In October 1998, two young men lashed Shepard to a fence in a remote area near Laramie, Wyoming. They tortured and pistol-whipped him and then left him to die. Later, his two murderers pleaded the ‘gay panic defense’, arguing that they were driven to temporary insanity by the sexual advances from Shepard – still, both of them received life sentences (Becker, 2006: 11-12). About 800 people attended Shepard’s funeral in Casper, Wyoming – among them also numerous protesters holding signs with homophobic slogans such as ‘Matt in Hell’ or ‘No Tears for Queers’ (Delahaye, 2003: 189). Meanwhile, many networks decided to reschedule their program in the aftermath of the hate crime and aired reruns of ELLEN’s coming out episodes, as well as gay-themed episodes of ROSEANNE, FRIENDS and THE SECRET LIVES OF MEN (ABC, 1998). The latter included a storyline in which one of the heterosexual characters fears that a gay business client is coming on to him – an eerie coincidence, given the fact that Shepard’s murderers later argued that they panicked because their victim had made a pass at them (ibid.: 12).

Today – 46 years after the ‘Stonewall Riots’ – homosexuality is so omnipresent in popular culture that hate crimes towards gays tend to be ignored, although they still do exist. There has been an enormous shift in the past decades from a “place of either invisibility or coded and brutally stereotyped images to a new place of an attenuated but nevertheless expansive new gay presence” (Walters, 2014: 4). It is 2015, and gay characters dot the cultural landscape of US-American TV. In fact, the generation of my parents really seems to experience a ‘before and after’ of gay life (ibid.: 5). While back in the 1990s, the coming out of Ellen Morgan was still something that viewers discussed with their co-workers at the lunch table, today it is hard to imagine a TV show in which the narrative revolves around the paradigms of closetedness and coming out (ibid.: 37), or as Becker puts it:

The banal ubiquity of television’s openly gay guys supports the illusion of a post-closet world where all men who are gay are out, and any man who isn’t out is obviously (and securely) straight – otherwise they’d be out (2009: 127).
Beyond the Closet – Gay Men in US-American Sitcoms Today

The majority of TV shows, especially sitcoms, no longer officially introduce their homosexual characters as ‘the gay ones’, but they are already active constituents of the plot. Thus, by the time we meet the gay characters in these new sitcoms, their homosexuality is no longer discussed, but they are presented to the audience as ‘already gay’ and outing (Walters, 2014: 37). Hence, the portrayal of homosexuality is no longer avoided in US-American sitcoms, but it can rather be understood as one of their major themes, which, of course, brings back the issue of visibility vs. representation and tokenized characters. But which one is the ‘real’ America? Is it the one of blissfully united gay couples in sitcoms or is it people committing hate crimes against gays because of their sexual orientation (ibid.: 7)? Walters even goes one step further by raising the question whether gayness is now so ‘post’ that it has morphed into the ultimate sign of hipness (ibid.).

Surely, US-American society has reached a new period of gay liberation. One may broadly divide this development into three main sections. The first stage of gay visibility, until the late 1960s, was “marked either by absence, coded and subterranean images, or the pathos of abject stereotypes” (ibid.: 8). The second phase, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was then spurred by social movements, but also by Hollywood niche marketing. Gays on US-American television were eventually coming out of the closet, and they now had to face the fact that they were finally seen but not necessarily portrayed in any significant way (ibid.). Today, we might be in a third phase, which is an era of banal inclusion and normalization of gay characters on TV (ibid.). For Walters, however, it is too early to speak of a post-gay liberation era. The author even warns against the nature of US-Americans to assert a ‘post’ before approaching the finish line (ibid.):

We did it with women’s rights, declaring an era “post-feminist” while women remained lower paid, sexually vulnerable adjuncts to a still male-dominant culture. We’re doing it now with racial equality, depicting the election of our first black president as an indication that the long struggle for civil rights is essentially over [...]. This idea of “post” (racial, feminist, gay, whatever) depends on painting bigotry as the aberrant acts of isolated monsters (ibid.: 8-9).

Therefore, although one might proudly declare gay silence and invisibility issues of the past, it is also important to note that US-American society has not realized absolute gay liberation yet and maybe it never will. Moreover, by declaring the end already in sight, “we prevent ourselves from crossing the finish line and achieving real integration and inclusion” (ibid.: 10). The great number of gay characters on US-American TV – and they do appear in all kinds of genres – does not automatically
implicate a meaningful representation of gays altogether. Coming back to the question of whether America is still acting in a homophobic way or embracing gays, there is no simple answer. According to Walters, the trajectory of gay liberation is not a singular and linear narrative of progress and victory (ibid.: 8).

In the following chapters, I will draw attention to the gay male protagonists of three contemporary US-American sitcoms and explore the ways in which they are represented in these shows. I will mainly focus on HAPPY ENDINGS (ABC, 2011-2013), THE NEW NORMAL (NBC, 2012-2013) and MODERN FAMILY (ABC, 2009-present), but I will also compare these shows to other US-American sitcoms in order to reveal certain repetitive patterns in the depictions of gay men. I am fully aware that it is equally important to consider the portrayal of lesbians and bisexuals on US-American TV, and as we could see in the outing of Ellen DeGeneres or the success of THE L WORD, gay women do play an important role in the history of gay visibility and liberation. However, in order not to go beyond the constraints of this paper, I decided to concentrate on the examination of gay men for my analysis.

3.2 It’s all about the Bromance! How Gay Guys, Guy Love and Queer Straights shape Postmodern Masculinities in HAPPY ENDINGS

One gay character that definitely catches the sitcom viewer’s attention is Max Blum from HAPPY ENDINGS. The show, which follows six best friends in their thirties, opens with the wedding of Alex and her long-term boyfriend Dave. Just before the vows, Alex runs out of the church with another man. This incident drastically changes the group dynamics and leaves the friends in the awkward position of having to choose sides.

While in the past most of the gay men in sitcoms were portrayed in flat and offensively stereotypical ways, there is something refreshingly different about the character of Max, as he represents a wider spectrum of gay than any sitcom figure before him. Max no longer has to be the flamboyant camp gay that enjoys extensive shopping sprees and frequent visits to theatres, like the character of Jack.
McFarland in WILL & GRACE. Instead, Max is the loveable guy who likes eating pizza in bed and watching football with his ‘bros’. He happens to be homosexual, but it is not a big deal (Adams, 2014). Also, his sex life is discussed as frequently and explicitly as the ones of his heterosexual friends. While in earlier productions, gays were too often “narrowly depicted as either desexualized or oversexualized, making of gay sexuality either the sum total of a character’s identity or, alternately, the unspoken absence” (Walter, 2014: 7), Max is not only ‘allowed’ to be sexually active, but also to talk about it with his friends. At the same time, his sexuality does not dominate his character. Thus, Max’s sexual orientation is just another trait, but it is not what defines him.

HAPPY ENDINGS does not simply throw in the obligatory token gay in order to ‘fulfill the duty’ of a 21st century TV show, but it leaves the character of Max Blum with multiple options to live his gay identity. He does not have to stick to certain stereotypically gay patterns or serve as mere source of amusement, like many gay characters before him. Still, HAPPY ENDINGS can be viewed from different perspectives when it comes to the portrayal of Max. On the one hand, the show can be praised for the non-stereotypical depiction of a gay man in a sitcom. On the other hand, Max can be considered ‘not gay enough’, because he defies all the gay stereotypes that we know from other US-American sitcoms. Consequently, one could criticize the show for creating a gay character that mainly panders to a heteronormative audience. However, I argue that HAPPY ENDINGS speaks out against gay stereotypes. This does not mean that the show banishes these stereotypes all together. On the contrary, HAPPY ENDINGS brings them in, just to draw attention to their problematic nature.

The second episode of HAPPY ENDINGS’ first season fully supports this argument as it introduces a great number of gay stereotypes, just to invalidate them at the end. In the episode titled The Quicksand Girlfriend (ABC, 2011), Penny accuses Max of being “the worst gay husband ever” (S01E02, 00:03:03) as he refuses to go to the farmer’s market with her. Instead, he decides to stay home and watch football with Brad.
For Penny, Max does not qualify as gay because he does not meet any of the stereotypes that she associates with gay men. Moreover, she reproaches him for not being the stereotypically gay that she would like to spend time with:

Penny: You're a straight dude who likes dudes. I want a gay who will watch house flipping shows with me and grab my boobs in a platonic way.
Max: So you want a stereotypically flamboyant, cartoonish ‘Sex in the City’ gay? That’s offensive.
Penny: The heart wants what the heart wants.
(S01E02, 00:06:05)

At the beginning of the dialogue, Penny labels Max as 'straight dude who likes dudes'. This statement is particularly alarming as it implies that all gay men are the same, meaning ‘campy’, otherwise they cannot be referred to as gay. According to Penny’s conception, homosexuality always involves gay stereotypes, like a general interest of gay men in fashion, shopping, or a certain genre of music. By stating that she wants a gay male friend who watches house flipping shows with her, Penny promotes the stereotypical assumption that gay men can either participate in makeover reality shows or at least they have to be crazy about watching these shows with their straight female friends.

When Max asks Penny whether she is longing for a flamboyant, cartoonish gay, he refers to HBO’s former flagship show SEX AND THE CITY (HBO, 1998-2004) that has frequently been criticized for its camp gay characters and for reinforcing the notion that “gay sex is transitory, fleeting, intangible, but that heterosexual sex is forever” (Greven, 2004: 42).

Max points out that Penny’s desire for a stereotypically gay male friend is offensive, but still introduces her to one of his gay friends that he believes to ‘fulfill’ all the gay stereotypes that Penny is looking for. Being theatrical, stylish and outstandingly campy, Derrick basically represents the complete opposite of Max. When Penny and Derrick meet for the first time, he immediately makes a comment about her dress, stating that it “looks delish” (S01E02, 00:07:08).
Penny is impressed by Derrick, as he is the guy Penny considers to be a ‘real gay’:

Penny: Max, who is this fine man?
Max: Penny, I’d like you to meet Derrick. We played on a gay softball team together last year.
Thought you guys might get along.
Derrick: P.S., four balls isn't just a walk, it's a party. What? Drama!
Penny: Aah!
Derrick: Can I touch your tatas?
Penny: Get in there.
Derrick: Aah! Oh my god, I feel like I've known you so long.
Penny: Aah! Oh, my God. I already miss you.
Derrick: Oh my god. Are we in a fight? No. I'm gonna get you accessories.
Penny: Get out of here.
Derrick: See you soon.
Max: Gay enough for you, Pen?
Derrick: Slut! Come help me out of this split.
Penny: He's the gay of my dreams.
(S01E02, 00:07:15)

While Penny and Derrick are talking to each other, Max keeps rolling his eyes, expressing his loathing to Derrick’s ‘campiness’ (S01E02, 00:07:28). Although he does not comment on Derrick’s behavior, the audience feels that Max is irritated by it. He is sure that Derrick has all the features that work as gay stereotypes. When he asks Penny whether Derrick is ‘gay enough’ for her, she replies that he is ‘the gay of her dreams’. Again, Penny makes clear that a man has to have certain ‘gay traits’ in order to be recognized as gay. Furthermore, Penny’s attitude conveys the message that the only purpose of gay men is to entertain their straight female friends.
After having spent a lot of time with Derrick, Penny realizes that she no longer wants to see him. All of a sudden, she starts criticizing him for the kind of behavior that she was longing for in the first place:

Penny: Okay, I thought that I wanted this offensively stereotypical gay guy, but it's too much. I mean, I feel like it messes with the group dynamic.
Max: It does, Pen. Because our group already has an offensively stereotypical gay guy. You don't need a gay husband. Because you're my gay husband.
(S01E02, 00:18:05)

When Max tells Penny that she might be his 'gay husband', the show flashes back to certain scenes in which Penny is the one to fulfill all the stereotypes that she exclusively assigns to gay men. We see Penny touch her friend's breasts and go crazy over Lady Gaga concert tickets (S01E02, 00:18:18). By pointing out that Penny shares more features with stereotypically gays than he does, Max signals that people can never be judged according to their sexual orientation and that certain stereotypes may apply to some gays, but they might as well be applicable to straight people. Thus, the character of Max strives against the stereotypical image of gay men that the audience has come across in many other sitcoms, and promotes gay identities that go beyond just the sexual orientation of a person. One might raise the question why HAPPY ENDINGS even includes a stereotypically gay man like Derrick. I claim that the character of Derrick works as a steady reminder for the audience that gay stereotypes on US-American TV, especially in the genre of sitcom, still do exist. Moreover, he might be evocative of former gay sitcom characters that have been considered offensive, like Jack McFarland from WILL & GRACE. By presenting the viewer both a stereotypically gay man in the form of Derrick and a gay man who does not perpetuate these stereotypes, HAPPY ENDING makes an important statement: not all gay men act according to these gay images, not all gay men are the same.

This also becomes clear in a conversation between Penny and Brad in which they are trying to determine which traits 'prove' Max' homosexuality:

Penny: What are the gay things Max does?
Brad: Okay. Hmm. Oh! Doesn't he spend hundreds of dollars on lotions and creams? No, that's me.
Penny: Oh! What about that binder he has full of pictures of men's goatees?
Brad: That's Dave. But he does have that giant collection of gay porno.
Penny: Weirdly, that's Alex.
Brad: Oh.
Penny: And every time I ask her why, she just says, "Hey, I don't smoke but I have ashtrays."
Brad: You know, I'm starting to think Max is the least gay of all of us. What a fresh character.
(S03E15, 00:08:35)
The dialogue shows that obviously, Max is the one member of the group who shows the least stereotypically ‘gay traits’. While Brad spends a lot of money on cosmetics and Alex is the one to watch gay porn, Max does not share any of these habits. This again illustrates that people cannot be assigned to certain stereotypical categories.

In another episode, Brad wants to set Max up with his co-worker Franklin, because he thinks they would be “perfect for each other” (S1E6, 00:00:10). Some time later, Brad and Max are sitting on the couch playing video games and Brad wants to know how Max’ date with Franklin went:

Brad: I thought you guys would have a good time, you know, I mean, you’re both...
Max: We’re both what?
Brad: Supercool dudes.
Max: Pause. You were gonna say ‘gay’.
Brad: Mnh-mnh.
Max: It all makes sense now. You, my friend, are a gaycist.
Brad: What?
Max: You think all gays are the same. You think just because Franklin and I are both friends of Elton, we’re just gonna pack it up, move to Vermont and start selling antiques?
Brad: No, I did not say that.
Max: Unpause. Relax. It's fine. I'm just messing with you. Besides, some parts of the stereotype are true. I mean, just 'cause we didn't get along doesn't mean we didn't have raging sex in a bus terminal.
Brad: Really?
Max: Pause. No! Playdate suspended on account of your gaycism.
(S1E6, 00:03:50)

For Max, a gaycist is someone who believes that all gays are the same, similar to racist concepts implying that all blacks or all Jews are the same. After his dispute with Max, Brad tells his wife Jane about it, seeking for her confirmation that he is not a gaycist:

Brad: Max keeps calling me a gaycist.
Jane: That's awful! I have no idea what that means.
Brad: That I think all gay people are automatically attracted to each other.
Jane: But you don't.
Jane: Okay, now you're just naming straight actors who've played gay characters.
Brad: Yeah, but come on, acting is pretty gay.
(S1E6, 00:08:24)

Although Brad tries to convince Jane that he is not a gaycist, at the same time he states that the profession of acting is ‘pretty gay’. Also, he claims that he loves gays, but can only think of straight actors or actresses who have played gay characters, not of any person who actually is gay. In order to prove to Brad that he is a gaycist, Max arranges a meeting between Brad and an old black lady at a bar. Max introduces her
as someone that Brad “would just hit it off with” (S1E6, 00:16:03). Brad is confused and does not know what the old lady and him could possibly have in common:

Max: Brad, I'd like you to meet Miss Mary. I met her on my floor, selling bibles and I thought you guys got a lot in common.
Miss Mary: So nice to meet you, Brad.
Brad: Ma'am!
Max: Miss Mary, why don't you have a seat and tell Brad some more about how your religion doesn't believe in blood transfusions?
Miss Mary: Oh, sure.
Brad: Um, no offense, Miss Mary, but, uh, Max…what on earth do you think I have in common with this woman?
Max: Why do I think you have something in common with her? Yeah, I don't know…’cause…you're both...
Brad: Okay, I'm a gaycist.
(S1E6, 00:16:06)

Introducing Brad to the old black lady, Max succeeds in opening Brad's eyes for his gaycism. Finally, Brad understands that his presumption that all gays are the same is just as racist as assuming that all black people are the same. With this episode, HAPPY ENDINGS perfectly illustrates that gaycism is just as much of a problem in society as is discrimination based on a person's race, skin color or religious belief.

However, it is also interesting to examine how Max’ gay identity has a crossover effect on his straight male friends’ masculinity. This is where the subject of male bonding or, as Becker calls it, the ‘bromance discourse’, comes in (2014: 235). The term ‘bromance’ combines the words ‘bro’, short for ‘brother’, and ‘romance’, and refers to intense bonding between two men or a group of men. Some of the most famous examples for bromances on recent US-American TV include JD and Turk on SCRUBS (NBC / ABC, 2001-2010), House and Wilson on HOUSE (FOX, 2004-2012) or Ted and Barney on HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER (CBS, 2005-2014). Becker connects today's proliferation of bromances to the dramatic increase of gay visibility in the 1990s and claims that although the debates about gay rights – for example about gays in the military or marriage rights – did not always result in immediate political victories, these battles still had an influence on US-American society as they undermined the social stigma associated with homosexuality (ibid.). Thus, “as homosexuality became less socially stigmatized and expressions of homophobia less culturally acceptable […], discourses surrounding masculinity and male bonding have shifted” (ibid.: 236).
At the beginning of the 1990s, when gay characters in sitcoms were still relatively new, many shows featured what Becker describes as “mistaken sexual identity plots” (ibid.). For example, the 1993 episode of SEINFELD (NBC, 1989-1998), titled The Outing (NBC, 1993), Jerry and his friend George are mistaken for a gay couple. Indeed, back then, many straight male characters on US-American sitcoms had to discover that people believed they were in a gay relationship with their male best friends. Narratives like the one in the SEINFELD episode, presented heterosexual men having to navigate in a new world in which openly gay men existed and where their own heterosexuality was not self-evident anymore (ibid.: 237). Consequently, straight men found themselves struggling with this new situation. On the one hand, some of them assumed that making casual ‘fag jokes’ helped to reassure that they were not gay, but that they were only hanging out with their ‘bros’ (ibid.: 236). On the other hand, straight men also felt the urge to make clear that they do not have a problem with gays and that they are not homophobic (ibid.: 237). When homosexuality on US-American TV became more common in the 2000s, this also shaped bromances:

Within its logic, the growing social acceptability of homosexuality and visibility of gay men no longer pose the same problems for the security of straight men’s sexual identity or the same type of pitfalls for male bonding. Instead, the bromance relies on the cultural awareness of and general positive associations connected to gay love to reframe straight masculinity [...] (ibid.: 241).

I mentioned JD and Turk on SCRUBS as a popular example for a bromance. The relationship between them can unquestionably be seen as one of the show’s central themes. This becomes especially noticeable in the episode called My Musical (NBC, 2007) in which JD and Turk sing about their friendship:

JD: Let's face the facts about me and you, a love unspecified. Though I'm proud to call you 'Chocolate Bear', the crowd will always talk and stare.
Turk: I feel exactly those feelings, too. And that's why I keep them inside. 'Cause this bear can't bear the world's disdain and sometimes it's easier to hide.
JD & Turk: Than explain our guy love, that's all it is. Guy love, he's mine, I'm his. There's nothing gay about it in our eyes.
(S06E06, 00:14:25)
This portrayal of hetero intimacy between JD and Turk could be seen as problematic as it “diminishes gay intimacy and arguably forecloses the possibility of intimate friendships between gay and straight men by so consistently enforcing the opposition” (Lotz, 2014: 170). In other words: the episode might suggest that true bromance can only take place among straight men. Hence, in the course of their duet, JD and Turk repeatedly point out that there is ‘nothing gay’ about their guy love. While Amanda D. Lotz argues that the bromance between JD and Turk downgrades gay intimacy, Becker takes the view that “gay love helps give meaning to this guy love by being amiably acknowledged, even as it is being disavowed” (2009: 132). Moreover, he describes relationships such as the one between JD and Turk as “representations of queer straight masculinity” (ibid.: 121). These queer moments among straight men indicate “hegemonic masculinity in the process of being redefined” (ibid.). Within recent years, the exploration of straight men’s queer masculinities has become a research field of its own. According to Robert Heasley from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, many straight men demonstrate queer masculinity, “defined here as ways of being masculine outside hetero-normative [sic] constructions of masculinity that disrupt, or have the potential to disrupt, traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine” (Heasley, 2005). Thus, we see that the steady increase of gay images on TV also affects straight male masculinity in several ways. The ‘bromance discourse’ seems to explore what being read as gay can do for straight masculinity (Becker, 2014: 250). Moreover, it “reveals a culture negotiating what it means to be a straight man in a gay-friendly world” (ibid., 2009: 122).
One character that obviously fits into the image of a ‘queer straight’ is HAPPY ENDING’s Brad. He is heterosexual and lives together with Jane, his very dominant wife. Although Brad has some hobbies that could be considered ‘typically male’, like his interest in football, he also plays up his feminine side. He enjoys time at the spa, goes to spinning classes with his female friends and drags along a handbag with socks, just in case they “go dancing” (S03E09, 00:01:13). During the day, Brad is a businessman, but at home Jane is usually the one to lay down the rules. Brad openly shows his effeminate side around the group and does not seem to worry that this demeanor could threaten his masculinity in any way. At the end of the show’s second season, Brad is briefly unemployed before he is offered a new business job again. His wife Jane works at a very male-dominated car dealer and is fully aware of her role as the ‘female breadwinner’. For example, this can be seen when Jane pays for everybody’s drinks at their favorite pub and argues that she is “rolling in it” (S03E09, 00:00:22). Brad is often made fun of by his friends because his wife is in charge of everything and – viewed from a hegemonic perspective that would suggest a clear role allocation – Jane could be considered ‘the man in the house’. This becomes clear in the following dialogue between Brad and his friends:

Penny: I love how cool you are with Jane being the breadwinner and you staying home. It is like postgender city population progress.
Alex: Yeah, you’re like, "I’m Brad, and I’m basically a woman. I got an inverted weiner and my boobs squirt milk." Postgender!
Brad: Okay, let’s not get carried away, okay? I’m still all man up in here.
(S03E09, 00:00:40)

In the course of the conversation, Alex claims that Brad is ‘basically a woman’ and even makes a comment on his penis being inverted, because his wife Jane is so dominant that Brad literally ‘loses’ his masculinity and develops female traits. Brad, however, is not bothered by these allegations and insists that he is still ‘all man’.

Fig. 14. Brad represents ‘queer straight’ masculinity
There are also moments when Jane insinuates that Brad has a feminine side. In one episode, Jane wants to bond with her male co-workers from the car dealer. Thus, she invites her colleagues and their wives over for dinner. While Jane is having a hard time breaking the ice with the men and makes some awkward comments about football and porn, Brad immediately teams up with the wives (S03E05, 00:04:00). After the guests have left, Brad apologizes to Jane for having left her alone with the guys:

Brad: Baby, I am so sorry I left you hanging with the guys. I got caught up with the wives and they would not let me go.
Jane: It all worked out. I got to shoot the bull with the boys club all night. And they invited me to watch a game with them after work!
Brad: Oh, that's great! I got invited out, too. The gals want me to go to their spinning class and then have salads afterwards.
Jane: Look at us! Me in the boys club, you hanging with the trophy wives.
Brad: Yeah! Hold on – are you calling me a trophy wife? 'Cause that's awesome!
(S03E05, 00:10:40)

Labeling Brad as her ‘trophy wife’, Jane signifies that she is the dominant part of their relationship – the breadwinner and businesswoman – whereas Brad is inferior to her and has to leave when she is ‘doing business’ with her male co-workers. In the show, Jane and Brad represent a postmodern couple that does not behave according to traditional concepts. Brad’s ‘queer straight’ personality supports the notion that conventional gender roles are rooted in the past and that there is no such thing as clear role allocation anymore. However, it is important to emphasize that with ‘queer straight’ masculinities, Heasley does not imply that these men have ‘gay traits’ or even ‘act gay’. It simply refers to men who are masculine outside traditional hegemonic, heteronormative standards. This, however, does not implicate a lack of masculinity, but demonstrates that conceptions of masculinity have changed over the decades and have multiple facets in the 21st century.

Related to the ‘bromance discourse’, Becker demonstrates what happens when a bromance occurs between straight and gay men. While many shows feature intense friendships between straight men, only very few of them include representations of intimate bonding between gays and straights. In HAPPY ENDINGS, the connection between the two straight men, Brad and Dave, is equally intense as the relationship to their gay friend Max. Brad and Max go out with each other, watch football together on the couch, and have their own special handshake-and-hug greeting (Becker, 2014: 251). Also, they constantly call each other ‘bro’. Dave and Brad do not have a
problem talking about Max’ sex life and they do not seem to feel threatened or irritated by it. On the contrary, they want to learn more about gay flirting and sex:

Brad: So when gay guys hook up, do they call each other ‘dude’? Like, “Dude, your lips are so soft” or, “Your mustache is tickling my navel, dog”.
Max: You’re an idiot. But yeah, we do that.
(S01E09, 00:05:08)

Although the post-closet logic of bromance is “beyond concerns about mistaken sexual identities and passé stigmas attached to homosexuality” (ibid.), bromances between straight and gay men are still rare in US-American sitcoms. Dainty Smith describes these bondings as ‘hobromances’ (2012: 17). One might raise the question why hobromances are so special (Becker, 2014: 251): if men can ‘play gay’ with a straight guy without having to worry that people might think of them as gay, why could they not do the very same thing with a gay guy? Unfortunately, these bromances between straight and gay men are still considered kind of ‘risky’ by many sitcom producers. Having two heterosexual men, like Turk and JD, hug each other and openly talk about their feelings for each other, the audience can still be sure of their heterosexuality and would most likely not assume they are gay. Yet, this clarity would weaken if one of the men actually was gay (ibid.). Therefore, most sitcoms do not want to run the risk of confusing the viewer about a character’s sexual identity.

HAPPY ENDINGS, on the other hand, suggests that straight men can be in a bromance with gay men. However, to make this hobromance possible, specific preconditions need to be given. First, the heterosexual characters of Dave and Brad can be seen as bona fide post-closet straight men who are completely secure in their sexual identities – they lie on the couch with Max, hug him and encourage him to go out with certain guys (ibid.). Max’ homosexuality does not make them feel uncomfortable at all and it is also not the main topic of conversation in their friendship. Second – as already pointed out earlier in this chapter – the character of Max is not stereotypically gay. In fact, most of Max’ heterosexual male and female friends fulfill more gay stereotypes than he does. “Being in wet clothes and watching ‘Schindler’s List’” sounds more fun to him than shopping with Penny (S01E02, 00:02:59). Not being the stereotypically gay guy that we know from other sitcoms, Max often conveys the impression that he is heterosexual. This, however, can be problematic in respect of the ‘bromance discourse’. On the one hand, the friendship between Max, Dave and Brad is a good example for bonding between heterosexual and gay men, as Max is the kind of guy who can help establish “both the gay-friendly
credentials and the post-closet-era straight confidence needed to fully enjoy the benefits of self-conscious bromantic male bonding” (ibid.: 252). On the other hand, it needs to be called into question whether this bromance would still be possible if Max had more features that his straight male friends consider effeminate. Is it the lack of effeminacy that allows Max to be part of this bromance? This would mean that bromances between straights and gays are no longer structured by the abjection of the gay, but rather by the abjection of gay effeminacy (ibid.). Future sitcoms featuring hobromances will show whether it is necessary to ‘act straight’ in order to have such friendships with heterosexual men.

Generally, HAPPY ENDINGS is a good example for the continuous development of the US-American sitcom. It uses innovative strategies to draw attention to the problematic nature of gay stereotypes and homophobia. While other shows either feature stereotypically gay characters or leave out gay characters altogether, HAPPY ENDINGS cleverly incorporates gay stereotypes to reveal how ridiculous, yet dangerous, they can be. Also, the show lectures its characters by illustrating that their homophobic, or as Max calls it, gaycist behavior is discriminating and wrong. The format makes use of a postmodern approach to gender, sex and sexuality as it presents images that question or even break with traditional conceptions of gender. This can be seen in the relationship between Jane and Brad, but also in Brad’s ‘queer straight’ identity. HAPPY ENDINGS is one of the first sitcoms to feature so-called hobromances, meaning close friendships between heterosexual and gay men. Nonetheless, it gives rise to the question whether this intimate relationship is only possible because Max is not the stereotypically gay character that we know from other sitcoms. Clearly, HAPPY ENDINGS can be described as a progressive sitcom, proving that some producers aim to include gay characters in meaningful ways. However, the approach that is used to highlight these issues, needs to be examined in more detail, as some questions remain open, especially with respect to the ‘bromance discourse’. Also, the utilization of these strategies requires a certain degree of media literacy in order to be understood in its entirety – a prerequisite that cannot be met by every viewer.
3.3 From Sweaty Dance Clubs to Suburban American Homes –
Same-Sex Parenting, Homodomesticity and Masculinity in
MODERN FAMILY

“We’re just a new type of family, you know? They don’t have the right
vocabulary for us yet. They need one of us to be the mom.”
– Mitchell from MODERN FAMILY (S02E21, 00:13:27)

Over the last decades, the US-American sitcom has constantly been subjected to
changes. However, one thing that remains unchanged is the unsurpassed success of
the domestic sitcom. While back in the 1940s and 1950s, formats like THE DONNA
REED SHOW (ABC, 1958-1966) portrayed what was considered to be the ‘normal
family’, today’s programs both continue and revise the traditions of the domestic
sitcom (Kunze, 2013: 105-106). One of these shows is ABC’s MODERN FAMILY
(2009- present). Winning the Emmy for ‘Outstanding Comedy Series’ in 2010 and
2011, MODERN FAMILY is not only one of the most successful sitcoms, but it also
became especially noticeable for its representation of same-sex parenting (ibid.: 105).

MODERN FAMILY revolves around three different families, who are ultimately one.
Among the leading characters is Jay Pritchett, played by Ed O’Neill. It is not known
whether O’Neill’s former role as Al Bundy had anything to do with the producers’
choice to again let him embody the family patriarch, but it is obvious that there are
certain parallels between these two father figures, except for the fact that Jay is older
and more successful than Al Bundy ever was. Jay is married to Gloria, an attractive
and confident Columbian who is much younger than her husband and already has a
son named Manny from her first marriage. Jay also has children from his previous
marriage, Claire and Mitchell. Claire is a perfectionist who gives her husband Phil a
hard time, because she tends to be a control freak when it comes to running the
household and raising their three children Haley, Alex and Luke. Jay’s son, Mitchell,
is gay and lives together with his partner of eight years, Cameron. They have
recently adopted their daughter, Lily, from Vietnam to complete their little family. As
the title already reveals, it is the use of the word ‘modern’ and the singular ‘family’,
which emphasizes the unity between the three households (ibid.: 106).
Concerning the gay couple of the show, MODERN FAMILY deliberately employs specific strategies to ‘normalize’ their relationship for a heteronormatively structured audience. In order to compare the series’ gay family to a traditional nuclear family (or in the case of Jay, Gloria and Manny, a patchwork family), the writers place Mitchell and Cameron in a heteronormative framework that makes them appear no different from the show’s straight characters (ibid.: 108). Steve Seidman refers to this representation as the construction of the ‘normal gay’:

This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviors. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. Although normalization makes it possible for individuals to conduct lives of integrity, it also establishes a moral and social division among gays. Only normal gays who conform to dominant social norms deserve respect [...] (2002: 133).

In other words: to guarantee the show’s success, the producers want to make sure that the gay characters Mitchell and Cameron appear as ‘normal’ (implying: heterosexual) as possible. They are both ‘out of the closet’, share a beautiful home and although they are not married to each other, their relationship seems stable and ordinary. The adoption of their daughter Lily also contributes to the image of what society considers a conventional family, with two parents and at least one child. The preservation of traditional family values is what makes Mitchell and Cameron recognized as the public image of the ‘normal gay’. Gay couples who fail to keep up with this image – typically visualized in the form of male, white, middle-class Christians – will not necessarily merit the same amount of respect as ‘normal gays’ (ibid.: 150). In MODERN FAMILY, this normalization of the gay characters is especially observable during the first season. In the earlier episodes, the producers intentionally use the same kind of dynamic – one partner being emotional, childlike and irrational, the other one being mature, reasonable and practical – for all the couples in the series (Kunze, 2013: 108). This already becomes perceptible in the pilot episode. In one scene we see Jay and Gloria at the soccer field, watching Manny play. When one of the other children’s mother suggests that the coach should take Manny out due to his bad performance, Gloria immediately becomes feisty and yells at the other woman, telling her to mind her own business (S01E01, 00:01:45). On the way home from the match, Jay then criticizes Gloria for her behavior at the soccer field, stating, “you don’t have to be so emotional all the time, that’s all I’m saying” (S01E01, 00:07:00). Later, we see Claire having a heated discussion with Haley, because she admits to dating a senior (S01E01, 00:04:48). While Claire
cross-examines her with questions about the boy, Phil does not seem to be too bothered by his daughter's confession and claims to always be the 'cool dad':

Phil: I'm a cool dad. That's my thang. I surf the web, I text 'LOL', laugh out loud, 'OMG', oh my god, 'WTF', why the face. You know, I know all the dances to 'High School Musical', so...

(S01E01, 00:05:09).

In another scene, Cameron and Mitchell want to introduce their baby daughter Lily to the rest of the family. When all of them are gathered in the living room, Cameron enters, dressed up with a traditional African costume and holding Lily aloft, while the song “Circle of Life” from “The Lion King” plays. Apparently, Mitchell is embarrassed by Cameron’s little show and asks him to turn it off (S01E01, 00:20:00). However, Cameron replies, “I can’t turn it off, it’s who I am” (S01E01, 00:20:24), assuming that Mitchell is referring to his behavior in general.

Already within the first minutes of the pilot, one can recognize that each couple in MODERN FAMILY has its emotional, irrational character (Gloria, Cameron and Phil) and one more reasonable, pragmatic counterpart (Claire, Mitchell and Jay). According to Peter C. Kunze, these duos reproduce the classic comedy team: Claire and Mitchell are the ‘straight men’ or ‘feeds’, Phil and Cameron work as the ‘funny men’ or ‘comics’ (ibid.). Here, “the earnestness of the earlier serves as a foil to the ridiculousness of the latter, producing part of the show’s humor” (ibid.).

When it comes to the show’s gay relationship, Cameron is presented as dramatic, eccentric and sensitive, while Mitchell appears more hard-headed and prudent. This disparity between the two men is also made visible with respect to their jobs. Mitchell is a successful lawyer and the breadwinner of the little family. Cameron, on the other hand, quit his job as a music teacher in order to stay at home with Lily. This distribution of roles is reminiscent of Will and Jack from WILL & GRACE. Will also represents the respectable lawyer, whereas Jack works as a singer and dancer. Traditionally, the job of the lawyer is associated with assertiveness, power and rationality. Creative professions related to singing or dancing, however, are often looked upon as feminine. Like Will, the character of Mitchell still conforms to mainstream, heteronormative culture due to his lack of gayness. Will constantly makes fun of Jack, calling him a girl or even a ‘tramp’. By doing so, Will appears more masculine and, of course, ‘less gay’ than Jack. The same behavior can be
detected between Mitchell and Cameron. There are many situations in which Mitchell finds Cameron’s stereotypically gay behavior embarrassing. Sometimes, he even rebukes his partner for his attitude. This can be seen in the following dialogue, where Mitchell wants Cameron to change his pink shirt for something ‘less gay’, because he wants to make a good impression on Lily’s first day of toddler play class:

Mitchell: No, hey, come on. Today is about Lily, alright? Her future best friend might be in that class and I don’t wanna… rub anyone the wrong way. Can you please just… change your shirt.
Cameron: Fine. You know what, I’ll just go put on a pair of khakis, maybe a polo shirt and everybody’ll think we’re a couple of straight golfing buddies who just decided to have a kid together.
(S01E02, 00:03:14)

Mitchell’s ongoing fear of appearing ‘too queer’ is a recurring joke of the show, but it can also be understood as a provocative social commentary. A gay man’s perception that a certain behavior or, in this case, a shirt, is ‘too gay’, draws attention to the performative aspects of sexual identity (Kunze, 2013: 109). It indicates that even gay men can find another gay too stereotypical or effeminate. This steady scrutiny of how ‘gay’ he and Cameron can be read, might go back to homophobic experiences he had with other people, for example with his father Jay (ibid.). Although Mitchell and his father get along quite well and seem to have had a good relationship already during Mitchell’s childhood, the audience can still sense some kind of discomfort whenever Jay is confronted with his son’s homosexuality:

Mitchell: My dad… my dad still isn’t completely comfortable with this. He still does this thing. It’s been five years now. And he still does this thing where he announces himself before walking into any room we’re in. Just to make sure he doesn’t ever see us kiss.
(S01E01, 00:17:15)

His father’s dominant straight male masculinity may be one explanation for Mitchell’s “ongoing, self-reflexive creation of his identity as gay and as a man in society” (ibid.). Thus, to analyze the representation of gay characters in MODERN FAMILY, one has to examine not only how gay men perform masculinity, but also how they interact with heterosexual men (ibid.: 106). Moreover, the interaction between heterosexual men might also reveal how masculinity is understood in MODERN FAMILY.

In the Mother’s Day (ABC, 2011) episode, Phil and Jay agree to prepare the family dinner while their wives go hiking with the children. Jay still has an old recipe from his mother to make her famous pasta sauce and spends hours in the kitchen with Phil in order to make the perfect meal (S02E21, 00:07:15). For the men, especially for Jay, this is an exceptional situation since usually their wives are the ones to prepare the
family meals. When Phil puts on his ‘onion goggles’ before he starts cutting, Jay instantly starts criticizing his son-in-law for not being ‘man enough’ to cut onions without them:

   Jay: What the hell are those?
   Phil: Onion goggles. No more tears when I cook. Welcome to the 21st century. You should get a pair.
   Jay: I was gonna suggest the same thing.
   (S02E21, 00:07:30)

With this statement, Jay expresses his aversion to Phil’s unmanly demeanor and even implies that using the goggles to prevent tears makes Phil lose his masculinity. Equating Phil’s behavior with a lack of virility (or, in this case, even with the lack of male genitals as such), reveals how Jay associates being a man with the toleration of pain. In a broader sense, Jay’s attitude can be linked to the traditional assumption that men have to fight to provide for their families, even if this involves suffering. Later in this episode, Jay unintentionally starts crying when Phil finds and reads out a poem that Jay wrote for his deceased mother back when he was a child. It is the first time that Phil sees his father-in-law crying. Jay immediately grabs the ‘onion goggles’ to hide his tears from Phil (S02E21, 00:09:00). Scenes like this unveil that much of MODERN FAMILY’s humor “plays upon the fragility of American masculinity, particularly the incompetence and consequent overcompensation the straight male characters – Jay and Phil – exhibit” (ibid.: 112). The anxiety Jay and Phil show over their fractured masculinities is one of the show’s major punchlines (ibid.).

MODERN FAMILY points out that in today’s world, straight male masculinity and gay masculinity collaborate and constantly influence each other. As Michael Warner claims, “against assimilation, one could insist that the dominant culture assimilate [sic] to queer culture, not the other way around” (1999: 74). This, however, does not suggest that gay culture is or strives to become a dominant ideology of its own. It simply illustrates that the heteronormative world has already gained so much from queer culture, and it should not stop now (ibid.). In order to guarantee meaningful representations of gay characters on US-American television, it is necessary to understand that straight and gay masculinities are inextricably linked to each another and that male masculinity in the 21st century is a fragile construct that is in steady progression.
In MODERN FAMILY, both the heterosexual and the gay men struggle to perpetuate certain images of masculinity. Jay’s age is the primary source of his nervousness (Kunze, 2013: 112). Therefore, Gloria continually has to reassure him that he is still desirable. Their relationship once again highlights how men use women “as means to demonstrate their manhood to other men” (ibid.). Phil, on the other hand, has issues living up to Jay’s expectations of what a ‘real man’ has to be like. He is always seeking his father-in-law’s approval to validate his own masculine performance (ibid.). This structure of straight masculinity, however, also affects the show’s gay characters. This can be seen in Mitchell’s perpetual fear of appearing ‘too gay’. In order to keep up with the general perception of straight masculinity (which especially his father Jay promotes), Mitchell even sets himself limits when it comes to ‘stereotypically gay activities’. In one episode, Mitchell and Cameron have tickets for a Lady Gaga concert. The viewer gets the impression that for Mitchell, being a fan of Lady Gaga is a typically gay stereotype. This becomes especially noticeable when he claims that going to the concert is the one gay cliché he “allows himself” (S02E22, 00:00:30). Considering the insecurities of the series’ male protagonists, it becomes clear that constructs of masculinity and the insecurity of not being able to keep up with these images, are an issue that is equally important to straight and gay men.

Nonetheless, there are many situations in which particularly gay male identity is being put to the test. The character who most often has to strive for recognition is Cameron, as his masculinity is constantly called into question. His sensitivity and the fulfillment of all the gay stereotypes that his partner is trying to avoid, make him the complete opposite of Mitchell. Cameron hates to be viewed as the feminine part of
their relationship and wants to be accepted as a man and also as a father for their daughter. Yet, he is holding onto the gay stereotypes that people associate him with:

Cameron: There’s nothing gays hate more than when people treat us like women. We’re not. We don’t want to go to your baby shower. We don’t have a time of the month. We don’t love pink.
Mitchell: Well, you love pink.
Cameron: No, pink loves me.
(S02E21, 00:04:37)

Cameron’s statement regarding his preference for the color pink can be seen as a provocative response to distinctive gay clichés that some people automatically link to gay men. Also, it suggests that homosexuality does not imply the loss of masculinity, and that gay men also have the right to be considered masculine. Within their circle of friends, Cameron is frequently thought of as Lily’s ‘mother’. Apparently, the queer family of Cameron, Mitchell and their daughter is being placed in a heteronormative framework by their (predominately heterosexual) friends. People are incessantly trying to assign distinctive heteronormative roles to Cameron (the ‘mother’) and Mitchell (the ‘father’). Again, it becomes clear how heteronormative culture depends on the traditional idea of the ‘normal family’ and how closely this image is linked to the issue of domesticity. For a very long time, gays have been excluded from popular notions of home and the domestic (Doran, 2013: 97).

MODERN FAMILY is one of the first sitcoms to break with this outmoded concept by placing Cameron and Mitchell in exactly this domestic setting. As Steven Edward Doran points out, the show is an example of how gay characters on US-American TV have paved their way from “dark, sweaty dance clubs to the sanctified homes of American suburbia” (ibid.: 95). For many, the presence of gay characters in these traditional domestic contexts signals that the inclusion of gays into dominant culture is complete (ibid.: 96).
However, Doran warns against too much enthusiasm and brings in the issue of the ‘normal gay’ or, as he calls it, the ‘good gay’:

Being placed within the domestic somehow legitimates these characters and, by extension, the queer identities and lifestyles they embody. Because of the centrality of domesticity to the way we understand social belonging in the United States, examining these representations [...] draws attention not just to how gays and lesbians are represented in popular culture in general, but to the ways in which the domestic is used as a cultural template to configure “good” gay and lesbian subjects (ibid.).

The appearance of gays in these domestic narratives is often referred to as ‘homodomesticity’. The problem with this concept is not only the risk of conveying the impression that the project of gay activism has been fully achieved, but that it again marginalizes all gay men and women who do not fit into the model of the ‘proper gay’. In a broader sense, it could be argued that, by placing Cameron and Mitchell into a typical heteronormative domestic setting, MODERN FAMILY expects gay men’s assimilation into the dominant social order and promotes the supremacy of heteronormativity (ibid.: 97).

In the Mother’s Day episode, this dominance of the heteronormative ideology becomes particularly prominent. When Mitchell wants to show his appreciation for Cameron by serving him breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day, Cameron starts to question the gender roles in their relationship. He cannot endure the thought of Mitchell viewing him as his ‘wife’:

Mitchell: And this is just the beginning. Yeah, ‘cause today is your day.
Cameron: Today?
Mitchell: All day.
Cameron: Today? Today is my day?
Mitchell: Something’s happening.
Cameron: It’s Mother’s Day, Mitchell.
Mitchell: So?
Cameron: You’re bringing me breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day.
Mitchell: Okay, no, no. This is not a Mother’s Day breakfast. This is a breakfast that happens to be on...
Cameron: You think of me as Lily’s mother! I’m your wife! I’m a woman!
(S02E21, 00:01:37).

Although Mitchell argues that he does not see Cameron as a woman, flashbacks show Mitchell referring to Cameron as ‘Mrs. Pritchett’ or ‘the wife’ in front of his family and co-workers (S02E21, 00:02:10). Later, Cameron becomes even more frustrated when their straight friends in the park ask Cameron to join the mothers for a Mother’s Day picture (S02E21, 00:05:15).
On their way home, Cameron vents his anger and Mitchell tries to come up with an explanation why people treat Cameron as if he was Lily’s mother:

Cameron: They offered me a bouquet, Mitchell.
Mitchell: Which you accepted.
Cameron: Why can't you ever take my side? They think of me as a woman!
Mitchell: Cam, no, come on. We're just a new type of family, you know? They don't have the right vocabulary for us yet. They need one of us to be the mom.
Cameron: So why does it have to be me? Do I wear a dress?
(S02E21, 00:12:54).

Mitchell’s remark acknowledges a key point: most of the time, the queer family is seen as an equal, not a variation, of the traditional nuclear family (Kunze, 2013: 111). Like other gay couples, the problem that Mitchell and Cameron have to face is not their relationship or their family per se, but the heteronormative understanding of their family by their straight friends (ibid.). Surprisingly, it is not only their heterosexual friends, but also Mitchell himself who has already adopted some sexual stereotypes, as can be seen in the scene when Mitchell brings Cameron breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day. This confirms the notion that some gays do feel forced to act according to a heteronormative system.

While Doran accuses MODERN FAMILY of erasing, overlooking, or suppressing the elements of gay identity that could disrupt the smooth operation of heteronormativity (2013: 101), I claim that the show does deserve credit for making visible and addressing certain issues that gay couples, and especially gay families, have to cope with. Nevertheless, it is also important to be aware of the show’s dominant heteronormative character. The family of Mitchell, Cameron and Lily is placed in a heteronormative framework. It is questionable whether Cameron and Mitchell would meet the same amount of acceptance if they did not conform to the image of the ‘normal gay’. This is a common problem regarding gay representation on US-American TV. Also, it needs to be mentioned that even though Mitchell and Cameron appear to be fully included, the depiction of gay sexuality is relatively poor. While MODERN FAMILY demonstrates its willingness to use exotic expressions of straight sexuality to propel its narratives, we do not witness a lot of physical interaction between the gay characters, except for some hugs and kisses on the cheek (ibid.: 100). By refusing Cameron and Mitchell an honest depiction of their sexuality, the show takes a step back in respect of meaningful gay representation.
So, although the show prominently features gay characters in roles never before seen in US-American sitcoms, it rarely actually challenges the ideology of the nuclear family (ibid.). However, despite the fact that MODERN FAMILY falls short in its visual depiction of gay sexuality and reinforces heteronormative family structures, it nonetheless explores some of the ways that the queer family differs from the heterosexual norm (Kunze, 2013: 111). Also, it includes certain scenes that draw attention to serious problems gay couples and families have to face. Revealing these inadequacies of contemporary gender roles, MODERN FAMILY might be more politically influential and progressive than many other sitcoms that only aimed at making gays visible to the audience, but looked away from any issues that being gay in a heteronormative culture might implicate (ibid.: 112). In addition, the show offers a subtle commentary on both gay and straight masculinities by illustrating their fragile and diverse characters (ibid.: 111).

Even though MODERN FAMILY does make use of a normalization process in the earlier seasons, it also gives space to more nuanced images of its gay characters in the later episodes, for example by examining concerns unique to same-sex parents (ibid.: 110). The show points out that even if gays are fully included, many of their problems are based on the fact that our society is structured in a heteronormative way. Thus, it is difficult for gay couples that do not want to be pushed into these dominant heteronormative patterns, to be valued to the same extent as the ‘normal gays’. Steadily negotiating between straight and queer models, MODERN FAMILY can be seen as an early attempt to reveal both new articulations of masculinity and meaningful representations of gay men (ibid.: 114).
3.4 Gay Men with Baby Bumps – A Comparison of Queer Family Structures in THE NEW NORMAL and MODERN FAMILY

“Leave it to the gays to raise the only underachieving Asian in America!”
– Mitchell from MODERN FAMILY (S02E05, 00:01:13)

Today, almost each series, regardless of the genre, has at least one male or female gay character. Some of them also have leading roles, like Max in HAPPY ENDINGS or Cameron and Mitchell in MODERN FAMILY. One could claim that, since gay characters on US-American TV are more present than ever, the gay movement has succeeded and gays have been fully included into dominant heteronormative culture. However, as Walters puts it, just because the openly gay genie is out of the bottle, does not mean we have reached post-gay liberation (2014: 9).

Although gays have been given a lot of screen time in sitcoms lately, many of them are still placed into a heteronormative framework. In the case of MODERN FAMILY, I mentioned the risk of having a heteronormative understanding of the gay relationship between Cameron and Mitchell. Here, the problem lies with the promotion of heteronormativity and the rigid gender identities connected to this ideology. One reason for the preservation of heteronormative values, also within gay relationships in sitcoms, might be the belief that there is something like ‘normality’ within heterosexual relationships and family structures. Mainstream television traditionally contributes to this image as it is a site where the terms ‘home’ and ‘family’ have become tangled together in the commercial culture of the 21st century, comprising a set of deeply held assumptions about the nature of ‘normal’ human existence (Ellis, 1992: 113). Consequently, ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘normal’ have come to cross-signify each other, locking gays into a contradictory position (Doran, 2013: 97):

On the one hand, “normal” is out of reach because of their exclusion from heteronormative constructions of “home” and “family”; on the other, “home” and “family” are inaccessible because of the variety of ways in which gays fail to be “normal” (ibid.).

Apparently, the image of the traditional nuclear family with father, mother and children, is still used as a particular pattern that gay couples in US-American sitcoms have to adhere to. Ironically, we see all kinds of families in current sitcoms: patchwork families, step-families, extended families, as well as single parent families, but none of them seem to be forced into a specific nuclear paradigm.
On the contrary, many of the shows portraying these ‘different’ families are being praised for their display of diversity. Most of the time, we witness very strong ties among these diverse families. There is the patchwork family of Gloria, Jay and their children in MODERN FAMILY. Their close bonding is never questioned throughout the whole show, although they cannot be labeled as a traditional nuclear family. The queer family of Cameron and Mitchell, however, is frequently put into a heteronormative context that promotes nuclear family values. Consequently, they have to deal with certain heteronormative expectations. MODERN FAMILY might be pioneering by bringing up these issues through the narratives of their gay characters, but nonetheless it also contributes to the stereotypical portrayal of gay men by using the long-known pattern of introducing one masculine, pragmatic and successful gay character and one effeminate, emotional and childlike counterpart. A similar approach was used back in the late 1990s for the gay characters in WILL & GRACE, as well as in 2012, when NBC aired the first (and only) season of THE NEW NORMAL.

THE NEW NORMAL follows a wealthy Californian gay couple living in Los Angeles. Bryan and David have everything – the only thing missing in their relationship is a baby. One day they start looking for a surrogate mother to fulfill their wish for a child and they meet Goldie, a single mother from Ohio. Goldie has just left her unfaithful husband and has moved to Los Angeles with her 8-year-old daughter Shania. Back in Ohio, she was working as a waitress and so does not have a lot of savings. Hence, she decides to become a surrogate for Bryan and David, in hope of using the money to go to law school one day. Goldie’s bigoted right-wing grandmother Jane follows them to Los Angeles and wants to stop her granddaughter from carrying a child for a gay couple. When Goldie and Shania refuse to return to Ohio with Jane, she stays with them and does not miss a chance to express her aversion to Bryan and David by making homophobic remarks. Since Bryan and David want to witness their baby’s development, they offer Goldie and Shania to move in with them. Right from the beginning of the pregnancy, Bryan and David are very close with the surrogate mother of their child. They buy her presents, have ‘family dinners’ with her and Shania and treat them like actual family members. Already within the show’s early episodes, the audience can observe how the four of them and the unborn baby become a family of their own.
When I first watched THE NEW NORMAL, I expected the show to be refreshing and innovative regarding its portrayal of gay men. However, it immediately awakened memories of other sitcoms that feature stereotypically gay characters. Already within the show’s first minutes, it becomes clear that, despite the good intentions, THE NEW NORMAL offers its audience the same clichés about gay men as many other sitcoms before. Although it promises in its title to come up with ‘new’ images of gays, one circumstance especially caught my attention. In the pilot, we get to know that David is a sport-loving, pragmatic, down-to-earth man who works as an obstetrician. Bryan, on the contrary, is a television producer who loves to shop and is portrayed as an emotional, irrational, almost foolish character. This pattern connects the gay men presented in THE NEW NORMAL with the gay couple of MODERN FAMILY. Both shows feature one pragmatic character who has a highly esteemed, well-paid occupation, while the other character works in a more creative field. In MODERN FAMILY, Mitchell is an environmental lawyer and Cameron teaches music at a school. In THE NEW NORMAL, David works as an obstetrician and Bryan is the producer of a musical TV show. Looking back on the history of gays on TV, there are a lot of gay men pursuing ‘typically gay’ professions. Most of the time, these jobs are located in the service sector, for example hairdresser or designer, or in the entertainment and arts sector, meaning creative jobs that are related to singing, dancing or acting. Although the portrayal of gay men has changed in a variety of ways within the last two decades, many gay men in US-American sitcoms can still be found in these stereotypical positions. Studies show that, although these ‘typically gay’ jobs come up regularly on TV, they actually do not exist in real life, as Norma Carr-Ruffino argues:

*A Fortune* magazine survey of 6,000 gay persons found more gay men and women in science and engineering than in social services; 40 percent more in finance and insurance than in entertainment and arts; 10 times (1,000%) more in computers than in fashion (2011: 211).

Traditionally, US-American society has associated creative jobs more frequently with women than with men. This assumption also became visible in numerous US-American sitcoms. In WILL & GRACE, for example, a masculine/feminine dichotomy can be recognized with Will representing the masculine, rational and pragmatic lawyer and Grace being a creative interior designer with the typical feminine traits of creativity and artistry (Ott / Mack, 2010: 213). This cliché involves the danger of considering women as the ‘weaker sex’ and suggesting that only men should carry out jobs that involve rational thinking. The abolishment of these gender stereotypes
has been the designated target of gender studies throughout the last decades. At the same time, many US-American sitcoms revive these stereotypes about men and women in the portrayal of their characters. Moreover, it seems that gay men in sitcoms are continually associated with the same feminine traits. This, however, creates a vicious circle of women being looked upon as weak and too emotional to do ‘masculine’ jobs, and gay men being related to the very same stereotypes, thus being declared ‘women’. We see these stereotypes in the characters of Cameron in MODERN FAMILY and Bryan in THE NEW NORMAL who stand in strong contrast to their partners Mitchell and David.

In contrast to MODERN FAMILY, where Mitchell, Cameron and Lily are only one of three families that are portrayed in the show, THE NEW NORMAL exclusively deals with the gay couple of Bryan and David. Although the show was cancelled before the audience could find out what their queer family would actually be like (Goldie gives birth to the baby in the final episode), the viewer already gets an idea of the family structures even before the baby is born. One reason for this is the fact that their ‘family’ is already extended when they choose Goldie as a surrogate and ask her and Shania to move in with them. Also, Bryan has a very close relationship with his female production assistant Rocky who will later become the child’s godmother.

Already in the pilot of THE NEW NORMAL, the image of the stereotypically gay becomes noticeable when Bryan tells David about his desire to have a baby:

Bryan: I want us to have baby clothes and a baby to wear them.
David: Sweetie, you know you can’t return a baby to Barneys?
Bryan: David, look, you are the kindest man I have ever had the pleasure to love. You would feed the child, and bathe him and care for him in the middle of the night when he has rubella, or anything else contagious.
David: How do you know what rubella is?
Bryan: LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE.
David: Oh, What would you do?
Bryan: Me? Mmm... I'm the fun dad.
(S01E01, 00:06:53)

This exchange between Bryan and David is alarming on several levels. Bryan’s statement that he wants baby clothes and a baby to wear them, implies that he is more interested in buying clothes for the baby than in the child itself. When David points out to Bryan that he cannot return a baby to Barneys, he supports the stereotypical image that all gays are interested in fashion and hints that Bryan is not able to take over the responsibility for a child. Bryan, on the other hand, suggests
that David would be the perfect father who would undertake all the parental duties, such as feeding the baby or taking care of it in the case of illness. When David asks Bryan how he knows what rubella is, he replies that he came across this term while watching LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE (NBC, 1974-1983). That again, promotes the common stereotype that gay men are obsessed with television shows and gain most of their knowledge through them. At the end of the dialogue, David asks Bryan what his part in the upbringing of their child would be and Bryan claims that he would be the ‘fun dad’. This utterance is particularly serious as it points to Bryan’s inability to assume responsibility for a child. David would undertake all the essential tasks concerning parenting, while Bryan’s only duty would be entertaining the child. We experience the character of Bryan as self-absorbed and incompetent in relation to child education. Also, the steady presence of the female characters Goldie and Rocky insinuates that two gay men cannot raise a child on their own, but constantly need help from their female friends. This becomes especially noticeable in the episode where Bryan and David are trying to find godparents for the unborn baby as they are afraid they themselves “have no spiritual advice to offer“ (S01E07, 00:01:50). At the end of the episode, they choose Rocky and Shania as godmothers for the child. Bryan and David fear that, due to their homosexuality, they have to bring up their child without ‘spiritual guidance’. This must be viewed with concern as it implies that spirituality can only be found in heterosexual characters, supporting the image of homosexuality being a ‘sin’. In the course of the episode, Bryan even goes to church in order to get the priest’s approval for him and David to bring up a child together:

Bryan: My partner and I are having a baby and we're looking for godparents, but I don't think I can find spiritual foundation in others if I can't even find it in myself. So that's why I'm here.
Priest: So, you're gay.
Bryan: Uh, yeah. I guess I should have led with that.
Priest: No, I get it. I committed my life to a man, as well.
Bryan: Eh, that's really funny. I'm actually talking about an actual man that I actually lay with, Leviticus style.
Priest: Well, contrary to popular opinion, being gay isn't a sin. The church is not anti-gay.
Bryan: Yet any chance he gets, the pope treats gay marriage like Amanda Bynes treats pedestrians.
Priest: Oh, yeah, the pope. Come on. Haven't you ever had a lovable old uncle who popped off intolerant comments at a family barbecue?
(S01E07, 00:09:20)

This dialogue is supposed to convey the message that it is ‘okay to be gay’ and that the problems gays have to face in society, such as the church’s disapproval of their sexual orientation, can easily be solved. However, the mere presence of these issues
in the show is problematic if we compare them to heterosexual parents in sitcoms. It is difficult to imagine straight fathers like Cliff Huxtable (THE COSBY SHOW) go to church and ask for the priest’s ‘permission’ to bring up children with his wife. Consequently, it is not only important to look at how certain issues regarding gay parenting are dealt with in these shows, but also why they are even brought up.

In another episode – by then, Bryan and David already know that Goldie is expecting a boy – Bryan buys a traditional christening robe for the baptism of his son, but David does not agree with Bryan’s choice:

David: My son is not wearing a dress, Bryan.
Bryan: It is not a dress. It is a classic turn of the century dressing gown. They were very common infant attire and a lot of parents still use them in birth and christening announcements.
David: I’m just kind of hoping to get to his first birthday without him being called a ‘baby homo’.

(S01E14, 00:00:39)

David’s statement regarding the baby’s christening robe is disturbing as it indicates that David feels the urge to hide his homosexuality and wants his partner to do the same thing. Instead of the gown, he wants his son to wear a football uniform at his baptism. The viewer gets the impression that the character of David is not only trying to conceal his homosexuality, but that he is also embarrassed by Bryan’s ‘gay behavior’ in certain situations.

One can recognize the same pattern between Cameron and Mitchell in MODERN FAMILY. Although Cameron is the one who stays at home with their daughter, he is often portrayed as too emotional and inconsistent when it comes to Lily’s upbringing. Hence, Mitchell perpetually has to step in and help Cameron, or even worse, apologize for his ‘unprofessional’ behavior. This can be seen in one episode named Fears (ABC, 2010) in which Cameron and Mitchell invite Lily’s pediatrician over for brunch. When the Asian woman carries Lily on her arm, she all of a sudden says the words ‘mommy’ (S01E16, 00:06:32).
As a result, Cameron has a nervous breakdown:

Cameron: Why do all the things I love go away?
Pediatrician: Look, I don't even think she said the ‘M-word’.
Cameron: No, we heard it. It was clear as day. I just don't know what we've done wrong. I quit my job, so I could stay at home with her. But maybe it’s not enough. Maybe we're not providing her with the feminine energy that she needs.
Pediatrician: Yeah, I wouldn't be too concerned about that.
Cameron: You, you know it's because you're Asian, right?
Mitchell: Cam!
Cameron: No, I'm sorry. What? Am I just supposed to ignore the giant panda in the room?
Pediatrician: Pandas are from China.
Cameron: Well, it doesn't matter.
Mitchell: Okay, okay. I think what my hysterical partner is just trying to say and, if I may, that for the first six months of her life, Lily was raised by very loving Asian women in an orphanage, with whom she clearly bonded.

(S01E16, 00:09:40)

Again, Cameron is presented as unstable and unreasonable. When Lily calls her pediatrician ‘mommy’, he immediately panics and comes up with irrational explanations for her behavior, even insulting the pediatrician. Mitchell is the one who has to stop Cameron from drifting off with his theory and apologizes to the pediatrician for Cameron’s emotional reaction. At the end of the episode, it is revealed that Lily only mimics the sound her doll makes. This, however, also “comments on how children’s toys and popular culture at large reinforce the heteronormative family structure” (Kunze, 2013: 110).

Both MODERN FAMILY and THE NEW NORMAL feature one stereotypically gay character. Most of the time, it is this character who is referred to as the ‘mother’ of the child, which is alarming in many respects. First, it contributes to the cliché of women being emotional and unable to act rationally, rekindling outmoded gender stereotypes. Second, it suggests that in every gay relationship, one partner has to be the feminine part, while the other one can be considered ‘the man in the house’. In further consequence, this leads to a revival of the heteronormative construct. THE NEW NORMAL also supported this dominant ideology with its promotional stills, depicting their gay male characters with baby bumps. Ott and Mack explain why portrayals like this can influence they way society sees and thinks of gay people in general:

People often turn to the media, consciously or unconsciously, in order to form values about the world we live in today, and those values influence the impressions we have of ourselves and society. When we form values and impressions on the basis of heteronormative media representations, we run the risk of continuing current and unequal power relations (2010: 214).
Fig. 16. NBC’s promotional stills feature the male gay characters with baby bumps.

Comparing THE NEW NORMAL and MODERN FAMILY, we can perceive certain similarities in respect to the stereotypical portrayal of at least one gay character. The depictions of Bryan in THE NEW NORMAL and Cameron in MODERN FAMILY must be viewed with concern as their characters suggest that each homosexual relationship ‘needs’ one offensively stereotypical part. Most of the time, this partner is associated with traditionally feminine traits that often imply weakness and incompetence. Thus, these stereotypical images can be considered a step backwards in both gender and queer studies’ struggles for equality.

In the case of THE NEW NORMAL, the audience will never find out how Bryan and David would have raised their child as the show was cancelled after 22 episodes. Contrary to many other series, the NEW NORMAL finally allows its gay protagonists at least some physical interaction and needs to be given credit for this, as it is a step in the right direction. We frequently see Bryan and David kiss and hug each other and also lie in bed together. Still, the show’s stereotypical nature outweighs the creators’ well-intentioned attempts to represent its gay characters in a convincing way. Bryan and David are just too flat and underdeveloped as to get across the meaningful message of gay equality.

MODERN FAMILY seemed to have a similar problem during the early seasons. As already pointed out in the previous chapter, the producers’ primary goal during the first season was to ‘normalize’ the relationship of Mitchell and Cameron for a heteronormatively structured audience. However, currently following season 6 of MODERN FAMILY, I claim that it does make progress in the development of their gay characters and the issues that they meet. Already during the second season, the
show transitioned away from the normalizing episodes, toward “plotlines that, although brief, comically examine concerns unique to same-sex parents” (Kunze, 2013: 110). In the *Fears* episode, the two fathers are afraid that, being a gay couple, they cannot provide their daughter with the ‘feminine energy’ that she needs. Also, it reveals gay fathers’ anxiety of being confronted with society’s heteronormative understanding of family. In another episode of the second season, Cameron and Mitchell learn that all of Lily’s playmates have secretly entered preschool. They are outraged that the other parents did not let them in on their plans and Mitchell suggests to “leave it to the gays to raise the only underachieving Asian in America” (S02E05, 00:01:13). This lamentation can be seen as a complaint about how a heterosexist society is judging Mitchell as a man, a gay person, and a parent (Kunze, 2013: 110). Consequently, they also want to enroll Lily for preschool. At the first school they apply for, the receptionist tells them how being gay adoptive parents of a minority baby makes them highly desirable for this school (S02E05, 00:01:13). They decide to play this to their advantage and try to get Lily into the best preschool in town. However, their plans are disrupted when an interracial lesbian couple, one of whom is in a wheelchair, with a black baby also apply for the same school. The episode obviously “scoffs at contemporary political correctness and punishes Cameron and Mitchell for exploiting their social marginalization in an effort to pander to identity politics” (Kunze, 2013: 110).

In the episode titled *Two Monkeys and a Panda* (ABC, 2011), Cameron finds out that Lily’s legal name is not hyphenated, as he had assumed. Hence, their daughter does not share both of her father’s surnames, but Cameron’s name has been relegated to Lily’s middle name. Cameron feels betrayed by Mitchell and wants to know the reason for his cheating. Mitchell admits that he was afraid of losing Cameron, who seemed to be anxious about fatherhood before Lily’s arrival. Hence, Mitchell did not want his daughter to one day share the name of the man who abandoned them (Kunze, 2013: 110-111):

> The episode sensitively examines how heteronormative practices like naming a child, raise new concerns in a queer family. Furthermore, this episode may be an understated political commentary; at the time of the episode’s airing (2011), California permitted gay adoption, but had banned same-sex marriage following the passing of the controversial Proposition 8 (ibid.: 111).
Considering Cameron and Mitchell cannot be legally committed through the institution of marriage, Mitchell's fear of losing his partner becomes understandable (ibid.). This is only one of many episodes in which MODERN FAMILY examines the world of the queer family and especially focuses on issues that heterosexual parents might not have to face. This underlines MODERN FAMILY’s intention to give the same amount of attention to the gay and the straight couples in the show. As the show proceeds, all of the characters, including Cameron and Mitchell, develop and never stand still. Although the show started off with a great deal of gay stereotypes, it abolished most in the course of time. It is this continuous development that makes MODERN FAMILY so refreshingly innovative. Still, this should only be considered the beginning of meaningful gay representation.

Walters warns that we tend to “imagine we have reached the pinnacle before we have even really started climbing the mountain” (2014: 10). Over the last decades, we witnessed a great development of gay characters in these shows. However, the genre of the sitcom also involves the danger of not being sure whether the audience laughs about the person (which is basically the aim of every sitcom) or about the gay stereotypes related to a character. Hence, it is especially complicated for TV producers to make people laugh about their characters (regardless of their sexual orientation) without making gay stereotypes the source of this entertainment. Once we see more sitcoms on US-American TV that can comply with this, America will be one step further in terms of the meaningful portrayal of gays on TV.
4 The End of the Rainbow? A Conclusion

"It's very dear to me, the issue of gay marriage. Or, as I like to call it: 'marriage.' You know, because I had lunch this afternoon, not gay lunch. I parked my car; I didn't gay park it."


Writing an academic paper usually requires research, reading and collecting information that is then put into writing. In my case, this thesis also involved a lot of time spent watching television. Working with the medium of television, however, is both interesting and challenging. Who does not know this feeling: you watch your favorite show and feel overwhelmed by the images that impinge on you. Later, converting these impressions into words is not always an easy task and you hope to be able to share your perceptions with the reader of your paper in the best way possible. This paper basically had two main aims. First, I wanted to give the readers of this work an insight into the history of gays in US-American sitcoms from the 1940s until today. Here, I dealt with some of the major TV milestones of the gay movement, such as the public coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and her sitcom character in ELLEN (ABC, 1994-1998). Back then, thousands of viewers celebrated this move and almost “got swept away by Ellen-mania” (Tropiano, 2002: 246). The second aim of this paper, however, was to convince the reader that this was only the beginning of a process, one that will probably never be completely finished. Also, in the course of this work, I wanted to point out that the “explosion of gay visibility” (Walters, 2001: 3) in recent years did not necessarily result in an increase in meaningful images of gay men and women on US-American TV shows.

Within the last decades so much seems to have happened when it comes to the portrayal of gays on US-American TV and this development is still ongoing. In fact, ending this paper somehow seems impossible, because we get to see new pictures of gays on TV shows almost every day, which makes it difficult to draw a line below this research project. Nonetheless, I briefly want to sum up the main insights that I have gained while working on this thesis.
Walters compares the story of gay visibility and inclusion to a sitcom: in its best moments, it is a structure of endless possibilities, offering its audience the appearance of easy progress (2001: 298). At the same time, the sitcom is also a place of dissent and difference, and it makes this containment visible for the audience to witness (ibid.). It seems to be the same way with the story of gay inclusion, as this process is also characterized by progress, regress, shattering of old ways and their reassertion (ibid.). Like a popular sitcom that comes back week after week, shows up in reruns or provides spin-offs in new (or old) directions, the story of gay inclusion on US-American TV shares similar features (ibid.). At first sight, it appears to be a simple and self-contained process that, like a sitcom, has a beginning, middle and an end: gays were invisible and tokenized in the past, now they are visible and included. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. Because, just like a sitcom, the process of gay inclusion is unsteady, always ongoing, but never in exactly the same form (ibid.: 299).

Consequently, it would be wrong for me to speak of something like a post-gay liberation era. In fact, this thinking seems to be part of the problem. Way too often, people and, as Walters claims, especially US-American society, are hasty to assert a "post-" although they have not approached the finish line yet (2014: 8). By doing so, real inclusion of gays is slowed down, if not even hampered. Watching US-American sitcoms of recent years, one could claim that gays are not only visible, but that they have finally reached equality. Indeed, today it is hard to imagine a TV show in which the narrative revolves around the paradigms of closetedness and coming out, like ELLEN did in the 1990s (Walters, 2014: 37). Almost every sitcom already features gay characters, some of them also in leading roles. In the course of my research project, however, I have not come across a single gay sitcom character that was completely free of stereotypes. For example, while THE NEW NORMAL (NBC, 2012-2013) claims to be innovative and refreshing already with its title, it actually contains some of the worst gay stereotypes that I have seen on US-American TV within the last years. Therefore, I want to draw attention to the fact that having two gay men as lead characters in a sitcom, does not necessarily make the show gay-friendly, innovative or commendable.
Other shows, like HAPPY ENDINGS (ABC, 2011-2013) or MODERN FAMILY (ABC, 2009-present) presented different approaches when it comes to the portrayal of their gay characters. Max Blum from HAPPY ENDINGS can be seen as one of the least stereotypically gay characters in recent US-American sitcoms. Still, this does not mean that the show banishes gay stereotypes all together. On the contrary, HAPPY ENDINGS brings them in, in the form of another gay character who is the complete opposite of Max, combining all the exaggerated gay stereotypes that we know from other shows as well. With this juxtaposition, the show succeeds in holding up a mirror to the audience and to draw attention to the problematic nature of these stereotypes.

MODERN FAMILY, on the other hand, tried to ‘normalize’ the relationship of its gay characters Mitchell and Cameron for a heteronormatively structured audience in its early seasons. Although it was one of the first sitcoms to place a gay couple and their child into the domestic setting that we usually associate with the traditional (meaning heteronormative) nuclear family, the show nonetheless panders to a heteronormative audience. Within the show, the queer family is most of the time considered a copy, not a variation, of the traditional nuclear family (Kunze, 2013: 111). Hence, the problem that the gay couple in MODERN FAMILY has to face is not their relationship or their family per se, but the heteronormative understanding of their family (ibid.). While MODERN FAMILY can be accused of erasing, overlooking, or suppressing the elements of gay identity that could disrupt the smooth operation of heteronormativity (Doran, 2013: 101), I claim that the show at least deserves credit for making visible and addressing certain issues that gay couples, and especially gay families, have to deal with.

Working with these shows, it became clear to me that something like a finish line for gay inclusion on US-American TV does not exist. One might compare this phenomenon to other movements that “experienced similar catalytic periods of heightened attention and accelerated change” (Walter, 2001: 290), but then again had to accept setbacks. For example, if we look back at the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the 1960s, many people would claim that today, blacks in the USA do have the exact same rights as whites. Then again, pointing to current events in Ferguson and other US-American cities, we once again realize the fragility and discreteness of the concepts of equality and inclusion. With that in mind,
I claim that indeed we have had many moments of victory regarding the portrayal of gays on US-American sitcoms within the last years. Still, the moment for raising flags and victory poses has not come yet, if it ever will.
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