

## **Review**

Michael V. Tueth, *Laughter in the Living Room: Television Comedy and the American Home Audience*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005. ISBN: 0820468452

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Beginning with what might seem an initially incongruous examination of Puritan culture, Michael Tueth's broad study of American television comedy takes as its start point the centuries-old domestic ethos of Puritan life and applies it ably to establish a context of the consumer lifestyle of post-World War II American television audiences, highlighting the importance of the family unit to his overall thesis. What then follows is a comprehensive look at how comic texts became domesticated and familiar, and ultimately became some of the most watched programming in the United States. By invoking the basic Puritan attitude of 'eagerness to be considered among the ... respectable social groups; avoidance of evil elements that identify one as doomed to failure and damnation; devotion to one's home and family; [and] diligence in the use of one's time, both at work and leisure,' (7) Tueth makes particularly strong links between an idealised post-WWII family unit and previous work detailing television's rise to prominence within the 'hallowed precincts' (17) of the family home. From this establishing context, a comprehensive examination of American television comedy is then able to take place.

Tueth establishes the role television played in bringing entertainment to the masses, offering live performances that were previously associated with Broadway theatre or nightclubs. It is in these early stages that we can begin to see the overall structure of the research emerge, as detailed case studies provide an emphasis on the production of comedy texts. Tueth looks in-depth at performers such as Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason, and Jack Benny, and provides a solid account of early American comedy's move from vaudeville to broadcast television. Those unfamiliar with the performers mentioned are given assistance by Tueth's subjective observations, such as noting that 'Red Skelton survived the longest on television ... because he had "heart" and presented the sort of amiable personality that viewers felt comfortable inviting into their homes.' (44) However, as becomes apparent

such conceptualisations of the audience in this manner are frequent, with summaries also supported by data such as viewing figures or television set sales.

In turning his attention to the sitcom, Tueth appears to be covering as many bases as he can, giving a broad overview of some of the history of the sitcom and its social role. For the “marriage comedies” of *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* we are told of previous literature that discusses the programmes’ position as barometers for early 1950s gender relations; the domestic, familial setting of shows such as *All in the Family* is said to reflect the experience of the audience at home; and *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Cheers* provided an extension to the familial setting, allowing a greater variety of characters and situations to appear. Much of this will be familiar to those already engaged in comedy studies research, but as an introductory text *Laughter in the Living Room* is useful in providing a review of some of the key arguments in sitcom analysis, and how they can be applied to notable texts.

Tueth reminds us early on that an inescapable truth regarding television is that it is a commercial environment, ‘Hence, most of the comedy on American television illustrates and reinforces the values and attitudes of the middle-class family and capitalist society.’ (17) This thread is followed through into the later stages of the book, where Tueth describes the use of more “adult” comedy by advertisers in an effort to capture the 18- to 49-year-old demographic. Harking back to his earlier adoption of the idyllic post-WWII family structure for his study, Tueth uses the remainder of his book to look at texts that subvert this notion, looking at issues of race and comedy, the presence of the anti-suburbia locale of New York City, and the rise of primetime animated sitcoms.

However, whilst all this is a solid look at the history of television comedy in the United States – and would certainly make a useful introductory text due to the vast amount of material it covers – the book’s construction of the audience is relatively simplistic. As is typical of comedy research, audience response is very often understood through the analysis of texts alone, and although Tueth provides some anecdotal evidence, the role and practices of the “American Home Audience” – as named in the title – is not explicitly addressed. Whilst this methodological choice is by no means deceptive – Tueth makes clear the historical approach his study will take – readers of this particular journal may find the research underwhelming. Ultimately, *Laughter in the Living Room* is perhaps more concerned with the perception of comedy’s “invasion” of the living room, rather than with those actually laughing.