2. Conceptual Impulses and Cultural Context

Online articles titled "The 29 Most Iconic Insults to Ever Make Their Way Onto a TV Show" (Marder), "10 TV Show Insults for Everyday Life" (Matta), and "TV Insults So Harsh, They Still Burn" (Grayson) exemplify the ample pleasure and enjoyment that popcultural disparagement brings its viewers. Insults are able to elicit humor. It is no surprise, then, to see that most of the examples of TV shows mentioned in the articles are situation comedies where "something is funny because someone is made fun of," since the most important purpose of the sitcom genre is to humorously entertain with, among other things, the disparagement and symbolic abuse of its characters (Scharrer et al. 2).

The intensity and variety of disparagement and insults in culture, society, and politics have been hotly debated in recent years (e.g. cf. Mendiburo-Seguel et al.; Ott; Colker; Embrick et al.; Black). Apart from growing public debates about hate speech, vile aggression on social media platforms, and political correctness, invective dynamics and constellations are also a highly prominent component of popular culture, and especially of the US television culture where a significant intensification and multiplication of disparagement, mockery, and humiliation can be seen.[1] Expanding representational practices are organized around shaming, embarrassing, exposing, and insulting characters who, although generally individualized, are regularly symbolically stylized as members of distinct social groups. In the period of investigation, the sitcom, as the most prevalent comedic pillar of television, is going through similar processes of expansion and differentiation of invective dynamics. The genre can

1 I acknowledge that these thoughts are greatly indebted to conversations, internal documents, and working papers of our subproject of the Special Research Unit in which I wrote my book.

symbolize the spectrum of themes, affect structures, and formal language in which popcultural invectives are realized in contemporary US television.

This chapter, consequently, focuses on the cultural context and conceptual impulses that are important for meticulously analyzing the subsequent case studies of invective phenomena, their dynamics, and constellations in contemporary US American situation comedies. Therefore, I take a closer look at the concept of invectivity below and at its points of intersection with three larger research contexts in the subsequent subchapters: American culture, humor theory, and the sitcom genre itself. I propose that the presented concept of invectivity greatly informs and invigorate the analysis of US American popcultural products since it allows me to contextualize selected existing research in a new light. I present a focused and very specific literature review that is very much aligned with the epistemological interest of this project at all times. To examine how the invective mode – the theorization of invective forms across media and historical periods – manifests itself in the situation comedy genre, I am concerned with media-specific realizations, formal principles, and political and social resonances of disparaging dynamics and constellations in my material. Before presenting the structure of this chapter, I introduce the analytical category central to this book and show the benefits of conceptualizing and framing invective structures as a mode of communication in order to emphasize its own affective regimes, strategies, repertoire, and historical and political resonances.

The concept of invectivity serves as a vital intellectual framework and inspiration throughout this project. In Ellerbrock et al.'s programmatic text, it is introduced as a novel perspective. The article

> understands phenomena of insult and debasement, of humiliation and exposure as – cross-cultural and epoch-spanning – basic operations of societal communication. Due to their disruptive, stabilising or dynamising effects on social order, *invective communication* have [sic] the potential to unite and shape societies. (Ellerbrock et al. 3)

The concept of invectivity, then, comprises "all aspects of communication (either verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, gestural or graphic) that are used to degrade, to hurt or to marginalize others" (Ellerbrock et al. 3). Consequently, it enables a systemic analysis of the dynamics, constellations, social functions, and cultural forms of disparagement of individuals, groups, and collectives of sitcom characters.

The article argues that symbolic and verbal aggression against other individuals or groups is a central manifestation of the social. Disparagement and exclusion are related to attributions concerning national, religious, or ethnic affiliations, gender, sexual orientation, social positioning, or other traits relevant to one's identity construction (cf. 4). Therefore, invective practices are more than deviant forms of social interaction – they go beyond in that they are able to destroy or produce, transform or stabilize. While invectives are usually characterized by a transgression of norms of interpersonal interaction, they simultaneously are able to establish their own notions of normality and assert their own normative claims. According to Ellerbrock et al., invectives serve as a mechanism for fueling social processes of exclusion and inclusion, and producing social orders and hierarchies – even in the storyworlds of situation comedies (cf. 6).

Depending on the historical context and social constellations in which they exist, the functions and manifestations of invectives can be socially, politically, aesthetically, and medially contextualized. They can "only be properly understood as performative events which develop through the interaction of ascription, response and follow-up communication as well as by means of the social, discursive and media conditions in which they arise" (Ellerbrock et al. 3). No comment is, therefore, in and of itself offensive – rather, that depends on the particular circumstances in which it is uttered. Invectives, so Ellerbrock et al., manifest themselves in a network of social norms, cultural knowledge, medial environment, and situational circumstances. They are embedded in a multidimensional context of processes of performance, staging, corporeality, and perception. As a point of departure for the analyses, the ideally proposed invective triad of the invector, the invectee, and the audience helps to emphasize the forms and functions of the respective invectives. Since these roles are highly volatile and interchangeable, the effects of invective communication are not a priori predictable, fixed, or calculable. Invectives are rather the result of imponderable performative processes involving various actors and spectators (ibid. 9).

Different media dispositifs facilitate different manifestations of the invective. Since this project is concerned with the analysis of invective strategies in contemporary American situation comedies, I describe three of the most significant affordances of the television medium that encourage or contain certain invective contingencies on screen. Firstly, television comedies are fictional and the invectives are, subsequently, staged. The analyses of

this project are, therefore, solely concerned with enactments of invectives. This not only enables an examination of how the American society looks at itself but also at its own invective structures and traditions. Since the possible and unpredictable alternation of roles between invector, invectee, and spectator is circumvented by the fictionality of the text, dynamics of invective escalation are of no concern. The second media-specific feature of television I want to highlight is the absence or presence of the spectator in the invective triad mentioned above. There are various staged audiences that could fill the role of the spectator at any given time: the intradiegetic audience in the storyworld, the intratextual audience represented by the genre-specific laughtrack of the sitcom, the implied audience inscribed in the text, and the actual, extra-textual, real-world audience in front of their screens at home. These scalings of presence play an important role in the dynamics and constellations of invective phenomena. The possible reactions of the audience are either prescribed in the text or they are rather futile since the viewers have no opportunity to instantly intervene in a respective situation. Thirdly, invectives can be analyzed on various levels in the audiovisual medium of television. On the one hand, insults and disparagement can be administered through several characters in the storyworld on a figural level. On the other hand, deprecation "can also disappear behind the apparatus of the medium, when the mis-en-scène and storytelling perform the mockery" on an authorial level (Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 17). Since the agency of invectives is frequently obfuscated, the political and social meaning-making processes are ambiguated and have to be examined meticulously, as I will explain later in more detail.

With regards to contemporary US American popular culture, Katja Kanzler argues that it

> is ripe with moments of invective: Popular media culture of the 21st century, to a significant extent, organizes around performances of deprecation, devaluation, disparagement; or, the other way around, performances of invective unfold considerable popular appeal in the commercial media culture of the contemporary moment. ("Invective Mode" 1)

In general, invective phenomena and structures make up a highly distinctive component of US American popular culture: They shape its diachronic developments as well as its formal repertoire. Popular culture serves

as an arena in which interpretive patterns of social realities are tested and interpretive sovereignties are negotiated. Since the beginnings of US American popular culture, performances and productions were frequently organized around disparagement. In line with contemporary thinking, the deprecation of an 'other' reflected societal and political circumstances. The contemporary television culture constitutes a particularly virulent context in which a distinct multiplication and accentuation of invective phenomena can be observed (e.g. cf. Mendiburo-Seguel et al.; Ott; Colker; Embrick et al.; Black). Since the arena of popular culture can be seen "as a barometer, mirror, and monument of the world," it is able to both reflect on and shape larger society and societal trends (cf. Hoffmann xi; cf. Ashby vii).[2]

While invective phenomena seem to require ritualization and routine to downplay and minimize their aggressiveness, "[i]nvectivity is uniquely suited for the conspicuous breaking of conventions, for pushing the boundaries of what is usually seen and heard on popular media, for moments of provocation" (Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 3). Along these lines, popular invective phenomena are not generally intended to put down or hurt people – but rather to entertain. To ensure economic profit by reaching and not alienating mass audiences, invective phenomena are "notoriously slippery in [their] rhetorical motivations and meanings […] [and] actively interested in not offending anyone" (ibid. 3).[3]

---

2 Popular culture "is full of contradictions and speaks in many voices," generating "liberating and confining, reassuring and unsettling" messages (Ashby vii). It mirrors political, social, and economic changes but can also be understood as a trigger of change, breaking barriers, influencing and facilitating distinct attitudes toward 'the other.'

3 There is a long-standing tradition of stylized and playful disparagement in the English language. In the 15th and 16th century, flyting, "a practice of stylized invective contest that circulated across some of the earliest canonical English texts" – for example, as Hendrick argues, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and various plays by Shakespeare (cf. 97; 93) – was utilized for competitions between poets to demonstrate their superior language skills through more and more fanciful and elaborate insults directed at their opponents (cf. Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 6). Although a physical battle would traditionally follow the verbal confrontation, the popular 15th and 16th century Scottish verse form constitutes, as Parks argues, a "more playful or 'ludic' type of exchange" (441). Framed as entertainment, the "flytings were typically performed at court and have usually been discussed as light-hearted – albeit vulgar – roasts appropriate for an intimate group of courtiers" (Hendricks 73). Another genre with a lively and potent English-language tradition is satire. According to Kanzler, the genre brings

To locate invective phenomena in the context of different media and historic periods, Kanzler outlines an approach to conceptualize invective structures in American popular culture that comprises their range and fluidity. She argues "that conceiving of popular invective as a mode and as an affordance brings into focus aspects that are quite central to the phenomenon yet hard to grasp with other formalist approaches," like genre ("Invective Mode" 3). Following Alastair Fowler, the mode concept is suited for encompassing invective forms across media and/or historical periods since it implies "more generalized, more flexible and mobile, less formally bound principles" (ibid. 5). Thus, the popcultural invective mode[4] transcends genre and media boundaries, and is able to uncover affective and representational strategies as well as socio-cultural functions of disparagement and symbolic abuse. It remains mobile and flexible, able to pour itself into ever new local formats, accumulating social and cultural semantics and functions. This project not only examines how the invective mode manifests itself in the contemporary US American situation comedy genre, it also shows that meaning-making processes of cultural products are closely related to the formal principles of the invective mode. But what makes the disparagement and marginalization of others so entertaining and appealing?

In the first subchapter, I argue that this new research perspective is able to assist further investigations of American popular culture where disparaging practices have consistently been ritualized, rehearsed, and reflected. I propose that contemporary situation comedies strongly rely on media-specific traditions and legacies of discrimination. Furthermore, I argue that the concept greatly informs discourses surrounding Cultural Studies' notion of 'othering' that is concerned with pejorative representational practices of an inferior 'other,' as well as Goffman's work on stigma and stigmatization that found its way into Disability and Queer

---

together the "use of humor and irony" and "the moral motivation that ostensibly drives invective attacks in satire: the conviction that the people, human behaviors, or social formations that are disparaged are wrong" ("Invective Mode" 7). As Frye argues, "[i]t is an established datum of literature that we like hearing people cursed and are bored with hearing them praised" (224). African Americans, furthermore, celebrate and participate in a tradition of "ritual insult-swapping sessions known as 'playing the dozens,'" developing significant linguistic skills related to creativity, humor, and wit (Jay qtd. in Brunvand 395).

4 For a more comprehensive overview of the invective mode that Kanzler proposes, please see her article "Invective Mode."

Studies in recent decades, being conceptualized as negative markings of non-conformity (cf. I. Tyler). Since I focus on female-led situation comedies, I, additionally, argue that the concept of invectivity is highly compatible with notions and ideas of Gender Studies, rooting disparities in status, power, material resources, and symbolic abuse. Secondly, I give a brief review of humor research, focusing on superiority theories and laughter that accentuate disparaging processes of 'othering' and that negotiate positions of privilege and power. Nevertheless, I argue that a conclusive analysis of invective humor in situation comedies includes additional aspects from other humor theories. In the third subchapter, lastly, I zoom in on the affordances of the sitcom genre that facilitate and enable invective dynamics and constellations. I propose two levels on which I subsequently analyze invective phenomena in my case studies: While the figural level subsumes interpersonal and intradiegetic disparagement between distinct characters, the authorial level describes invectives that may disappear behind the medium's apparatus, like humiliating camera settings and the laugh track. This threefold division allows me to show how the selected conceptual impulses and cultural context are informed and educated by invectivity as a novel research perspective, and how this supports the arguments I want to bring forward in the subsequent analytical chapters.

2.1 American Culture and the Invective

The United States of America are honeycombed by deeply entrenched traditions of disparagement and inequality in their society and culture. Symbolic abuse or invective structures and dynamics closely correlate with these traditions and legacies. In the arena of American popular culture, the invective represents a highly unique component that can be observed in longstanding media-specific legacies of debasement and uneven representation. It not only manifests itself when popular culture stages disparaging and invective confrontations between characters in mainstream media. The invective also frequently manifests itself when the narrative or production agency exposes, vilifies, or disgraces its characters, who may be read as representatives of whole social groups. While popcultural invectives

seem to be often talked about in the present, they have a long history.[5] Their prevalence and persistence suggest that they perform significant cultural work across not only eras but also media, like challenging socially reinforced regimes of inequality, allegations of inauthenticity, and as a means of 'othering' and self-aggrandizement. Given their prominence, relevance, and historical reach, invective structures and dynamics seem to represent a fundamental pillar of popular culture that has yet to be examined as such.[6]

In the following, I want to examine how the new research perspective of invectivity can be utilized to aid and assist the further investigation of American popular culture. The concept represents a new approach in Popular Culture Studies that promises to bring into focus the ways in which the popular is not only constructed around the politics and poetics of affection that is typically emphasized in definitions of the popular (e.g. cf. Grossberg 79ff.). Popular culture also presents itself as a prominent field in which invective structures and practices have been rehearsed, tried out, ritualized, and frequently critically reflected on, from entertaining 15th century ritual insult swapping contests to contemporary comedy television. Apart from Popular Culture Studies, I show that the concept of invectivity invigorates, among others, three particular research contexts in the field of American Studies important to the argument of my project. Firstly, the analysis of constellations and dynamics of disparagement that the concept of invectivity is interested in is able to greatly inform discourses of 'otherness.' The concept of 'othering' focuses, among other things, on pejorative representational practices that mark 'others' as different and, thus, demarcate and devalue them (cf. S. Hall 225f.). Along similar lines, Goffman's work on stigma marks and degrades non-conforming individuals as social outcasts. Lastly, in line with the project's focus on female-led television comedies, I show that the concept of invectivity is highly compatible with Gender Studies. According to Ridgeway, those structures of gender inequality that have been at work for centuries involve disparities in power, status, and material

5 Popcultural staging of blackface minstrelsy, for example, deeply entrenched in the festivals and the carnivals of early modern Europe, and the sensationalist and disparaging display of non-normative bodies in freak shows all over the nation enjoyed widespread popularity as early as the 19th century. Processes of minstrelization and enfreakment extend their invective cultural work into the present (cf. Ashby 12).

6 I acknowledge that these thoughts are greatly indebted to conversations, internal documents, and working papers of our subproject of the Special Research Unit in which I wrote my book.

resources (cf. 3). I claim that these stalwart inequalities are frequently and prominently entwined with symbolic invective practices as well. To support this claim, I take a closer look at examples of gendered representational inequalities on television from the beginnings of the medium up to the present. Together with the following subchapters, the next paragraphs will specify the cultural context and serve as a conceptual foundation of the project's analyses of invective strategies in contemporary US American situation comedies. I propose that the shows are built and deeply rely on media-specific legacies and traditions of discrimination. I argue, and later show in my case studies, that symbolic invective structures of inequality still come into play in contemporary cultural artifacts. For this, I briefly and intently focus on reviewing prominent academic literature on topics essential for my arguments, as listed above.

One of the reasons disparagement seems to be so entertaining and inviting for popular culture is that images of an inferior 'other' accompanied US American self-conception and narratives from the beginning. In the mid-19th century, French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that "the position of Americans was quite exceptional," making reference to the absence of European feudal structures (De Tocqueville qtd. in Paul 14). However, as Heike Paul suggests, political American exceptionalism was quickly decontextualized "to describe the genesis of the American nation in much more comprehensive and sweeping terms" (14). The belief behind narratives of the nation's exceptionality "informs and structures American *self-representations*. It has been important in fashioning internal coherence and has also often been used as an ideological tool to project American hegemony outside the US" (17, emphasis in the original). As a consequence thereof, 'otherness' and difference are scolded and deprecated; the dynamics and processes of constructing alterity can be read as invective. Anchored in postcolonial theory – where Spivak inquires "how Europe had consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as 'Others'" (247) – and fed by Cultural Studies – where Hall asks "[w]hat is the secret fascination of 'otherness,' and why is popular presentation so frequently drawn to it?" (225) –, the concept of 'othering' particularly focuses on the reciprocal relationship between derogatory images of 'the other' and the positive self-design. The basis of 'othering' consequently lies in an imbalance of power, "understood as a social method of identifying individuals thought to be different from one's self or culture, most specifically the majority culture, that creates or emphasizes dominance and subordination" (Epps and Furman 2). Based

upon characteristics such as nationality, culture, religious affiliation, or ethnicity, it can occur as the subject between individuals in distinct social settings or between entire communities, races, or populations, creating a general feeling of 'us' versus 'them.'[7]

Goffman's work on stigma also tries to shed light on the relational aspects between 'us' versus 'them.' He argues that stigma can be understood "as something produced in social settings [that] pivots on the existence of a social consensus about 'what is normal'" (I. Tyler 750). A historically specific power imbalance, then, authorizes normative individuals to invectively devalue and shame individuals who fail to adhere to specific norms. Goffman emphasizes how stigma is learned "through processes of socialization" when "people judge themselves against incorporated norms and anticipate 'the standards against which they fall short'" (ibid. 750). Consequently, and similarly to the roles of the invector and the invectee, the stigmatizer and the stigmatized are also interchangable social roles depending on the interactional context. The difference between 'us' and 'them' is, thus, staged as a "system of confining and discriminating norms" (ibid. 756).

According to Hall, one of the reasons why difference is so fascinating "is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture" (S. Hall 236). Binary oppositions, like black–white or woman–man, strengthen these classifications. Things that fail to conform to any category, however, "float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy" (ibid.). 'Difference' is, nonetheless, always ambivalent, in both positive and negative ways. While it is

> necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a sexed subject – [...] at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the 'Other.' (ibid. 238)

7 Social theorist and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, strongly influenced by G. W. F. Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, characterizes "the notion of 'the other' as a construction opposing and thereby constructing 'the self'" (Brons 69). The dismantling of social hierarchies and the relationship between men and women were at the center of her scholarly work.

The representation of difference is frequently combined with stereotypes, a practice described by Cultural Studies as negatively reducing images of marginalized social groups. While some images are sentimentalized or even idealized, the majority are "form[s] of ritualized degradation" and, consequently, linked to the symbolic power of invectives (S. Hall 245). Portraying, for example, female characters one-dimensionally, solely as mothers, wives, or objects of male desire in television series, constitutes a symbolic and invective devaluation of women in general.

As a result of the selection of female-led situation comedies, the construction and representation of gender plays a significant role within the scope of my project. In the following paragraphs, I, consequently, take a closer look at how concepts of gender inequality intersect with the concept of invectivity. According to Ridgeway, gender – the "shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female" –[8] "like race, is a categorical form of inequality in that it is based on a person's membership in a particular social group or category" (7, 3). It has various implications for an individual's life, yet one of the most substantial is "that it acts as a basis for inequality between persons" (ibid. 3). This gender inequality translates to a classification system between women and men in status, power, and material resources. In the United States, as Ridgeway suggests, it "has persisted […] despite major transformations in the way that gender, at any given time, has been entwined with the economic and social organization of American society" (3). In the profound economic and social transformation and reorganization of the US to an industrialized society, women were relatively absent from paid labor, in contrast to men. Yet, as women moved into the job market and, in addition, into positions that were formerly solely filled by men, "a pattern of gender hierarchy has remained in which men continue to be advantaged not only in employment but also throughout much of society" (ibid.). Disparate access to power and material resources are, therefore,

8 Non-binary or genderqueer identities are more and more being recognized in medical, legal, and psychological systems. Non-binary or genderqueer individuals "have a gender which is neither male nor female, and may identify as both male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders" (Richards et al. 95). According to Butler, gender is socially and discursively constructed and hegemonically imagined as a binary "fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites" (Schippers 90). Within the scope of this project, I follow the binary construction of gender for reasons of simplification.

always intertwined with symbolic discrimination, disproportionately and invectively disadvantaging women.

The symbolic detriment of women is frequently explained and justified by the argument that "[w]ithin a patriarchal gender order […] an idealized form of masculinity gains cultural ascendancy over, and at the expense of, all femininities and other forms of masculinity" (Abedinifard 238; cf. Reeser). In other words, scholars frequently argue that femininity is defined by a subordinate position in relation to a hegemonic dominant masculinity (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt). Physical strength, the capability of interpersonal violence, and authority are frequently outlined in empirical literature to "guarantee men's *legitimate* dominance over women only when they are symbolically paired with a complementary and inferior quality attached to femininity" (Schippers 91, emphasis in the original).

Since gender, as Butler suggests, is not something an individual has but rather something an individual performs, the social category can be seen as a discursive construction (Butler 520). It presumes "that there are certain bodies, behaviors, personality traits, and desires that neatly match up to one or the other category […] [–] a whole repository of symbolic meanings" (Schippers 89f.). The social practice, according to Schippers, thus, is the significant mechanism by which gender meanings organize everyday social life: from child-rearing to embodied interaction, passing legislation, executing and developing policy, and generating television programming. The "contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be (masculinity and femininity)" are distinctly tied to the "*mechanism* (social practice) by which those meanings come to shape, influence and transform social structure" (ibid. 92). By symbolically attributing more value to particular performances of gender, namely performances that can be read as male, it invectively devalues and disadvantages non-male performances.

Furthermore, Ridgeway argues that positional and status inequalities are invectively inscribed in the category of gender. She argues that social organizations (i.e. households, workplaces, governmental and educational institutions) "are the major producers and distributors of the resources most of us seek, from the basics of food and shelter to more abstract resources like money or information" (Ridgeway 10). These organizations are structured by relational social positions (i.e. teacher-student, manager-worker); and, as mentioned above, men usually "have greater control over the resources that the organization generates and carry more power" (ibid. 11). Because these

positional inequalities between women and men persist, as Ridgeway argues, status inequality persists as well. Unquestioned, pervasive, and invective beliefs that women are generally less competent and less socially respected partly depend "on people's daily experience with positional inequalities […] that appear to provide evidence for these beliefs" (12). Status inequalities are entrenched in common cultural beliefs and invective presumptions about the social esteem, honor, and respect linked to particular categories of individuals. Thus, a woman filling the CEO position in a company "is not quite equal to an equivalent man in that position, despite the structural equivalence of their positions" (ibid. 11). Although long-established invective distinctions based on gender are more and more at odds with the realities of everyday life in the US, inequalities may only be actually and genuinely eliminated when the unequal access to resources and power is disestablished.

Various scholars address the connection between gender inequality and its invective negotiation on the mass medium television. As a part of American popular culture, according to Media scholar Holtzman, "television interacts with gender in two critical ways[:] It reflects cultural values and it serves as a trusted conveyor of information and images" (76). Film and Media Studies scholar Allison Perlman suggests that there is "a profound connection between how women were depicted in American media and the discrimination and oppression that women faced in their everyday lives" (Perlman 413).[9] Although individual shows in television programming adapted to larger upheavals within American society and culture accelerating in the 1960s, like the Women's Rights Movement, studies of the time show that the majority consistently presented women in invectively diminished and demeaning roles (cf. ibid. 423).

With the help of female comedy star pioneers, the inclusion of women on television was pushed forward. Lucille Ball, for example, opened up possibilities for female talent early on. After starring in supporting roles in numerous movies in the 1930s and 40s, she was cast in the CBS radio comedy

9 Perlman investigates the activism of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and its attempts to file numerous petitions-to-deny the license renewal of various television stations in order to emphasize that media reforms and feminist goals were inseparable (cf. 427). In her article, she describes how reform activism tried to eradicate disparaging representations of women on television in the past in order to bring "the issue of derogatory media images of women into the public sphere" (421f.).

"My Favorite Husband" (1948–51) that focused "on the antics of the boisterous wife of a stodgy bank vice-president" (Doty 8). The show was so successful that CBS developed a pilot episode for television, produced by Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz (CBS 1951–57). *I Love Lucy*'s protagonist comprises Ball's earlier flashy films and vaudeville[10] characters, emerging in "a creation that is both conventional sitcom character and variety show performer" (Doty 4). Although the character of Lucy Ricardo is mostly invectively depicted as rather naive, caring for her husband, and looking after the house and children, she antithetically hungers for a place in the entertainment industry. The carefully manufactured character of Lucy "as a zany, lovable, not-too-bright, talentless housewife and mother" strictly locates and fences the comedic transgression of a female performer in the domestic sphere (ibid. 7). Since the protagonist predominantly fails to successfully enter the entertainment business, contemporary gender roles and values remain untouched, "maintaining an image of domestic contentment through various repressive mechanisms" (ibid. 16). Gendered humor in particular, as I show in Chapter 2.2 in more detail, supports invective "articulations of heteronormativity in […] television comedy, all of which seek to ridicule 'marginalised' or 'subordinated' gender identities as a process of hegemony" (S. Weaver et al. 230). However, the fact that female-led *I Love Lucy* became one of the most-watched television programs of the time attests to female entertainers tediously grinding out spaces for themselves. Following Ball's example of building her own production company, comedy stars like Mary Tyler Moore and Roseanne Barr followed suit, thus "[being] able to construct and exploit their own image and narrative opportunity" (cf. Stafford 5; cf. *Lucille Ball: Finding Lucy*).

The success of *I Love Lucy*, however, could not be immediately emulated. Women in situation comedies were once again restrained to housewives, mothers, and other supporting roles. Even if the 1970s saw a disengagement from these demeaning representations by centering more shows around

10 Derived from a series of French songs, 'vaudeville' came to mean "a ballad or light form of comedy" (Slide xiv). The US American vaudeville circuit had been an extremely popular entertainment format from the middle of the 19th century until moving pictures and the movie industry gained traction in the 1930s. Entertaining and fast-paced acts drew audiences not only to traveling shows in rural areas but also to new elaborate amusement parks (e.g. Coney Island, New York) and dime museums. With the revolution of the film industry, low-price and small vaudeville halls and traveling companies quickly went out of business (cf. Ashby 107ff.).

female characters, "studies also revealed that there were more males in evening television than females, more diverse roles were available to males, and female characters appeared less competent than male characters" (Holtzman 78). A study of the 2005–06 primetime television season shows that "[f]emale characters were more likely to be seen interacting with others in familial and romantic roles" while "male characters were more likely to inhabit work roles exhibiting more agentic goals including ambition and the desire for success" (Lauzen et al. 211). In 2017, Sink and Mastro conducted a systematic analysis of gender depictions on primetime television. While numerous female-led shows, like *Scandal* (ABC 2012–18), *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011-17), and *Veep* (HBO 2012–19), could suggest a 'golden age' for women on television, their study still shows that "women appeared significantly less frequently than men," and that "the hypersexualization and hyperfeminization of women on TV appears to remain a staple," underlining the historical depth and contemporary significance of invective media-specific legacies of inequality (Sink and D. Mastro 16f.).

In this subchapter, I have shown that the concept of invectivity, which understands phenomena of disparagement as fundamental operations of social communication, invigorates other concepts in American Studies, like 'othering,' stigma, and gender disparity. This, in turn, allows me to take a closer look at invective phenomena as narrative devices in contemporary sitcoms that echo awareness of difference and its implications for social orders and hierarchies. As I show in my case studies later on, deep-rooted traditions of disparagement in American society and the longstanding media-specific legacies of deprecation still thoroughly influence invective strategies and representational issues in contemporary sitcoms. In Chapter 3, I apply the extensive notions of 'othering' and stigma to describe invective performances of fatshaming in *Mike & Molly* (NBC 1994–2004), and I examine remnants of gendered structures of inequality in the comedic domain in *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011–17). In Chapter 5, I describe invective strategies connected to gender inequalities in *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon 2017–).

2.2 Humor and the Invective

> Dan: What's the whole not drinking thing?
> Ed: I'm a Quaker.
> Jonah: What?
> Dan: Bullshit. No one's a fucking Quaker.
> Jonah: You probably think that staying sober keeps you on top of your game. Well, guess what. I work hard and I play hard, bitch. That's my credo. I got that shit tattooed on my dick with room to spare.
> Ed: Jonah, you're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details like pigment or self-respect. You're Frankenstein's monster if his monster was made entirely of dead dicks. (*Veep* 2.06, HBO 2012–19)

This disparaging and humiliating dialogue from the situation comedy *Veep*[11] can be analyzed in myriad ways and on various levels. Primarily intended to entertain and to make viewers laugh and take pleasure in the humor of the scene, the short dialogue is not only comprised of straightforward interpersonal invectives, it also emphasizes the elaborate, intricate, and cunning phrasing of the series' "baroque, obscene" insults (Alter). Since "[b]y definition, sitcoms use humor as a narrative device," analyzing the dynamics and constellations of disparagement in this scene is, therefore, on the one hand, evidently dependent on superiority concepts of humor that are able to capture the depicted processes of self-aggrandizement, 'othering,' and the claiming and distributing of power between the characters (Scharrer et al. 2). On the other hand, additional concepts of humor, like incongruity theories – "based on the discrepancy between abstract ideas and real things" – and relief theories – "the release of nervous energy" – are necessary to appropriately analyze invective phenomena in contemporary American situation comedies in their entirety (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor").

11 The seven seasons of the political satire *Veep* were broadcast on HBO from 2012 to 2019. The plot revolves around protagonist Vice President Selina Meyer and her staff attempting to leave their mark and lasting legacy in the everyday politics of Washington. By drawing the protagonist as mostly overwhelmed by daily business, her private life, and looming scandals, the show satirizes the inner workings and political activities of contemporary US governments.

In this subchapter, I focus on reviewing humor research that acts as a foundation of invective dynamics and constellations which I analyze in contemporary US American situation comedies in the next chapters.[12] In the following, I consequently concentrate primarily on superiority theories that claim that the "laugher always looks down on whatever [she] laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard" (Monro qtd. in Lintott 347). Although superiority theories occupy a central space in this project's analyses, I argue that, in a lot of instances, a conglomerate of various humor aspects is necessary to consider when analyzing contemporary sitcom texts. So, by using the example of the HBO situation comedy *Veep* above, I illustrate that mockery, ridicule, and humiliation are central for the invective humor of the scene, yet that additional aspects from, for example, incongruity and relief theories are important to analyze the complexity of invective humor that cannot be explained with superiority theories alone.

It seems to be a strenuous task to find and articulate one exact definition for humor. Humor theory "comprises work from many seemingly unrelated disciplines, such as sociology, politics, psychology, linguistics, biology and mathematics [...] often discussing [it] as an aside as part of the analysis of other topics" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 76). Due to humor's prevalence, a detailed scholarly consideration seems difficult and has been evaded in the past. For the frame of this project, I follow the argument that "[h]umor is a pervasive phenomenon in the social fabric of most, if not all, societies" and I follow the long tradition of conceptualizing "humor as a means of communication"

12 When it comes to the state of research regarding invective dynamics in television comedies, however, there is not a lot to be found. Cringe comedy, for example, is a recent and general development of televisual humor based on an the excessive staging of embarrassment and humiliation of distinct characters. 'Cringe,' as Middleton argues for the British *The Office* (BBC 2001–03), refers to "how the show conveys the embodied experience of time for the characters, trapped in their repetitive white-collar jobs in perpetuity" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 18). Schwind's notion of embarrassment humor, in contrast, "challenges an audience's viewing pleasure by negotiating issues of empathy and moral disengagement with the conventions of darker forms of mediated humor and comedy" by analyzing the British original and American adaptation of *The Office* (NBC 2005–13) ("Embarrassment Humor" 49). Lastly, Brett Mills' notion of comedy verité needs to be mentioned in this context. Also adducing the example of *The Office*, Mills argues that the show employs the visual features of cinema verité, indicating that some contemporary television comedies are utilized to examine representations and processes of media formats as well as the staging of humiliation and embarrassment (cf. "Comedy Verité" 74).

(Martineau 101, 102). Social Science scholar Billig, for example, argues that "we belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human" (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 13). Communication scholar John C. Meyer also generally views humor as a social phenomenon and defines it "as a cognitive experience involving an internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a 'mirthful' state of mind, of which laughter is a possible external display" (311). While Bergson proposes "not [to] aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition," other scholars have tried to delineate laughter in the past (471). Commonly seen as the physical reaction to humor, Billig emphasizes that laughter might not be a 'natural' reaction but rather rhetorical. If that is the case then laughter "has to be learnt and can be mobilized in various ways," i.e. for ridiculing others (*Laughter and Ridicule* 199). As in young children, Morreall argues that "the natural human propensity of derisive laughter is still left in most adults" (*Taking Laughter Seriously* 10). Although it might not be polite or permissible to laugh, "we still enjoy witty repartee, especially well-phrased insults" (10).[13]

Today, humor theory is commonly categorized by three specific theoretical schools: superiority, incongruity, and relief.[14] First and foremost, it is important to note that, following Billig's argument, "no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humor" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 175). Each of the three theories reveals one factor that seems to be the reason for laughter in a specific instance.[15] Although, as Scharrer argues for sitcoms, "humorous interactions among characters can be considered manifestations of power differences in that they give certain individuals the upper or the lower hand in the exchange," certainly not all instances of invective laughter

13 Unfortunately, in the scope of this project, a more comprehensible consideration of laughter is not feasible. See Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*; see Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* for more information.

14 See Raskin for a conceptually detailed and historically full overview of superiority, incongruity, and relief theories.

15 Billig identifies three paradoxes inherent to humor that prevent a monocausal explanation of laughter. Firstly, humor is simultaneously particular and universal: "It is to be found in all societies, but not all humans find the same things funny" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 176). Secondly, humor seems both anti-social and social: it can reject people by mockery and ridicule as well as bring them together in enjoyment. Lastly, humor "appears mysterious and resistant to analysis, but it is also understandable and analyzable" (ibid.).

can be explained by superiority theories (2). After briefly introducing the three main theories of humor, I will – with the help of the example from *Veep* above – illustrate that, indeed, mockery and direct interpersonal invectives are central to the humor of sitcoms. However, it is also important to pay attention to overlaying and complementary perspectives in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of disparagement in contemporary comedic texts.[16]

As the earliest of the three theories, the superiority theory can be traced back to Ancient Greece and evolved over time.[17] For Plato, as Mills portrays, laughing while feeling superior to other individuals constitutes a negative emotion and an immoral act, "one of combined distress and pleasure for a person's malice [that] shows itself … in pleasure at the misfortune of those around" (*The Sitcom* 77). Along these lines, Aristotle compared laughter to abuse, suggesting that it is always aggressive, explicitly directed at and targeting a victim (cf. Vandaele 225). Morreall also stresses the Bible's

16 Superiority, incongruity, and relief theories analyze 'social humor' that rather differs from humorous broadcasts in that "the joke teller and the joke butt are [usually; KS] in the same place, with the laughter of those who hear the joke giving support to the teller and causing embarrassment to the butt" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 80). Humor theories, however, can be effectively adapted to the specifics and technicalities of television situation comedies. Mills suggests a 'cue theory,' arguing "that the ways in which jokes work in sitcoms is less important than the ways in which the genre signals its intention to be funny, creating a space within which audiences are primed to laugh. […] This is useful in terms of genre theory because such approaches suggest that the conventions of genres assist readers in aligning texts with pre-existing ones, helping them respond to programmes in particular ways." (93) As I will later show in more detail, genre markers, like the laugh track and reaction shots, are the most apparent cues that not only signal particular comic moments of the show but also repeatedly remind the audience of the overall comic intent of situation comedies. While "the three traditional Humor Theories […] foreground the textual elements of specific jokes and comic moments," the analysis of television comedies, moreover, attends to the media-specific realizations, the cultural work, and the social and political resonances a given text encompasses (94).

17 Since the term 'humor' "was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18th century," philosophers like Hobbes, Kant, and Plato wrote about comedy, as a part of entertainment, or laughter as a physical response to and the primary indicator of humor (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor"). It is not surprising that most of the early philosophical writings on humor and laughter "focused on scornful or mocking laughter, or on laughter that overpowers people, rather than on comedy, wit, or joking" (ibid.).

attitude towards laughter and argues that it "is usually represented as an expression of hostility [or] as a warm-up to aggression" (*Comic Relief* 4). The trend continues throughout the Christian European Middle Ages in which comedy and laughter are condemned as "ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions" (Prynne qtd. in Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor").

An integral part of the superiority theory is the social power of humor. In the 17th century, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes suggests, as Mills describes, that "humour is the result of 'sudden glory' […] [and] a tactic employed by those with little power, who mock others in order to assert and demonstrate their dominance" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 77). Similarly, René Descartes argues that the pleasures of humorously pointing out others' flaws are "related to notions of social power, and joking can be seen as a tool for marking social distinctions" (78). Mikhail Bakhtin also examined the "subversive, democratic, potentially liberating social power" of comedy (Soper 90). He argues that in hierarchical societies, seasonal or periodic festivals gave way to "carnival life – a 'second' life that operated according to radically different rules" (90). This second life is marked by a possibly invective emancipation from the prevailing order and a suspension of norms, privileges, and hierarchical rank. The temporary disruption of social order "[acts] as a social steam valve for class discontent" (91). As Billig argues, superiority theory "is basically a theory of mockery, for it suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others," consequently or intently establishing social orders and hierarchies (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 39).

On the basis of the superiority theory framework, Social Science scholars Ferguson and Ford address the notion of disparagement humor, which they defined as "[referring] to remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" (283). Under the veil of humor, messages do not need to be interpreted in a serious manner – so "disparagement humor can uniquely denigrate its target while stifling challenge or criticism" (284). Beside the humorous disparagement between individuals, the social identity theory (cf. Tajfel and J. C. Turner), as the two scholars claim, "offers a unique perspective on the effects of disparagement humor on amusement by emphasizing the relationship between social groups" (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford

296).[18] Kersten also argues that sharing a common adversary can "[create] a bond of solidarity among the group of laughers, and [unite] them with a sense of shared values and with a sense of superiority" (Kersten 303). Disparagement humor, thus, can function as a means to "bolster or maintain positive distinctiveness" of one's own group over another relevant out-group (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 298). By highlighting the relationship between individuals and between social groups, Ferguson and Ford emphasize the link between disparagement humor and processes of claiming power and 'othering.'[19]

According to Weaver et al., the notion and ideas of the superiority theory of humor play an important role in gendered humor "as ridicule is shown to have a role in the maintenance of gender hegemony" (228). Gendered humor, as Abedinifard states, is considered to be "any humour that concerns differences between men and women *qua* men and women" (239, emphasis in the original). Invectively gendered humor may "[serve] to (threaten to) punish any violations of established gender norms […] while certain hegemonic gender norms or normative acts are presumed or implied" (241). In a recent study, Abedinifard analyzes contemporary gendered Anglo-American mainstream humor and argues that its targets are primarily non-normative bodies, such as effeminate men, lesbians, women disputing hegemonic gender ideas, and disabled, aged, and racialized femininities and masculinities. He argues that the invectively portrayed power dynamics

> not only [validate] the notion that gender hegemony is constructed through the abjection of non-hegemonic gendered identities, but also [point] towards *ridicule* as an essential abjecting and policing tool in the processes of construction and maintenance of hegemonic gender norms and identities. (244, emphasis in the original)

---

18 Group membership is said to constitute a significant part of an individual's identity. The social identity theory, moreover, "assumes that people want to maintain a positive identity, including a positive social identity […] by judging one's own group as superior to other groups" (Janes and Olson 273).

19 Although Ford and Ferguson argue that disparagement humor does not implicitly initiate prejudice against others, "it changes external sources of self-regulation, creating a social setting that encourages the expression or release of existing prejudice against the targeted out-group" (T. E. Ford et al. 172).

Situation comedies, as part of popular television, provide numerous examples of invectively gendered humor that "is informed by, and informs, the current Anglo-American gender order" or hierarchy, as I show in greater detail later (ibid. 245).

In contrast to humor in superiority theories, the humor in incongruity theories "[arises] from the disparity between the ways in which things are expected to be and how they actually are" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 82). Humor is positioned as a cognitive phenomenon. Therefore, "[i]ndividuals must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice difference" (Meyer 313). Brett Mills applies incongruity theory to the screen, where he describes that for audiences to appreciate the humor in, for example, genre parodies, they must have the understanding of genre conventions in order to take pleasure in jokes incongruously undercutting expectations (cf. *The Sitcom* 83).

Lastly, relief theory suggests that humor "results from a release of nervous energy" and laughter reduces stress by "subconsciously [overcoming] sociocultural inhibitions" (Meyer 312). Building on Sigmund Freud's ideas, relief theory argues that "comedy and laughter fulfil a vital role within the individual's psyche in allowing repressed thoughts and ideas to be expressed in a manner less problematic than might otherwise occur" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 88). Mills argues that Western cultures utilize televisual comedy formats to offer relief from delicate topics, like death. In HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001–05), for example, laughter releases repressions and objectifies death in order to "[burst] through the restraints of normally acceptable conduct" (88).

At first glance, an analysis of the above-mentioned invective scene from the HBO show *Veep* supports Scharrer's argument that disparaging jokes and characters insulting each other is a defining feature of situation comedy humor (cf. 2). At second glance, various elements of the invective communication between the characters cannot be explained by superiority theories alone. In the following, I want to argue that, although sitcoms frequently utilize superiority humor, invective phenomena cannot only be read along the lines of mockery and ridicule. In many places in any given sitcom text, invective structures can be read and interpreted with the help of other humor theories.

The scene from a second season episode called "Andrew" involves three characters – Dan, Ed, and Jonah – at a bar in a restaurant.[20] The three men are staged to deride each other on an interpersonal, figural level. So, who laughs at whom? While the first few lines of the dialogue suggest that the character of Ed is staged as the butt or the invectee of the joke, the roles quickly and clearly shift. At first, Ed is verbally attacked ("bitch" (*Veep* 2.06)) and invectively ridiculed and stigmatized for turning down alcohol because he is a Quaker. Not only are Jonah and Dan staged to deride Ed's beliefs, Jonah is also staged to present himself as superior to Ed since he apparently works *and* drinks harder than he does. Jonah is then staged to notch up his brash performance by addressing the apparently above-average size of his penis, trying to further invectively emasculate Ed: "That's my credo. I got that shit tattoed on my dick with room to spare" (ibid.). Superiority theories of humor would suggest that viewers are invectively laughing *with* the characters Jonah and Dan about Ed' shortcomings. Taking into account the context and balance of power of the scene, however, a very different picture is painted. Jonah, *Veep*'s most celebrated victim of verbal abuse, is constantly "targeted [for] his lack of emotional intelligence, surplus of height, and bottom-rung status" (Snierson). The audience consequently does not laugh *with* Jonah insulting Ed but *at* Jonah and another one of his futile and invective attempts to establish dominance over his co-workers. In this scene, the humor does not singularly arise from one character asserting dominance over another, or from one character humiliating another in order to reinforce or establish a distinct social order. It also arises partly from the incongruence of Jonah vainly trying to establish his superiority when, in this episode alone, he is repeatedly professionally rejected by the VP herself, as well as rejected by multiple other women with whom he is misogynously trying to flirt, and partly from the nervous relief of a seemingly grown and professional man freely using the image of his genitals to make a point.

The characters of Ed and Jonah are staged to clearly and quickly alternate their roles of invector and invectee. Not accounted for in any of the superiority theories, these invective constellations and dynamics require meticulous analysis. Ed, previously staged as the invectee, is now stepping into the role of the invector, humiliating Jonah:

20 In the storyworld, the Vice President and her family have dinner at a public restaurant. Staged to keep an eye on the VP, her staff sits at nearby tables (cf. *Veep* 2.06).

> Jonah, you're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details like pigment or self-respect. You're Frankenstein's monster if his monster was made entirely of dead dicks. (*Veep* 2.06)

Ed's harsh and direct disparagement of Jonah is very much in line with superiority theories of humor. Ed, verbally establishing dominance over Jonah, invites viewers to laugh and feel a similar superiority. Jonah's shortcomings are, however, not the only textual invitation to laugh at play in this scene. After noticing that audiences "loved to hate [Jonah]," the writers followed creator Iannucci's guidelines that it was not enough to insult the character, "the language had to be baroque" (Snierson). Artistic invectives like a "tall stack of failed pancakes, the bad guy from *Indiana Jones* only taller, undercooked pool noodle, overcooked pool noodle, Leaning Tower of Loser, upright train accident, and Garbage Pail Adult" themselves are significant sources of humor on account of their unexpected, sometimes incongruent wording (Chaney, "How to Write a Jonah Insult"). Although superiority theories of humor greatly inform the analysis of disparagement in this scene, they are insufficient on their own.

In this subchapter, I have shown that superiority theories of humor are able to act as a foundation for the analyses of invective constellations and dynamics in contemporary American sitcoms. With the help of an example from *Veep*, I was able to show, however, that mockery and humiliation cannot always suffice as an explanation and source of invective humor in all instances. It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to carefully examine the humorous invective dynamics and constellations. Analyzing disparagement via invectivity and via the specific framework outlined above, thus, enables a better grasp at analyzing the functions and cultural complexities of humor as a "narrative device" in contemporary sitcoms (Scharrer et al. 2). Since research regarding disparagement in television comedies does not abound, I use the present disparate approaches and, whenever appropriate and productive, consult research from other disciplines in order to reflect on and analyze the humor of invective phenomena in my material.

2.3 Situation Comedies and the Invective

The situation comedy, also known as the clipping 'sitcom,' is arguably the most popular comedic televisual genre, having entertained large audiences for many generations (cf. Marchin; Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour").[21] As its name implies, the sitcom genre relies, among many other things, heavily on humor. Therefore, one of the most significant and obvious genre characteristics is the sitcom's 'comic impetus': "while it may do other things, and audiences might enjoy it for a variety of reasons, its humour is always of paramount concern" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5f.). As I was able to show in the previous paragraphs, the sitcom genre's humor relies, for the most part, on superiority theories, frequently utilizing symbolic abuse or invectives in order to elicit humor.

In this subchapter, I zoom in on selected affordances of the situation comedy genre that enable and facilitate invective phenomena like disparagement, humiliation, and mockery. I point out two distinct levels on which I, in the following chapters, analyze the case studies of this project: the figural level describes interpersonal invectives exchanged by characters in

21 According to Dias Branco, the situation comedy "is generally defined as a type of series in which an established set of characters are involved in recurring comic situations" (95). Although such a generic definition cannot, of course, be attentive to particular stylistic properties of distinct sitcoms, it provides a productive framework. According to Mittell, "genres operate as conceptual frameworks, situating media texts within larger contexts of understanding," operating inside cultural practices, audience, and industry ("A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory" 16). The conventions of the situation comedy genre were initially established in radio comedy shows and vaudeville performances. With "the US networks' desire to employ popular comedic vaudeville names," however, performers paved their way into regular timeslots and comedic formats on TV. The situation comedy genre thus "developed as a compromise between its theatrical origins and the necessary strictures of television and radio broadcasting" and eventually resulted in a stable and "repeatable narrative" that the sitcom genre would utilize for a long time (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 63). Individual episodes usually comprise a single, self-contained narrative conflict that will be resolved at the end of the show. The status-quo of the narrative is restored for the beginning of the next episode. In contrast to the 'episodic' form, sitcom productions have begun to carry certain storylines over several episodes or whole seasons. These 'serial' narratives increase the complexity of their stories and enable and allow for character development (cf. Stafford 3). See Mills, *The Sitcom*; see Hamamoto for a more detailed inspection of the situation comedy genre in general.

the storyworld, the authorial level subsumes invective textual elements and editing processes, like the laugh track and camera settings, as the authorial agency of the text that performs the deprecation. For the former, I argue that reductive and stereotypical images make up a large part of figural invectives in sitcoms. Furthermore, I argue that the textual devices of the laugh track and the reaction shot are prime examples of the invective authorial agency in sitcom texts.

As has been established above, situation comedy's laughter is frequently concerned with ridicule, mockery, and establishing the superiority of the laugher over the laughee. To analyze the dynamics and constellations of disparagement in the sitcom genre, it is vital to examine who is laughing at whom. The analysis of the distribution of power and agency in the respective texts seems to be the key to meaningfully analyzing this book's case studies. According to Kanzler,

> [t]he agency behind sitcom-mockery can be both figural and authorial – it can be distributed among several characters in its storyworld, who hand out ridicule to each other, and/or it can also disappear behind the apparatus of the medium, when the mis-en-scène and storytelling perform the mockery. ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 17)

Firstly, the figural level is concerned with characters exchanging invectives in the intradiegetic world. Figural invectives obviously entail verbal insults, humiliation, and abuse but can also comprise other intradiegetic non-verbal and gestural communication that is understood to exclude or ridicule another individual, like giving someone the middle finger or tapping one's forehead at someone. As I have shown above by using the example of HBO's *Veep*, the figural roles of the invector and invectee are prone to alternate during the run of even a single episode because, as Kanzler argues, "every social identification represented in the storyworld may become the target of ridicule" (18). In the second season episode of *Veep*, the characters of Ed and Jonah are staged to swiftly alternate their roles of the invector and the invectee. As targets and agents of disparagement can frequently be obfuscated, social and political meaning-making processes are ambiguated. It is, therefore and as shown above, of the utmost importance to examine the constellations and dynamics of invective processes in order to fully comprehend the cultural work that the scene performs.

Because situation comedies repeatedly rely on interpersonal banter to elicit humor, they frequently utilize invective simplifications, also known

as stereotypes. Communication scholar Schiappa defines stereotypes as "pejorative overgeneralizations" since they invite the categorization of members of a particular group of people "as having the same attributes […] whether such attributes are behavioral (things people do), ethical (good or bad), personality traits, or physical characteristics" (16). Although stereotypes are generally cognitively created to help process and classify unfamiliar information, "they can lead to the [invective; KS] objectification and the invalid categorization of entire groups of people, which can deny people the opportunity to create their own unique and personal identities" (Nichols et al. 107). When sitcom characters, thus, rely on invective stereotypes for comedic purposes, they facilitate, on the one hand, the portrayal of easily detectable characters and their attributes in order to elicit humor. On the other hand, they may propagate and reinforce invective images of the stereotyped individual or group. Mass media, particularly because it reaches such a large audience, "is a powerful influence in the development, reinforcement, and validation of stereotypes," providing possibly invective behavioral scripts and unhealthy attitudes (ibid.).

While Mills argues for "the 'harmless' nature of comedy" and the unwitting contribution "to stereotyped representations of underprivileged groups" (*The Sitcom* 10), Park et al. pointedly inquire "whether viewers laugh *at* stereotyped minority figures or *with* them," stressing the possibility of invective imbalances of power on screen (159, emphasis in the original). When, in the CBS sitcom *Mike & Molly*, for example, myriad invective anti-fat stereotypes are reinforced by fat-phobic jokes, supported by the laugh track, and multiplied in order to elicit laughter at the expense of fat people, audiences are strongly invited to invectively laugh *at* them and their imagined inferiority, manifesting and strengthening anti-fat bias. For *Two and a Half Men* (CBS 2003–15), Scheunemann argues along the same lines. While the protagonist Charlie is staged to readily adopt invective stereotypical beliefs about the inferiority of women, Scheunemann stresses the ambiguity of the laughter on screen: "Either Charlie's comment is seen as a ridiculous reiteration of an old prejudice, resulting in laughter *at* Charlie […] or the audience thinks this was a clever thing to say and agrees with him, laughing *with* him" (115, emphasis in the original). Although the text veils any heteronormative and patriarchal perspectives on gender, it still issues invitations to invectively see women, as Porter argues, as "comic objects… peripheral to the production of humour," possibly perpetuating

and reinforcing invective assumptions about gender disparity (qtd. in Mills, *The Sitcom* 64).

While figural invectives describe "scenarios of intradiegetic confrontation in which invector and invectee are present in and as characters," authorial invectives represent "constellations of invective by proxy in which the devaluation originates from the authorial agency of the material, manifesting itself in patterns of characterization that invectively construct characters as other, debased, inferior" (Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 1f.). Authorial invectives can, among others, take the shape of mocking and humiliating camera shots, editing techniques, and music and sound cues. In the following, I elaborate on two significant tools of the authorial agency, the laugh track and the reaction shot. The invective valency of these textual elements ceases behind the medium's apparatus and invites distinct audience responses connected to the superiority theory of humor: to invectively laugh *at* the misfortune of others.

Emanating from the collective experience of US American vaudeville traditions that were popular from the 19th until the early 20th century, the laugh track of situation comedies usually alludes to "a record of the 'live' responses of those who witnessed the event, recorded and transmitted to viewers at home" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 14).[22] The laugh track generally constitutes an intratextual but extradiegetic phenomenon. While the viewers are aware of it, the characters are staged to be oblivious. Soon, the laugh track would become the genre's distinguishing marker, not only signaling its 'comic impetus' and inviting viewers to join in, but setting itself apart from any other kinds of television programming. As a persistent feature of the sitcom, the laugh track "is testament to the notion that genre expectations become normalised and help create future expectations for genre series" (ibid. 102). Although many contemporary sitcoms abandon the audience's aural embodiment, the laugh track still unerringly signals recognition of the genre.

Kalviknes Bore uncovers two functions of the laugh track (cf. "Laughing Together?"). On the one hand, individual viewers are provided with a sense of laughing together with a collective audience. The situation comedy "invites the viewer to feel at one with the few dozen people s/he can hear laughing,

22 Later and for editing purposes, 'canned laughter' – the "practice of augmenting recorded laughter in postproduction" – is usually added, "[blurring] the boundaries between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' laugh tracks" (Kalviknes Bore 25).

and by extension with millions of others across the country" (Medhurst and Tuck 45). Likewise, Meyer argues that the rewarding and pleasant quality of humor is appreciated more when experienced in a group setting rather than alone (cf. 311). On the other hand, sitcoms create invective spaces where it is acceptable to laugh at transgressions or the misfortunes of others. Since the viewers are laughing along with an imagined community, they are reassured of their innocent reaction – "everything is just a joke" (Kalviknes Bore 24). Since alternative reactions – like guffaws and laughter in improper places – are edited out and dismissed, the final version of situation comedies seems to claim that "there is a collectively agreed-upon notion of when it is appropriate and inappropriate to laugh," and, consequently, what is funny and what is not (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Contradicting the notion of individual humor, sitcoms encourage and invite viewers to adopt MacCabe's idea of 'dominant specularity,' "a reading position constructed by texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106).[23]

Since popular culture's and, subsequently, the sitcom's desire is to reach mass audiences, they inevitably and invectively sideline "needs and ideologies of minorities and excluded groups" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Mills notes that there admittedly is a tradition in entertainment and comedy to represent marginalized and underprivileged groups more than in any other social realm. While BIPOC characters were notably absent from early television programming, they appeared in early comedy series, like *Beulah* (ABC 1950–53) and *Andy'n'Amos* (CBS 1951–53). Minority groups are usually invectively staged as the butt of the joke in line with the superiority theory of humor, while the mass audiences of sitcoms "are being invited to find laughable the behavior of marginalized groups, and are doing so through cultural texts assembled by those from privileged positions" (ibid. 83). Furthermore, the laugh track "suggests something is obviously, clearly, unarguably, unproblematically funny, and that such responses are collectively defined and experienced," thereby perpetuating and continuing invective and imbalanced power relations (ibid. 81).[24]

---

23 Communication scholars Rhodes and Ellithorpe examine how the laugh track communicates norms of behavior and suggest that it "can communicate normative information about the behaviors exhibited in the narrative, and this normative information can be internalized and influence attitudes and behavioral intentions" (376).

24 Although it is easier and certainly involves a more pleasurable viewing experience to occupy the unambiguous position of the 'dominant specularity,' sitcom texts still

By removing the intratextual device – as has been a trend in the last two decades –[25] the text puts audience members in charge of deciding when to laugh, obscuring the suitable response created by the text itself and opening up alternative readings. By complicating the intratextual power balance and the position of the 'dominant specularity,' sitcom texts hold viewers more accountable for their (invective) laughter, demanding the mental effort to actively participate in meaning making processes. Without the aid of the genre-specific laugh track, the privileged position of the texts and related ideological and invective coloring are more veiled.[26]

Another textual element that the authorial agency utilizes to veil its deprecation of particular characters is the reaction shot. Similar to the laugh track, it is able to establish and invectively depict power disparities and social hierarchies in the intradiegetic world. Described as an editorial treatment,

---

afford viewers the opportunity to define their individual responses against a collective consciousness provided by them. The aural embodiment of the preferred audience position, as Mills suggests, even encourages viewers to notice a differing response in themselves. Although the effects of alternative readings might be minuscule and localized, "the laugh track offers the individual the possibility of defining themselves in response to that mass" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 104).

25 With the fragmentation and blending of genres, a growing number of recent situation comedies abandon the laugh track, making viewers and their laughter more accountable. Defying genre parameters, the mockumentary sitcom format, for example, as Nardi argues, "tackles common topics of non-fiction but changes the rules of the game for comedic purposes" (73). Mockumentary sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC 2009–20) or *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), then, utilize visual markers of the documentary genre "in order to establish a different kind of comedic discourse" (Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 53). *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix 2017–19), for example, merges the genre of horror with the family sitcom, "daring the audience to laugh, recognising and successfully navigating the fine line between horror and comedy" (Jowett and Abbott). As *The Guardian*'s Jones suggests, Michael Schur's *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) "continues to work as a light sitcom, even as it fearlessly explores weighty philosophical conundrums and peels back the layers of liberal self-delusion," not only including dramatic and fantastic genre markers but also capturing and engaging the audience with the contemporary zeitgeist ("Forking Hell!").

26 Additionally, deviating from the sitcom genre's norms seemingly complicates its identifiable and rigid form. *M*A*S*H* (CBS 1973–84) was one of the first situation comedies to opt against the laugh track, demonstrating "that any deviation from it, no matter how minor, results in a text that then asks to be understood as something else" (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 66).

the reaction shot is "a stylistic feature vital for the semiotics of television comedy" (Schwind, "Chilled-Out Entertainers" 28). Cinematographer Karl Freund was the first to notice how important it is for comedic programming to cut away from the behavior of one character to the reaction of another.[27] On the one hand, the reaction shot elicits humor by cuing the audience "into reading such behavior as abnormal and, therefore, comic" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 39). On the other hand, it can ensure a second laugh related to one joke: "[W]hile a shot of comic behavior would get a laugh from an audience, a subsequent shot of a reaction to that behavior would get another laugh" (ibid.). The reaction shot, like the laugh track, represents a caesura in the narrative, cuing the audience into a viewpoint from which the story and the jokes within it make sense. Mills, for example, argues that reaction shots are vital for the humor in the British *The Office*'s staging of embarrassment "by incorporating many shots of Brent's employees looking aghast at what he says and does," suggesting that Brent's behavior is laughable (ibid. 69).

In this subchapter, I have conclusively examined selected affordances of the situation comedy genre that facilitate and allow for invective dynamics and constellations. While focusing on two distinct levels of invectives enables me to describe various invective techniques, the differentiation of agency, moreover, not only reflects the complexities of humorous popcultural texts but also enables a comprehensive analysis of disparagement that may affirm, reflect on, or break invective conventions.

By establishing the elements that constitute the conceptual impulses and the cultural context of this study, I set out to define the scope of my project and concentrate the subject matter of my analysis on the situation comedy texts that make use of this very construct. In three larger sections, I have shown that the concept of invectivity greatly informs and furthers the analysis of American popular culture since invective practices have continually been rehearsed, ritualized, and critically reflected in this arena. For this, I focused on points of intersection between the novel concept and larger research

27 During the 1950s, Karl Freund was not only responsible for discovering the importance of the now popular reaction shot, he also created one of the most generic camera set-ups of sitcom history, the 'three-headed monster.' This shooting style captures dialogue scenes between two characters: One camera "covered a wide, establishing shot while the other two were each mid-shots of each performer," allowing for quick editing in conversation scenes between two characters (Mills, *The Sitcom* 39).

contexts within American Studies: American culture, humor theory, and the situation comedy genre. The awareness and understanding of the conceptual impulses and cultural context of this study frames and furthers the analyses of the formal principles, media-specific realizations, and political and social resonances of invective dynamics and constellations in contemporary American situation comedies. By introducing these conceptual impulses, the study is now able to focus on invective phenomena in situation comedies that echo an understanding and awareness of difference, establishing social hierarchies. Moreover, the concept of invectivity provides a better understanding of the functions and cultural complexity of humor as a narrative tool. A closer look at the genre's affordances, finally, allows the study to carefully zoom in on and analyze the invective phenomena of contemporary US American situation comedies and their cultural work, whether it is a reflexive questioning of established regimes of inequality or an affirmative consolidation of exclusionary norms.