The television series *Community* and Sitcom

A case study aimed at the genre of contemporary American Sitcom television series

TV-serien *Community* och Sitcom
En fallstudie riktad mot genren av samtida amerikanska Sitcom TV-serier

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Abstract

This thesis is asking whether the television series *Community* (2009-) can be defined as a Sitcom, combined with a look at how other genres that generally are considered to be non-comic are incorporated in the series and how those are identifiable as well as whether or not they compromise *Community*'s possible label as a Sitcom. In seeking to define this show's place in its own genre I found that whilst *Community* does not follow the archetypal technical conventions of Sitcom, it still does follow some of its setups, tropes and ideas. It does not suffice as a classical Sitcom, but it does lean on some of the genres conventions and has not yet passed over the line where it would be part of a completely different genre. Instead I state that the series fits the term New Comedy, as devised by Antonio Savorelli, not a genre but a term representing the heightened use of metatextuality on four levels in Comedy. Thus *Community* suffices as a part of an evolved version of the Sitcom genre.

**Keywords:** Community, Television, Sitcom, Comedy, Western, Documentary, New Comedy, Genre, Contemporary American Television Series
Abstract

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1 Introduction

To navigate the gigantic range of programs offered by television, viewers make use of genre labels to identify the shows which have the greatest potential to fulfill their preferences and needs. “Genre is the primary way to classify television’s vast array of textual options.”¹ Genres are defined through conventions agreed upon by creators, viewers and industry. Many genres have clear cut rules that are already obvious in the titles of the programs that employ them, for instance would a viewer that is interested in seeing a crime solved pick a show from the CSI-franchise, but probably wouldn’t choose a show like Grey’s Anatomy, because already its title indicates it being a hospital show, and a romantic drama in part which is indicated by its cast. Thus the first superficial information has already created an emotional expectation with the viewer. What then if a television series does not strictly follow the rules of its genre?

This is what Community does. With an experimental take on genre, this metatextual show tries a new approach, which in theory should offer a smorgasbord for every viewer, in that it does not restrain itself by the rules of its own genre but gladly mixes with and references other expressions of the contemporary culture. It is in itself a study of genres. It uses the medium that television is perfectly, developing an extreme sense for the now being spiked with pop-cultural references and overlapping with other shows (as the continued exchange with Cougar Town for example), without forgetting history and drawing on the classics such as the norms of Action movies, Westerns or Documentaries. At the same time Community does not make use of the most obvious conventions of its own genre. It seems like there is no clear consensus on whether or not Community is a Sitcom: whilst its broadcaster NBC simply advertises it as a comedy series, most critics call it a Sitcom and even IMDB tags it with the keyword Sitcom. How then is the viewer supposed to perceive it?

Comedy (as television studies itself) is an easily disregarded genre in academia even though it with its endless variations and hybridizations offers up a vast field of different expressions to dig through.² This might derive from or at least bind into the discussion of television being a low status medium and Comedy being a low status genre both due to their appeal to a mass audience.³ I picked this particular series because of its innovative play with genres and the different approaches in almost every episode is a risk that other shows might not dare because they might not be as accessible to a broad viewership. This

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gambles is what first fascinated me with this show. What I want to examine here is how *Community* defines itself as a Situation Comedy, meaning how the series separates itself from classic Sitcom archetypes and shows increased self-awareness, as well as the play with other genres that usually are considered to be non-comic and whether this puts the status as a Comedy at risk. Thus I seek to define the show’s place in its genre.

1-1 Succinct Introduction

In essence, this thesis is a case study through a filter of genre (theory) of a contemporary American Sitcom series that dismisses certain conventions of its own genre. By delivering accounts on television history, the genres of television series and in particular serialized Comedy together with theoretical concepts, as well as a presentation of the television series *Community*’s content, I am hoping to create a sturdy base for an analysis of the generic construction of *Community*.

1-2 Aims and Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the Sitcom genre in *Community*, and above all to find out whether or not the show can be defined as a Sitcom. The goal is to take a look at the television series *Community* through a genre-filter to examine its construction, main characters and play with genres. One question becomes the potential of this particular show to redefine its own genre by separation from the traditional Sitcom archetype and demonstration of increased self-awareness. In addition I will look at the way genres that are not considered to be comic are incorporated in this show, if they still are identifiable and whether or not they compromise the show’s possible label as a Sitcom, with the goal of seeking to define the show’s place in its own genre.

1-3 Method

In this generic case study I will mainly focus on the intertextual qualities of the show, but some of the text that *Community* is can only be understood through context, since it refers to other texts. Also, genre can only be defined and understood by comparison to other works within the same space since conventions are based in quantity, I will however generalize rather than specify. I derive the method for my analysis out of a combination of film and television studies, with a focus on genre theory and basic narration theories, specifically I will try to look through a lens of neoformalist theories of narration as well as very simplified structural semiotics (such as the use of the actantial model to better define and compare themes and motives), and a particular method of genre definition based on
the four categories devised by Joachim Friedmann and Stefan Wilke\(^4\) which will be further explained in chapter “2-4 Genre and Genre Theory”.

1-4 Disposition and Delimitation

I will start my thesis with trying to deliver a broad theoretical background by accounts on television and genre as well as a presentation of Community’s content and reception. Then the specific topic of this thesis will be addressed, the attachment with genre conventions, the analysis itself will thus be divided in different chapters according to the genres addressed; starting with an analysis of Community’s connection to Sitcom based on the pilot episode (the pilot is the first episode of a television series and is filmed separately before the actual production starts, whether the series is going to be broadcast depends on the quality and success of the pilot, it is also the episode that not only starts off the story but sets the mood of the whole series). Genre is in this analysis firstly considered as a textual and format strategy, and only secondly as part of the system of television production and consumption. Also I do not explain what specifically is funny in the show or what humour is, but work with the assumption that Comedy (and Sitcom) is a genre produced with the intended emotional response of laughter – I am not looking at the emotional response, which can be very individual. For this thesis it is satisfactory that if the aim of a production is comic, the simple intent suffices as stating that the emotional/physical response of the audience will be laughter. For my purpose I will mainly consider the two fully released seasons of Community. But I will not look at all episodes in detail; instead I choose certain episodes as prime examples, as the ones I perceive as the strongest examples within the show while at the same time trying to keep an overall look at the story. I chose the pilot episode as starting point for looking at the general compilation of the series and its connection to Sitcom. To seek out the show’s place in Sitcom I will start with a more detailed look at the pilot and then examine the series as a whole in connection to a recent theory on contemporary television series: New Comedy, as devised by Antonio Savorelli. For reasons of practicality and continuity I will describe this theory in the respective chapter in coalition with applying it to Community instead of presenting it separately before the analysis. For a look at the use of other non-comic genres during the show I will examine episode 1.23 “Modern Warfare” as representative for the use of the Action genre and 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs” for Western, as well as episode 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking” which will be looked at for its use of Documentary

\(^4\) Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: *Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien*, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p.91
conventions. In regard to keeping the overall look at the story, I will also refer to events/episodes from the third season currently airing on NBC, I will however not go into details, mainly because the season is not yet concluded as I start writing and therefore not obtainable on DVD. The episodes will be referenced with their title and a number, indicating first the season and then the episode within that season, for example the very first episode would thus be 1.01 “Pilot”.

Due to the object of the analysis my thesis will be limited to U.S. American television. While no one case study provides an account of any genre in its entirety I hope to catch a glimpse of the essence of contemporary television Sitcom and its evolution in the U.S. I have to point out that I do fairly limit my attachment with television studies to television series and the serial narrative, and leave subjects such as reality television and commercial breaks i.e. most of the flow of the medium out of my accounts due to the limited space and/or relevance here. Flow, as once devised by Raymond Williams, is nowadays more and more irrelevant (or challenged in its relevancy) considering that the original definition of television as a LIVEmedium has completely changed, it is but a mere rhetorical illusion considering how little live content actually is aired, instead television is a communal experience in the way that this mass medium unites the masses around its own NOW. But this collective now is in its demise, which becomes clear in considering the ways we actually consume “television” today, the black box in the living room is no longer the main platform: television content has spread to most devices we own, become portable and thus become less broadcast and more archive (YouTube, TiVo, Netflix, On Demand, DVD, etc.), which often also offer the possibility to pause and fast forward thus enabling the user-viewer to create his own flow. This evolution away from broadcast television to archive based media channels has brought on more individualized and interactive media. Thus the question is sparked how television should be redefined, but it is a far to vast discussion to further investigate here, so even if usually in television the identification of a genre will also be led by scheduling and production, I will not be looking at those closely, but at the text itself (and certain essential parts of its production such as casting). It shall be enough for this analysis to state that whilst Community is very much a broadcast show since it first airs on NBC I have no means to actually watch it on NBC and thus no way of determining where for example commercial breaks are added, what sponsors are featured or any graphic overlays such as network logos. So instead I will, for reasons of practicality and coherence, be employing one of the most common practices of consumption: the complete season DVD. Also, I will limit the analysis to episodes produced for television,
thus leaving out webisodes and special commercials using the show’s characters. I will stick with the common terms of television series/show/program. Also, whilst television studies tends to emphasize its ties to social studies and politics, putting “academic emphasis on the social importance of television […] simply to distinguish the field from the institution from which it emerged,”5 I’d rather look at the text as a text, not at what it might want to accomplish politically or socially. Because in focusing on which influence television has on the viewer, both politically and educational, television studies can be missing out on the “complexity of narrative or the beauty of construction,”6 which in academia justifies the critical consideration of a film (or a novel for that matter). Thus much of televisions (aesthetic) qualities can get lost. I therefore do not want to pick the sociological aspects of a show as its most important feature as common in television studies, but rather look upon the text within its genre, where it fits into Situation Comedy and where it steps out of its genre norms in regard to its narrative and graphic construction.

1-5 Literature
As for the literature used in this thesis, since I could not find an academic analysis of Community I will build my analysis on secondary literature and professional television critics’ reviews.

6 ibid, p.4
2 Background
In the following chapters I will present the theoretical background for my analysis consisting of a brief description of structural semiotics and neoformalist theories of narration, a short account of the history of television (limited to the U.S.A.), a presentation of television studies and genre theory as well as a closer look on the genre Comedy.

2-1 Theory: Structural Semiotics and Neo Formalist Theory of Narration
I shall try to base my analysis in the basics of two theories of narration derived from film theory: Structural semiotics and Neoformalism. An explanation for this combination will be found in the chapter on semiotics.

2-1-1 Neo Formalist Narration Theory
Narration theories examine, theorize and systemize the mechanisms and dynamics of filmic storytelling. In general there are two positions on narration theory, (post)structuralist and (neo)formalist. In Tomas Elsaesser and Malte Hageners book *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* the differences between these tendencies are explained as follows:

Neoformalist and cognitive theories of narration tend to emphasize rational-choice scenarios and logical information processing, while post-structuralist and deconstructive approaches focus on the instability of meaning. The former believes in a fair and free relationship between spectator and text, the latter is rather more interested in power structures and unconscious processes.\(^7\)

In the neo formalist notion a movie (or in the case of my subject, a television series, thus this applies to all audiovisual narration) consists of audiovisual indicators that are received and processed by the audience, the viewer is seen as an active participant. It is not the *movie* that conveys meaning, but the *audience* that recognizes meaning due to certain conditions.\(^8\) The viewer builds the story out of indicators; he does this through previous experiences with help of hypotheses that were built from previous experiences with similar works. The raw material presented in the audiovisual story (movie, series etc.) is called *plot*, from this the viewer constructs the *story* through linking together seen events and filling in the gaps with what he knows is logical.\(^9\)

This also fits for the recognition of genres, knowledge of genres and their conventions, thus how to identify what genre a story belongs to is dependent on previous experience

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\(^7\) Elsaesser, Thomas; Hagener, Malte: *Film Theory An Introduction through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.43
\(^8\) Hickethier, Knut: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.106
\(^9\) Elsaesser, Thomas; Hagener, Malte: *Film Theory An Introduction through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.43-44
with similar work: “Genres are shared ideas about particular stories.” As for instance the presentation of different genres in *Community* lives of the earlier experience the viewers have of those genres, or in the case of the homage of the films that are referenced for example in 2.18 “Critical Filmstudies” such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), as well as the previous knowledge of Comedy.

The Russian formalists of the 1920s were concerned with understanding how artworks use various ‘devices’ to achieve particular ‘functions’:

A **device** can be any of a set of historical strategies available to a media maker: choices about camera setups, character qualities, dialogue, editing, and so on. **Function** is the desired effect on the audience member, an attempt to attain certain narrative (crucial story information), emotional (how we should feel about the story), or aesthetic goals.

The creator decides which function he wants to accomplish and then seeks the best device to accomplish this, but the devices are limited by available technology, economic constraints, and by historical convention. The different functions that devices serve in a text are not independent, but are combined in the artwork to form a distinctive system, specific to the world that the artwork has created and lets that world function under certain principles. Such functions, devices and systems are creating the formal conventions for a genre.

### 2-1-2 Structural Semiotics

A short account on the notion of semiotic theory, in a simplified manner, shall follow in this chapter, albeit my use of it shall be even more restrained than this description.

Semiotics could be defined as the doctrine of sign system, derived from the Greek word for “observant of signs”, and is basically the science of meaning in the broadest sense, it involves more than lingual meaning but also pictorial language such as gestures, pictures and other visual signs. Semiotics is the theory of film language or film as language; language in the sense of language as structure just as text does not necessarily have to consist of written words (“text” is any message/communication preserved in a form whose existence is independent of both sender and receiver), thus images can be read. Audiovisual media are seen as sign systems and with that as language.

A sign consist of what are basically two sides of a coin: the **Signifier** (the material indication, such as words on a page, a facial expression or an image) and the **Signified**

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(the concept that a signifier refers to). Those are actually closer to each other in movies, since a picture of a book is closer to an actual book than the word book. Also a picture, and a moving one at that, covers much more information at once than one word or a whole sentence for that matter. Film is a communication that uses signs to say something about something that isn’t actually in the process of the communication, in this communication process anything that doesn’t mean itself can become a sign; for example can architecture, clothing, music, colors and hairstyle become indicators of class, milieu or employment. As Hickethier explains, the theory of signs uses cultural codes, which distinguish themselves from language by not having a fixed grammar or being lexically defined, instead their degree of efficiency is determined through the context in which they appear. I see this also applicable in for example genre theory (even in a broader or more shallow sense), as the community has to agree on the indicators and norms for each genre, consisting of titles, topics, cast, camera, sound, light, color etc. For example is a dark environment, fast paced and high pitched music, rapid cuts between different darkened parts of the environment or sweeps towards a specific area and an actress or actor with short breath and widened eyes indication of a Horror film. As well as a shot of a sunlit meadow, alternating between a male and female running and running towards each other, overlaid with birds singing or a popular love song, is a definite sign of a romantic movie. The first scenario will let the viewer suggest that a monster is about to enter and thus experience the fear of the character, the second one will let the viewer anticipate a hug and a kiss, assuming deep feelings of love between the characters. Making elements such as lighting, environment, music etc. signs given meaning through cultural validation.

In semiotic theory there is a further distinction made between two levels of meaning: **Denotation** is the most basic or literal meaning of a sign, for example does the word rose signify a particular kind of flower, it is what we actually see; but in **Connotation**, which stands for the secondary or cultural meanings of signs, their interpretation, the word rose signifies a certain feeling being a culturally agreed upon signifier for love and passion. This connotative meaning is especially important in film and television since it allows the iconic sign of the pictures to also be seen on a symbolic level. The visual communication of for instance a rose leaves much less room for personal association than the word. In the visual communication the picture of the flower will be very specific in color, lighting and camera angle, with a low angle suggesting more dominance than a picture from above

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13 Hickethier, Knut: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.112
might for example. These are long since agreed upon techniques to communicate a specific meaning. Of course there is always room for some different interpretations given that every director will pick a different photo, leaving the viewer with a different interpretation of the “rose”.

As semiotics is a structuralist theoretical notion it might not be the obvious choice to be paired with a formalist view on narration theory. I hope however that this will still prove fruitful. Both theories seem to approach audiovisual communication as dependent on the viewers capability to read the moving pictures, to illustrate what I mean I might reuse a line from the previous chapter: It is not the movie that conveys meaning, but the audience that recognizes meaning due to certain conditions. Thus it is not the movie that mediates meaning, but the viewer that recognizes meaning in it due to certain conditions based in previous knowledge. What the formalists call devices and systems are part of the language of the film, as semiotics would call it.

My use of semiotic film theory will be very shallow, the part of structural semiotics that I intend to use is above all a certain model that aids analysis, namely the actantial model as created by Algridas J. Greimas.

The actantial model is a tool that can theoretically be used to analyze any real or thematized action, but particularly those depicted in literary texts or images. In the actantial model, an action may be broken down into six components, called actants. Actantial analysis consists of assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes.

The model is structured as follows: a subject has a project to obtain an object, meets conflict, but has associates/helpers and opponents.

The actantial model simplifies the identification of motives and themes in stories, it therefore also simplifies the comparison of structures and goals throughout both different episodes and with other shows/stories (of the same genre). In Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics Louis Hébert points out that any kind of

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15 Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.106


17 ibid


19 ibid, p.249
action can be described by at least one actantial model, because an action can mostly be seen from various different perspectives, for example from both the protagonists and the antagonists point of view.\textsuperscript{20}

As will be shown during the analysis, there are more than one model for the general action of an episode, even if restrained to one character as the point of departure.

I am interested in looking at the language of the Sitcom and the language of \textit{Community}, but in a broad enough sense where I see it useful to still rely on a fair and free relationship between spectator and text, because of the unconscious definition a common viewer will apply to the viewed subject. The most important knowledge a viewer brings to the viewing of \textit{Community} is the subconscious recognition of indicators for other formal systems (meaning other genres or specific texts) with help from subconscious hypotheses and charts that are built on previous experiences with similar works. Thus my main view on narration is based in (neo) formalism but I add the semiotic actantial analysis model as an aid and try to uncover some of the language of Sitcom, based on the stereotypical conventions of the classic Sitcom. Also, I do not believe there to be only one right answer in the interpretation as formalism sometimes insinuates.

\textsuperscript{20} Hébert, Louis: \textit{Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics}; Published October 13\textsuperscript{th} 2011, Université du Québec à Rimouski, Québec; Translation Julie Tabler; http://www.signosemio.com/documents/Louis-Hebert-Tools-for-Texts-and-Images.pdf; 2012-02-12
2-2 Television History (focused on Comedy and Sitcom)

This chapter will focus on the history of the medium and the historical development of the genre Sitcom in television to help place Community within the genre and clarify its evolution and “how changing cultural circumstances bring about generic shifts.”

In recent years American television has become the beacon which contemporary television all over the (western) world follows. It is not surprising that the American television industry would turn out to be the strongest and develop the fastest considering that its greatest developments and actual entrance into households and everyday lives took place in the aftermath of World War II when all other industrial nations had been severely weakened and needed to focus on rebuilding, whilst the U.S. as the winning nation with the lowest losses in soldiers and no civilian losses, no damage to industry or land could refocus all its industrial capability from insuring military superiority to the manufacture and development of leisure items. Thus “Television’s entrance into American life coincided with the beginning of the era of peace and prosperity.”

The technical development might have started with the Morse-telegraph, but the real mother of television is radio. With the dependence of the industry upon the radio for both the technical development of television itself and the channels it becomes clear that the radio paid for the birth of television, not only through financial resources but also through content. The first of America’s television networks were thus also its strongest radio networks - NBC, CBS and ABC - since they were the only ones able to afford the financing of television during the early 1930s after the Wall Street Crash in 1929. For a long time the most powerful channels, the big three ABC, NBC and CBS had barely any competition worth mentioning. Public service channels did exist since 1952, but without any success until the government support came in 1967. It were hard times to pay for a television channel considering the FCCs (Federal Communications Commission, founded in 1927) ban on television commercials, thus the radio had to shoulder the whole funding. NBC were the first to show a commercial on their television channel, the WNBT, after successfully pushing the FCC to lift the ban in 1941. In the beginning it was easy to fill the channels with programming, simply transferring the contents of the respective channel’s radio shows over into the new medium. The 50s hadn’t offered any competition for the powerful three, even though the first steps at trying to create Pay-TV had been

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22 Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas: Introduction: Comparative European Perspectives on Television History – Aims and Audience; In Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): A European Television History (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p.4
24 ibid, p.2
taken, pushed by Hollywood after heightened looses at the Box-Office due to the New York base of television. But successful variation in the channel selection had to wait until 1972 when Time-Life launched their Home Box Office (HBO) as the first well-functioning Pay-TV channel sending their programming without commercial breaks for an extra fee via cable. 1979 saw the rise of assortment, with children oriented Nickelodeon, sports channel ESPN and the CNN news broadcaster. The creation of identity and strong image had become of utter importance for the television channels and remains so until today. All of these channels were based on concepts that had proven successful earlier on. Only the creation of MTV had to wait until 1981 because the bad relationship between the musicians union and television had allowed the radio to maintain the monopoly on music.

The first fully functioning television set had been presented by John Logie Baird in 1925, but the medium wouldn’t rise to power in the audiences’ life until 1953.\(^{25}\) Whilst it is always hard to determine actual dates for such statements, in *Watching TV – Six Decades of American Television* the authors’ Castleman and Podrazik base their presumption on three birthdays. The first ones were the birthdays of an actual and a fictional child. The actress Lucille Ball portraying Lucy in *I love Lucy* (1951–1957) had a son both in real life and on the show, and both births created a great enthusiasm with the American television audience, making the episode the highest rated single television event to that point thus representing the American viewers complete acceptance of television and the represented characters as part of their daily lives. It also symbolizes the importance that the Sitcom holds in the viewers lives until today. The third so called birth was the election of Eisenhower for president and Nixon for vice-president. The process had been closely covered by television representing the governments’ complete and utter acceptance of the medium. Television emerged as more than a mere source of entertainment, it also became a serious medium for delivering information.

As to the creation of television series, just as game shows and sports broadcasts were copied right of the radio, so were also these serialized stories. In the childhood of television, the 30s to the 50s, most of the programming stemmed directly from the radio. Everything from the daily soap operas to the most successful (mostly so called ethnic-) Sitcoms such as *I love Lucy* (1951–1957) were not only inspired by the radio shows but also drew the big stars of broadcasting from radio over to television. Actress Lucille Ball had gained more fame through her CBS Radio Sitcom *My favorite husband* (1953–1955) than through any of her Hollywood-movies. When the radio show was canceled she and

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her husband, musician Desi Arnaz, started filming their television Sitcom *I love Lucy*, the first television series not to be broadcasted live from New York but pre-taped in Los Angeles, also the first one to make use of the now iconic “three-headed monster,” the three-camera set-up with studio audience. Not only became the series a raging success but it also made the couple the first television superstars. Many other shows were inspired by its concept of family and the dominion of the filmed Sitcom began.

Changing definitions of what a genre houses become very logic and vivid in reading the history of television Comedy as written by Michael V. Tueth in his book *Laughter in the Living Room*: just as the outward circumstances, such as a country’s political and social situation changes, so changes also what the genre needs to show so that the viewer can feel reflected or reassured (depending on what is needed in this particular period in time) and thus stay interested. Whilst up until the 50s the comedy-variety shows were the main form of televised Comedy, from there on the Sitcom would become dominant, solely accompanied by the new form of variety, the host and the sketch centered Late Night show. “As television reached out across America, it soon became clear that the viewers preferred the milder format of situation comedy rather than the raucous revelry of the comedy-variety show.” With the social and political circumstances the focus of Sitcoms changed: the 50s were filled by marriage-Sitcoms like *I love Lucy* mirroring the return to normal family life and the then classic husband and wife gender roles; the 60s came with escapist-Sitcoms such as *Gilligans Island* (1964-1967) and nostalgia like *Bonanza* (1959-1973) brought on by the nightmare of political and social upheaval set off by the Kennedy-assassination. The event had turned America during one weekend “from a print-and-radio-nation (we read and heard the news) to a television nation (we saw the funeral),” letting television provide viewers both with the bad news and the way out into a simpler world of escapist fantasies to the old west or small town life. The 70s and predominantly the 80s came with the workplace-Sitcom such as *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) and *Cheers* (1982-1993) with a more sophisticated and witty dialog it was a concept long combined with the marriage-Sitcom that finally managed to come into its own right, presenting a new kind of “family” and being the most successful subgenre of television Comedy considering their long original runs and long afterlife in syndication. After the workplace-Sitcom had started to test the boundaries both plot- and character-wise, the 90s urban ensemble-Sitcom got to portray the more cynic big city life centering on predominantly a group of *Friends* (1994-

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28 ibid, p.87
2004), just as the Americans themselves moved back into the urban areas to better accommodate the need for being close to the job and due to the cities being perceived to be safer again. The Sitcom characters moved into the cities and as for example New York in *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) the city would almost become a character in its own right hosting in its womb the often eccentric urbanites that even with their quirks were something close to role models. It seems that it is this last part, the role model, which is most important. Following the path of Comedy illustrates that the most successful Comedies of their time featured the role models of their time, from the attractive socially liberal couple similar to the Kennedys in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) to the neurotic but emancipated yet struggling *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), the characters would become the embodiment of their time. Sitcom reflects the kinds of relationships which the broader society finds normal. Television allows us to invite the world into our living room, and thus role models visit viewers at home and become something like friends. In the final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) Mary said: “What is a family? A family is people who make you feel less alone and really loved. Thank you for being my family.”

This sentiment has held up on screen until today; “In the 1990s comedies the gang in the office or the friends who hung around the apartment became each other’s family.” Based on my own observations the surrogate family is still the predominant form from big hit shows like *How I met your mother* (2005-), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-), *The Office* (2005-) and *30 Rock* (2006-) to *New Girl* (2011-), *Cougar Town* (2008-), *Workaholics* (2010-), *Girls* (2012-) and last but not least *Community* (2009-).

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30 ibid, p.182
2-3 Television studies and television series

Television studies spring from film studies, to set aside a clear difference and with hopes of lifting up their medium from the low status it held/holds, scholars would focus less on the mediums aesthetic values and more on its importance for society, the cultural and political contexts of the programming. Traditionally television is defined in context to other communicative media:

Academic studies of television have attempted a range of definitions of the medium, primarily based on how the medium communicates, which have mainly involved distinctions between television and cinema or radio. The subject’s analytical methodologies have derived from disciplines including film studies, its methods of discussing audiences and television institutions have come from sociology, and overall these ways of describing the development of television can amount to different ontologies and histories of the medium.  

Television series are a visual storytelling medium, the main difference to other storytelling media such as books and movies is duration and the “endless”-concept. Books and movies are internally closed stories and have an ending, they occupy a closed space of time. This is the traditional dramaturgical model, spanning from antique drama theory until today and particularly popular in the Hollywood feature, Knut Hickethier describes this as “Dramaturgie der geschlossenen Form” which basically translates to dramaturgy of the closed form, further called closed dramaturgy. Television series on the other hand have a completely different actual length (from a few episodes up to tens of seasons, as well as episodes being everything from a couple of minutes to an hour long), the creation stretches several years and is very dependent on outside resources such as cast and crew, economic resources, sponsors, network and audience, but has at the same time to be produced under incredible time pressure taking into consideration the broadcasting schedule of its television channel and that much more content needs to be produced in a much shorter time compared to feature films. One component can easily change the whole story that is supposed to be told and drive it into a different direction. This leaves the show in constant risk of being altered from the original version or to be left completely unfinished. Hickethier calls this form of dramaturgy open, referring to its possibility for incompleteness. It has a double innuendo, on one side the narrational structure aimed at infinity gives creators the opportunity to continuously tell their story, whilst on the other side leaving producers and channels the possibility to order more episodes or cancel the show based on ratings whenever they feel it to be adequate. The open dramaturgy is

31 Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): A European Television History (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p.3
32 Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.116
33 Binder, Nora Annika: Kurzweilige Neurosen Zum Fascinationspotenzial von Ally McBeal und Monk (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2009), p.59
predominant in television with its vast array of serial narratives compared to the feature film and its closed space of the cinema. The individual episodes are arranged for continuation, ergo open, but simultaneously usually closed in their structure, interaction between characters and the meaning as perceived by the viewer. Thus being of double structure or double dramaturgy (the conclusion of the individual episode is in correspondence with the incompleteness of the show as a whole). At the same time as this puts the programs at constant risk of elimination it also becomes one of the mediums greatest assets, giving opportunity for the viewer to join the story late but still understand its premises, becoming a continuous part of the viewers’ life and involving them in a much bigger manner than other storytelling media. Series know how to use the strength of the television medium: "22 hours to tell a story, long-arc characterization, that intimate loop with viewers who watched alone, at home – and then in communion online."\textsuperscript{34} For a long time the distinction between series and serial had been clear; the actions of the series are concluded after each episode, featuring the same characters yet being independent from stories told in other episodes (today only rarely seen, in programs like The Simpsons, with never ageing characters and the return of status quo in every episode). It was originally aimed at men and featuring more action, as for instance a cop show. Serial was more aimed at women and the episodes were not in themselves concluded, also themes changed to concerning relations such as love, friendship and family, the most evident example being Soaps such as Days of our lives (1965-). But the wall between the two has been broken down and today those two concepts are seldom divided, instead it is made use of the earlier mentioned double dramaturgy, so too in the here examined series Community. The success of the double structure in television series is generally credited to the police series Hill Street Blues (1981-1987) where most episodes have an overall story arc concerning for example the main characters relationships spanning the whole season or show as well as subplots such as a murder mystery which will be concluded during the episode. In general the television medium is often more experimental with narration structures (comparison here is made between the American mainstream television and the American aka Hollywood feature film), which is most evident in the prime time Drama such as for example Desperate Housewives (2004-), where the in the pilot established main character dies during this first episode only to become the voice that guides the viewer through suburban drama season after season, dead and yet very much

\textsuperscript{34} Nussbaum, Emily: When TV Became Art: Good-Bye Boob Tube, Hello Brain Food; Published December 4th 2009; New York Magazine; http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/; 2012-05-22
alive. But Comedies have also become more experimental, a prime example being the successful Sitcom *How I met your Mother* (2005-) with its unique narration structure, a father from the future telling the story of how he met his children’s mother to those kids in a constant flashback, which in itself is again broken up in different flashbacks and -forwards, playing with chronological orders and letting the narrator at times get lost in his own story, as well as laying out hooks for events happening later on in the story the biggest one of course being the meeting of The Mother. This relies upon the viewers’ capability to edit in the chronology whilst he watches, a cornerstone of film viewership, and a sign that the television viewer is accepted as an active participant in the communication process.

Another example for television's play with narrative structures and the heightened genre development of recent years is *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), the show that is credited with creating the genre term Dramedy, a combination of Drama and Comedy. The original idea, similar as in the later *How I met your Mother*, of letting the main character share their thoughts and feelings, but here added with an aspect of the characters imaginative fantasy world being openly presented to the viewer, was soon abandoned for the benefit of an all-knowing outside narrator. The sharing of the imaginative mind of the main character as a main story-telling device was successfully realized in another hybrid genre show, the medical Dramedy *Scrubs* (2001-2010). Hybrid genres, particularly with Comedy, have become more common.

Before moving on to the term genre and genre theory I’d like to make a short detour to the notion of “quality” in television and its connection to the serial. When it comes to television what is called “quality programming” is mostly referring to the dramatized serial narrative. Television has for most of its history used serial strategies only to gain daytime audience for Soap Operas. The realization of the serial narratives power to attract and maintain a loyal audience is the medium’s greatest (financial) asset, but for long it was assumed that primetime audiences would not be willing to devote the required time to get to know characters and understand a long-running plot. Which resulted in the primetime series episodes being more disconnected from each other and thus enabling the audience to start watching at any time without needing to first catch up on previous episodes. But with the success of *Dallas, Dynasty* and *Hillstreet Blues*, the serial narrative became a mark of quality television. Channels often make use of the word “quality” to set themselves apart from other programming, mainly known for this brand of quality programming is HBO

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35 Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: *Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien*, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p.11
36 ibid, p.90
with slogans such as “It’s not TV. It’s HBO” - branding the channel to be equal with quality, and better than any other kind of television. Whilst in the U.S. mostly used as a targeted marketing strategy, making it okay for high culture aficionados to watch television, in Europe the term quality in television is more aimed at being used “in official policy documents to provide an elusive, highly debated description of a desired type of programming.”\textsuperscript{37} In connection to the American use of the word, Jane Feuer has noted a link between “quality television” and the quality, or rather desirability, of the audience that comes with it. The mark of quality draws a young, urban and wealthier consumer which the sponsors of course are highly interested in. Feuer’s argument continues with reminding us that “quality TV is liberal TV”, with which she means to say that more tolerant values and with that more quirky characters are presented, examples are Northern Exposure (1990-1995) and Twin Peaks (1990-1991), where the whole community that is shown is very tolerant and quirky. “Another characteristic that distinguishes much quality television from the mundane is its tendency to refer to other television shows,” Feuer continues: “intertextuality and self-reflexivity operate both as the normative way of creating new programs and as a way of distinguishing the ‘quality’ from the everyday product.”\textsuperscript{38} They are most rewarding to their viewers due to the winking references congratulating viewers for recognizing the quality of its construction. The third part of quality, as added by John Caldwell, are the visual principles, as the industry legitimizes itself as quality programming by not only “overproducing and complicating narrative”\textsuperscript{39} but also by “overproducing and complicating high production values.”\textsuperscript{40} In a reading of Community this might lead to the question whether it is a quality show or just a parody of the paradigm. After all the genre of Comedy still does not instantly leap to mind when thinking of quality television, which might be because of the genre of Comedy generally not being seen as very qualitative, but the show certainly pushes boundaries of television style and expressivity, as well as makes use of several levels of metatextuality, as will be shown during the analysis. Including the use of other genres visual conventions, thus often adopting expensive techniques, and the inclusive group dynamics and quirky characters Community hits several of the marks of quality described above.

\textsuperscript{38} ibid, p.8
\textsuperscript{39} ibid, p.9
\textsuperscript{40} ibid, p.9
2-4 Genre and Genre Theory

Jason Mittell asks in the introduction to his book *Genre and Television* why a trivial thing such as a television series generic classification should matter, answering his own question with an argument that he states throughout the book: “Television genres matter as cultural categories.”\(^4^1\) To further define this: “[...]television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found [solely] within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts.”\(^4^2\) The categories that genres constitute are connected to particular concepts such as cultural value, social function and assumed audience. As Mittell argues, even though there are many other modes for television categorization active today, especially considering hybridization, genre is still the most common one: “Through the prevalence of generic mixture and niche segmentation, genres may be even more important today than in previous television eras.”\(^4^3\) Genre, from the French word for kind or type, is a universally accepted term for categorizing audiovisual narration to help the viewers navigate and choose based on expectations and conventions. To choose a genre is to opt for or against a certain emotional experience: expectations on a Sitcom differ from those on a Procedural. Genre lets audiences easier organize fan practices and journalistic critics take help of genres to locate programs within common framework. Thusly genre is not only an academic field of research but the norms and conventions of genres have everyday application. Classification is a fundamental aspect of the way texts of all kinds are understood. Of course genre is not only meant for viewers, the industry itself needs genre division to define brands and target audiences through scheduling. Scheduling for instance is a central mechanism for television programmers to distinguish between shows, a practice that as part of genre definition is unparalleled in other media, just as genre-specific channels.

In the basic foundation terms and genre labels can be transferred from feature films to television series. In the book *Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien* the authors Eschke and Bohne transfer the four basic functions for categorizing films into genres (as devised by Joachim Friedmann and Stefan Wilke) onto television series, a classification strategy I will also be making use of in the analysis of *Community’s* genre affiliation: the audiences emotional expectations meaning the effect on the viewer (Drama - compassion, Comedy - laughter, Horror - fear); the heroes main conflict or universal basic conflict which

\(^{4^1}\) Mittel, Jason: *Genre and Television From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.xi

\(^{4^2}\) ibid, p.xii

\(^{4^3}\) ibid, p.xiii
lead the nature of the plot (Crime show/Procedural - justice, Soap - love); the setting is location, time and milieu (Medical - hospital, Science-Fiction - space); structure and means of narration (Daily Soap - slow moving and long-term). Usually one of these will be dominant enough to characterize the genre, for instance is fear as an emotional expectation the dominant signifier of genre identification in Thriller/Horror-movies, whilst the Telenovela (Latin-American born subcategory of Soap Opera which mainly separates itself from its mother-genre by having an actual ending, commonly a wedding) will have its love story as the most significant identifier which here makes the heroes basic conflict dominant, a Science-Fiction show will more often be defined to its genre by the setting. A variety of settings can condition genre: a hospital (Grey’s Anatomy, ER, Dr. House) or spaceship (Battlestar Galactica, Stargate- and Star Trek- franchise) are as probable as suburbia (Desperate Housewives) or a metropolitan police precinct (NYPD Blue, Blue Bloods, Southland, CSI- franchise). The four categories do also connect to each other, for example is the basic conflict also tied to setting: Procedurals often demand the hero to be a self-sacrificing crime fighter, the Medical Drama stages the genius doctors ethical dilemmas, the relationship-Drama demands a hero or even rather heroine that never gives up in the search for true love or does everything possible to keep the family together. The combination generates an emotional expectation in the viewer, the show’s title shall preferably already give indication for these expectations, by using for example medical terms (Scrubs, Anatomy, Dr.) or well known crime fighting institutions acronyms (CSI, PD) - the viewer thus can easily pick after his own preferations regarding setting and thusly the basic conflict. Similarly are the expectations altered in regard to the time of the day during which the show is aired: an early afternoon show titled General Hospital (1963-) indicates a Medical Drama but will in its structure vary drastically from the prime time Medical Drama aired the same evening, the first one being closer to a Soap Opera. These indicators guide the viewer to actively pick the formats and contents that are of interest.

But it is not always this simple to identify a genre, hybridizations are more common and conventions are questioned. Generic sections are open to debate and interpretation, genre does not always fit into neat and tidy categories. This makes even genre theory variable to a degree and not fixed to certain laws. Especially considering that “Genre definitions are no more natural than the texts that they seem to categorize.” This is simply illustrated by a look at the history of genre: the first distinctions of genres were made in the field of

44 Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p.91-92
45 Mittel, Jason: Genre and Television From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.1
theater by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in 335 BC and consist solely of comedy, tragedy and ballad. He started a long tradition of genre study. With the constant evolution of genres and their interchangeability even the academic study of genres demanded different points of departure. A modern example in film studies is Jane Feuers attempt to create a more complex form of genre interpretation consisting of three different critical levels on which the research/study should be conducted:

**The Aesthetic Approach** ‘includes all attempts to define genre of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression, especially involving individual authorship. The aesthetic approach also includes attempts to assess whether an individual work fulfills or transcends its genre.’

**The Ritual Approach** ‘sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which culture speaks for itself’. This involves conceiving ‘television as a “cultural form” that involves the negotiation of shared beliefs and values and helps to maintain and rejuvenate the social order as well as assisting it in adapting to change.’

**The Ideological Approach** ‘views genre as an instrument of control. At the industrial level, genres assure the advertisers of an audience for their messages. At the textual level, genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology of a capitalist system. The genre positions the interpretive community in such a way as to naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text’

The study of genre is not an exact science; constant change, hybridization and the creators questioning of conventions open up a permanent challenge of genre labeling. But no less is genre theory an excellent tool for our understanding of television series. “Genre, then, is not simply important as a way of classifying different modes of artistic expression, but explaining how these different modes of expression can actually create meaning for an audience.” Genre labels communicate expectations. Of course there is also much criticism against genre (labeling) and the notion of putting works of literature, film or any other kind of art in a canonic body since the chosen works are often not actually the very best, also generic terms are often imposed retrospectively, for example had the term “Science-Fiction” not yet been invented in 1902 but the film *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902) is still considered under it, and this “can do violence to our sense of history” due to the fact that this takes the text out of its historical context and imposes a new understanding onto it that might not correlate with the original one. As earlier pointed out, genres and their definitions change and develop over time, with that our understanding of certain texts might change according to the historic period in which the recipient lives, but this does not necessarily mean that only the first, original meaning is more true or

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47 ibid, p.2
48 ibid, p.3
49 ibid, p.1
authentic than any other. A classical example is the Film Noir, the genres meaning itself has changed during different periods in time and it is often discussed whether Film Noir is a genre at all.\textsuperscript{51} But of course the definition of what a genre might incorporate HAS to change over the years, as more and more texts get added and more and more works need to be labeled. With greater mass comes greater variety and a need for redefinition to incorporate those varieties. Certain genres however are historically and culturally dependent, for instance can a Western not exist before 1800 (both in regard to the stories setting and to when the story was written) whilst the Procedural is dependent on the establishing of the modern procedures in crime investigation based on rational argumentation and compilation of evidence into proof.\textsuperscript{52}

Another point of critique is the different content of the same named genre in different media, the term might be named the same but it does not necessarily house the same meaning.\textsuperscript{53} Which might get complicated by the fact that memory plays a vital part in our understanding of genre, both because of the base of understanding what a genre consists of is knowing representative texts within this genre but those might have changed over time, and because of what is learned and memorized for a genre in one medium might not apply to another medium. Memory is the most important part of understanding genre, as Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich write in their introduction to \textit{The Shifting Definitions of Genre}:

\begin{quote}
Generic definitions are bound up with memory in different ways. On one hand, generic definitions are related to the processes of remembering and forgetting and, on the other hand, they also operate to produce a sense of the past. If different generations continually revise the films and television shows that are included or excluded from specific genres, it is also the case that the very notion of genre works to establish relationships above and between different forms of visual media, and so creates senses of lineage and development.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

So the development and change within genre categories and the overall definition of what genres constitute is bound to an interlaced play of remembering and forgetting, which is both the most vital part of genre and the most critiqued one.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Hickethier, Knut: \textit{Film- und Fernsehanalyse} (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.204
\item[54] ibid, p.12
\end{footnotes}
2-4-1 Television Comedy and Sitcom

The classical Sitcom is as a genre still deeply rooted in its theatrical origins. The roots in theater and vaudeville are most obvious in stand-up comedy, the restricted camera movements of the three-camera setup and live audience or laugh track. But that is not all there is to television Comedy. The genre has moved away from its origin towards a more mature stage where it dares to make use of a more cinematic visual storytelling and hybridization, taking itself and its audience more seriously. The realization for primetime of the serial forms power to provide a strong impetus for viewer loyalty made the serial narrative a mark of quality that also spilled over into Sitcom, disregarding the genres more episodic form, story-arcs were develop spanning the whole series, such as whether Ross and Rachel would end up together on Friends. But the reliance on longer or more connected stories can challenge the fact that, in comparison to genres like Drama, “the Sitcom performs much better in syndicated rerun, in part because it does not depend so heavily on the viewer having seen previous episodes.”

Not only is Sitcom the dominant form in American primetime television for over 50 years providing a huge amount of texts, but also is the range of the field enormous and connects to a vast array of variations within the forms it fills and the most popular genre to use for hybridization. Paired with the academic neglect that the genre has suffered, this makes Comedy one of the hardest genres to define concisely. “The idea of comedy as something that ‘makes one laugh’ is not only reductive but not necessarily true. The term comedy, even in the stricter sense of television series, shelters a number of texts very different in nature.” For all the different kinds of Comedy there are and all the partial definitions; from humour theory over Hobbes’ superiority theory applied on aggressive jokes and Bergson’s mechanization theory for farce all the way to Freud’s sexual theory for dirty jokes; a complete and satisfying definition has yet to be developed.

In Film Comedy Geoff King offers a couple of basic explanations to what comedy might be, as for instance:

A comedy might initially be defined as a work that is designed in some way to provoke laughter or humour on the part of the viewer. This is the dominant definition in contemporary usage [...]. Comedy, in this respect, has something in common with forms such as horror and the ‘weepie’: defined to a significant extent according to the emotional reaction it is intended to provoke.

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56 King, Geoff: Film Comedy (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.18
60 ibid, p.2
This is however not an exhaustive definition because it demands the definition to be understood solely from the point of view of consumption. What is intended might not happen and the other way around. King further states that “to be clearly defined as a comedy, a film should be dominated to a substantial extent by the comic dimension […] but the exact balance varies considerably from one example to another.”

King suggests that comedy in film might be best understood as less of a genre and more of a mode, which leads to that “any genre might be treated as a subject for comedy. A variety of possibilities exist. A western might include some comedy without altering its primary definition as a western.” As another way to explore the relationship between mode and genre King also introduces the use of the term comedy as either adjective or a noun, which he exemplifies by making the distinction between a Comedy in a western milieu and a comic Western. But since this does not lead him to a concise solution, King circles back to the basics: when we think of comedy, we think of something that is funny or makes us laugh. But it is not always agreeable what is comic, and to describe film, or a television series, as just comic leads to the realization that things are never just comic, but only “in particular ways and for particular reasons.” Which concludes to comedy playing “upon a variety of elements to achieve its effects. It can only be understood in relation to a number of specific contexts, including many of our basic expectations and assumptions about the world around us.”

Whilst historically the happy ending has been one of the criteria used to define Comedy, it does not really apply to television since the “ending” is hard to place in a serialized potentially endless form (see open dramaturgy in chapter “2-3 Television studies and television series”). Also it does not always apply to films and has thus been placed more as an effect than as criteria. King says that the closest his book comes to a definition is that comedy tends to involve departures of a particular kind – or particular kinds – from what are considered to be the ‘normal’ routines of life of the social group in question. In order to be marked out as comic, the events represented – or the mode of representation – tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world. Comedy often lies in the gap between the two, which can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration. […] Comedy can result from a sense of things being out of place, mixed up or not quite right, in various ways. One set of examples is found in films that derive much of their comedy from temporal, geographical or other forms of displacement.

What then, if we instead look at the subgenre Sitcom? Brett Mills explains in *Television Sitcom* that “a standard definition of sitcom [is] concentrating on the recurring set-up and

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62 ibid, p.2
63 ibid, p.4
64 ibid, p.4
65 ibid, p.5
characters, the happy ending and the fact that individual episodes rarely refer to events in previous ones.\textsuperscript{66} He also points out the great flaws in the many simplified definitions such as the ignoring of the content in looking at nothing but the structure, a structure that could very well occur in almost any serial narrative. Mills adds that genre definition is always somewhat personal considering previous knowledge and where to draw the line of when a work no longer is part of that genre, but “there are a number of core characteristics which would be agreed to by most people”\textsuperscript{67} and those are what make genre meaningful. The Sitcom has quite many of those, in fact it is the genre with the most agreed upon characteristics ranging from the laugh track and three-camera setup to casting choices and program lengths. Basically, the classical Sitcom will be a half hour long (20-30 minutes), employ stereotypical characters who lack the ability to change themselves or their circumstances despite constantly trying and thus repeating the same or similar actions in a comic fashion, the comic will be aided by a laugh track which also forces the actors to take pauses between their lines to leave room for the live-audiences or the canned laughter thus the performance differs clearly from other genres, the theatric effect of the laugh track will be enhanced by the placement of the camera as a forth wall which also somewhat hinders the mobility of the picture, since three cameras are employed none of them can move to far or it would reveal the others, the picture will consist mostly of close-ups and entrances are very obvious placed within the rooms hierarchy, in fact there is no other genre that employs hierarchy within the settings this strongly. However, as everything evolves and changes, so too does the Sitcom. Most recent changes have been made through such programs as the British show \textit{The Office} (2001-2002) and its American adaptation (2005-) a workplace-Sitcom without the laugh track and filmed as if it were a Documentary, thus completely disregarding the most prominent characteristics of the genre. The matter of how a series can still be perceived and defined as Sitcom even though it does not conform to the above mentioned criteria will be the subject of my thesis.

One last remark shall be made on the difference between simply comedy and Sitcom. As mentioned before, comedy can be seen simply as “a mode drafted onto something else, and its funniness is limited by the requirements of the dominant genre.”\textsuperscript{68} The comic moments cannot undermine the coherence of, for example, the Drama. This is possible since humour exists both within and outside the medium. Comedy as a genre “suggests material whose primary purpose is one of funniness, usually created by specific people

\textsuperscript{67} ibid, p.26
\textsuperscript{68} ibid, p. 18
with that aim, and understood as so by audiences."⁶⁹ The Sitcom has a deliberate production process that needs to be understood as comic by the audience, the “nature of the genre, and the successful cueing of genre expectations, is vital for successful comedic communication."⁷⁰ So whilst comedy not necessarily is a clear cut genre, Sitcom most definitely is. The simplest definition of the genre Sitcom is visible when picking apart the term: Situation Comedy - a situation is a position, locale or a state of affairs, the latter can be seen as a metaphoric extension of the first,⁷¹ a story about this situation told with nothing but comic intent is a Sitcom. To highlight the difference between comedy as a mode and Comedy as a genre I will in this essay indicate the genre through use of a capital first letter, for reasons of continuity I will highlight every genre in this fashion, such as Action and Western.

⁷⁰ ibid, p.17
3 The Show: *Community*

In the following chapter I will provide a background on the television show *Community* ranging from its content and production facts to reception.

3-1 Series Content – the Story

*Community* centers on a group of Community College study-buddies, involuntarily brought together and headed by the disbarred lawyer Jeff Winger (Joel McHale) who is forced back to college to validate his law degree. The show takes place on the campus of Greendale Community College, a school with outspoken low standards, where the group will eventually learn more about themselves than about their classes. The study group of loveable misfits around Jeff consists of the high strung former drug addict Annie (Allison Brie), naive and clumsy environmentalist Britta (Gillian Jacobs), mother and newly divorced cupcake-guru Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown), the elderly racist and rich Pierce (Chevy Chase), former high school athlete and prom king Troy (Donald Glover) and the socially challenged pop-culture-savant Abed (Danny Pudi). A group as diverse in race, religion, age and background as possible. They are surrounded by a selection of odd characters with promising names, such as Star-burns, Magnitude, Dean Pelton (Jim Rash) and Spanish professor senior Chang aka El Tigre (Ken Jeong).

3-2 Series Facts

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<td>Channel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>Dan Harmon</td>
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3-3 Reception

The show has received praise from national television critics and has won two awards, including an Emmy 2011 for outstanding achievement in animation for the clay-animation episode 2.11 “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” and gotten 16 nominations.\(^2\) The first season scored 69/100 on Metacritic.\(^3\) It topped of several critics best of list such as Emily Nussbaum of New York Magazine\(^4\) and Alan Sepinwall of HitFix.\(^5\) It frequently wins fan

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\(^{2}\) IMDB: *Community – Awards*: The Internet Movie Database; http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1439629/awards; 2012-03-19
\(^{3}\) Metacritic: *Community: Season 1*: Metacritic; http://www.metacritic.com/tv/community/season-1; 2012-05-22
\(^{4}\) Nussbaum, Emily: *The Year in TV*; Published December 5\(^{th}\) 2010; New York Magazine; http://nymag.com/arts/cultureawards/2010/69901/; 2012-05-22
voted contests such as TV Guides favorite Comedy and favorite ensemble\textsuperscript{76} as well as Hulu “Best in show”\textsuperscript{77} and E!onlines “Save one show”\textsuperscript{78}. Still, viewer reception is split: On one side are the low Nielsen ratings (I’d like to add that I find the Nielsen-ratings system horribly outdated, considering how it only measures selected viewers and leaves out all online streaming services) which first booted the show of the NBC midseason spring 2012 schedule, and then there is the devoted fan cult that organized through social media such as Twitter formed the great protest that led to the regaining of a timeslot. The March 15\textsuperscript{th} 2012 return of the show came with a surprise: it rated number one amongst adults 18-34 and men 18-34, the most desired categories, beating during its half-hour even the whale of ratings \textit{American Idol}. With a 4.9 million total viewers it also increased its audience by 36-47 percent in comparison to past seasons, boosting the episode to the highest rating for a non-sports time slot in 14 month on NBC.\textsuperscript{79} Unfortunately the numbers could not be kept up throughout the season.

Part of reception is also the genre as which a show is presented. Whilst NBC on its homepage simply calls \textit{Community} a comedy series\textsuperscript{80} and the streaming service HULU follows this definition\textsuperscript{81} (whilst 120 [2012-05-01] viewers added the tag Sitcom), IMDB lists it firstly under Comedy but has added the keyword tag Sitcom\textsuperscript{82}. The consensus between television critics seems clear, for example is the clear definition Sitcom used in the headline both in articles in the Huffington Post\textsuperscript{83}, the Guardian\textsuperscript{84} and Rolling Stone\textsuperscript{85}.

\textsuperscript{78} Bricker, Tierney: Save One Show: We Have a Winner!; Published April 30\textsuperscript{th} 2012; E!Online; http://uk.onlin.com/news/watch_with_kristin/save_one_show_we_have_winner/312677; 2012-05-03
\textsuperscript{79} Mitovich, Matt Webb: Ratings: Community Pop, Pop’s With Awaited Return, Awake Gains Viewers; Published March 16\textsuperscript{th} 2012; TV Line; http://www.tvline.com/2012/03/ratings-missing-premiere-community/ 2012-03-19
\textsuperscript{80} NBC: Community (about.); official homepage; http://www.nbc.com/community/about/ 2012-05-02
\textsuperscript{81} HULU: TV Community; HULU Streaming-Service; http://www.hulu.com/community; 20012-05-02
\textsuperscript{82} IMDB: Community; The Internet Movie Database; http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1439629/keywords 2012-05-02
\textsuperscript{83} Ryan, Maureen: ‘Community’ Review: NBC Sitcom Returns, As Demented And Lovable As Ever; Published March 14\textsuperscript{th} 2012; The Huffington Post; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-ryan/community-review_b_1346018.html; 2012-05-02
\textsuperscript{84} Beanland, Chris: Community: the classy sitcom you must catch; Published April 10\textsuperscript{th} 2012; The Guardian; http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/apr/10/community-sitcom-classy; 2012-05-20
\textsuperscript{85} Sheffield, Rob: ‘Community,’ The Most Hilariously Ambitious Sitcom on TV; Published January 20\textsuperscript{th} 2011; Rolling Stone; http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/exile-in-losserville-20110120; 2012-05-02
4 Analysis

Before I start the analysis I want to revisit the questions I pose.

The main aim is to look at Community as Sitcom: to examine Community to find out whether it can be defined as Sitcom and by looking at the way genres that are not considered to be comic are incorporated in the show determine if those genres still are identifiable and whether or not they compromise the shows possible label as Sitcom.

I’d also like to shortly revisit the three main methods I am using in the analysis. To simplify identification of genres I am looking at the four basic functions for categorizing films into genres as devised by Joachim Friedmann and Stefan Wilke: 1) the audiences emotional expectations; 2) the heroes main conflict or the structure of the plot meaning the protagonists goals and obstacles from which the nature of the plot is derived; 3) the setting meaning location, time and milieu; 4) structure and means of narration. From neoformalism I take the basic definitions for plot, story etc., but also the idea of certain devices creating certain functions

A device can be any of a set of historical strategies available to a media maker: choices about camera setups, character qualities, dialogue, editing, and so on. Function is the desired effect on the audience member, an attempt to attain certain narrative (crucial story information), emotional (how we should feel about the story), or aesthetic goals.

The different functions that devices serve in a text are not independent, but are combined in the artwork to form a distinctive system, specific to the world that the artwork has created and lets that world function under certain principles. In regard to Community, I will look at the introduction of setting, story and characters and on the other side how devices work as genre indicators connecting with the above mentioned categories. The actantial model I take from structural semiotics, to simpler clarify motives, themes and connections between characters and thusly their role in the group:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SENDER} & \rightarrow \text{OBJECT} \rightarrow \text{RECEPIANT} \\
\text{HELPER} & \rightarrow \text{SUBJECT} \rightarrow \text{OPPONENT}
\end{align*}
\]

It expresses the story as a subject that has a project to obtain an object, meets conflict, but has associates/helpers and opponents.

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86 Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p.91
4-1 Community’s Components

In this chapter I will sketch up a very short account of the components of the series Community, already partially taking Sitcom conventions into mind.

4-1-1 The Visual Component

The camera in Community is very agile, with a broad range of shots, angles and camera movements. Due to the environment in which the stories take place and the fact that contrary to Sitcom, which is usually confined to narrow spaces, Community often features outdoor scenes, shots range from close-ups and shoulder shots mainly when the characters gather around the study room table, to three-quarter and medium shots during motion scenes in the hallways and outside, as well long shots mainly outside. However, most outside shots are in season one, due to budgeting issues the outdoor sequences are more sporadic in other seasons. The camera, contrary to the dialog, takes its time taking in the reactions and spaces whilst the dialog often comes like rapid fire. The fast dialogue is also uncommon in Sitcom where it is conventional to take pauses to fit in the canned or live-audience laughter. Of course there are changes in the visual representation in the genre-themed episodes, such as for example a greyer filter over the picture and a shakier frame in the documentary-themed episode 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”.

4-1-2 Paratextual Elements (Opening Theme, Episode Titles)

Firstly, there is the opening theme: At Least it was here by The 88. The heard lyrics are: “Give me some more/ Time in a dream/ Give me the hope to run out of steam/ Somebody said it can be here/ We could be roped up, tied up, dead in a year/ I can’t count the reasons I should stay/ One by one they all just fade away.” The text might be aimed at indicating that the characters need to let go of past status and learn to enjoy the now before it is too late, to learn to make the best of their situation. The drum rhythm of the song starts simultaneously with the visual of the opening. The credits of the main cast are incorporated into the animation of a paper toy, revealing a new name for every time a side opens. The writing is in blue ball pen ink and the names are accompanied by small pictures drawn in the same way. These are the same for every episode, except some themed ones as for example in the Halloween episodes where the pictures display the appropriate décor of ghost and pumpkins etc., another exception is found in episode 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs” where the whole opening credits sequence is changed into one fitting the Western and Paintball theme of the episode with shadow versions of the characters and paint splashes. The toy moves about on what is presumably a wooden
school table ending with the paper unfolding completely and revealing the title *Community*. The camera zooms out as the paper folds back together into a triangle now showing the words “created by” revealing the background to be the wooden table with some pencils, a cup of coffee and glasses on it as well as the name Dan Harmon carved into the wood. The visual component of the opening credits sequence indicates the setting by using items usually found in a school. After the opening theme, more of the show’s credits are shown for about 45 seconds at the bottom right corner of the screen in white bold print.

It is not customary for Sitcom series to display the episode titles as part of the opening sequence, *Community* follows this and so the titles become part of a broader paratext. The information can instead be found in television guides and on websites dedicated to the show, as well as on the DVD, not on the episodes itself either, but in the included leaflet and in the menu. The exception is 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, where the title is presented as part of the opening credits. The episodes are titled as if they were different college classes somehow tying into the theme of the episode, except for the first one which is as customary called “Pilot”. The second episode for example is called “Spanish 101” and features mainly a Spanish class, whilst 2.08 “Cooperative Calligraphy” is not a class about penmanship but rather about how chaos and mistrust rage in the group due to an assumed stolen pen. Thus the titles always have a degree of literacy, sometimes referencing actual classes and sometimes referencing the main plot, but with few exceptions (“Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas”, “A Fistful of Paintballs”, “For a few Paintballs more”) the episode titles refer to both the plot of the episode and a type of college course, sometimes the episode number is added in the title (Season 1, episode 9: “Debate 109”).

4-1-3 Characters (Main and Secondary)

In *Community* the main characters are the ones that constitute the study group, later in the series they will also be referenced as the Greendale seven. The hub of the group is self-centered disbarred lawyer Jeff (Joel McHale), he occupies the head side of the table near the entrance to the study room very much like a patriarch. Following the seating order of the study room table, to his right side sits Britta (Gillian Jacobs), the clumsy activist for a better world. She is also the reason Jeff started the study group, although he never planned for the group to be more than him and Britta getting drinks. The reason for the fast growth of the group sits to Britta’s right side, Abed (Danny Pudi), the media savant but socially challenged half Palestinian, got invited to the group by a cautious Britta and kept on inviting more students from Spanish class. Abed is by his father only allowed to attend
classes that will help him run the family falafel restaurant one day, although his dream is to make movies. Next to him, opposite to Jeff, sits Troy (Donald Glover), high school jock and prom king who got injured in a keg flip and lost his scholarship. He will soon become Abed’s best friend, both have the ability to play like children. To Troy’s right is Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase) seated, heir to the Hawthorne moist towelettes concern he believes himself to be a popular philanthropist, whilst he actually only is a racist, homophobic and lonely old man. Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown), sits next to Pierce, opposite to Abed, making the racist Pierce completely surrounded by afro-Americans to offend. She is a mother of two and newly divorced, still dealing with the repercussions the devoted Christian woman has a whole lot of bottled up rage. She attempts to build her own cupcake business by taking business classes at Greendale. Closing the circle, Annie (Allison Brie) occupies the chair between Shirley and Jeff; she is very proper and actually very pretentious but got unfortunately hooked on drugs during high school which she started taking to keep up with her high pace of studying. She now has to cope with being at the worst school she could imagine and also somehow find a way to make friends so that she won’t relive the unpleasant loneliness she experienced in high school. Annie starts out having a crush on Troy, whom she had been infatuated with already in high school, but is more and more drawn towards Jeff, who soon will be continuously wrestling with his affectionate feelings for the much younger Annie.

Secondary characters are the ones populating the campus besides the main cast, the Community College environment requires to be populated by different orders of secondary characters to give life and credibility to the setting. They range “from those played by the so called B-cast (actors whose presence in episodes is not continuous but who often play key roles and whose characters can evolve in ways similar to those played by the main cast), to those nonspeaking extras, to the one-time characters.”89 Despite their name one-time characters may appear in more than one episode, but their overall plot is limited. The extras occasionally evolve and get their own storyline despite their ridiculous nicknames that are based on their outer appearance, such as Star-burns and Fat Neil. “Occasional characters are those with speaking roles who do not appear unless the story specifically requires it, and who are often played by more or less well-known or emerging actors.”90 In Community such characters include Jeff’s love interest besides Britta in season one, his statistics teacher Professor Michelle Slater (Lauren Stamille), Britta’s and later Annie’s

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90 ibid, p. 46
hippie boyfriend Vaughn (Eric Christian Olsen), the second season anthropology teacher played by Betty White, and Jack Black who tries out for a membership in the study group. “The B-cast characters constitute a separate category in that they are always ready to use in interactions with the main characters as their backup, or as setups or payoffs for jokes. In some cases, they may have their own secondary story lines, which cross and enrich the primary ones.” Here Community has mainly Dean Craig Pelton (Jim Rash) coming into the study room to announce random things in mostly female outfits, he also has a crush on Jeff which he shows by continuously touching Jeff for no obvious reason, his greatest wish is to be a good Dean and make the best possible school out of Greendale. Jeff’s friend the psychology Professor Duncan (John Oliver) with a drinking problem also fits into the category, reappearing as a teacher and having a constant fight over status with Senior Chang (Ken Jeong). Chang starts out as the creepy Spanish teacher but when it is revealed at the end of season one that he lacks a Spanish-degree he becomes a student. He often tries to bond with Jeff and become part of the group. Both Chang and the Dean have the habit of using their name/occupation as substitutes for similar and sometimes completely different words.

4-1-4 Time and Space

Community plays out in a naturalistic universe like ours and whilst it largely takes place on the campus of the fictive Greendale Community College it is never mentioned where exactly in the U.S. this college is located. The space hierarchy in Community is quite simple, the study room and its table stays continuously at the top, which is even the theme of episode 3.01 “Biology 101” when first Pierce and later Jeff lose their place at it and Jeff goes completely crazy. The study room and its table symbolize the central hub that in other Sitcoms is represented by a sofa (Friends, Married with Children, According to Jim) or a bar (Cheers). The difference is that in Community the characters sit around the table and not just on one side of it, thus it lacks somewhat of the classical Sitcoms buildup of action hierarchies within the room where the story takes place in the immovable foreground whilst secondary characters populate the movable background behind the sofa where all entrances are located.

The second place I would give to the cafeteria where many parties and other activities take place. When the group is not in the study room, they surely meet to eat together here. The parking lot and the quad are somewhat similar, as many contests and even some

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classes (boating in episode 1.19 “Beginner Pottery”) are played out there. The classrooms barely repeat themselves, but in season one the classroom that is used repeatedly is the Spanish room, the equivalent of which will become the anthropology room in season two and the biology room in season three albeit none of them are used as frequently as in season one. The hallways and outside of the school buildings are frequently featured as the group travels between classes and to the study room. The study room is surrounded by the library, which lets the library become a bit like the hallways since it is mainly used to travel through. Season one is restricted to the campus and so the only home environment where the characters interact is Abed’s on campus room. In season two however Jeff’s small apartment gets added where he often interacts with Duncan and Chang. Annie is revealed to be living in a bad neighborhood. Pierce lets Troy live with him but their house is only shown once in the first episode of season two. In season three Troy and Abed move in together and later Annie joins them, their apartment becomes the second study room albeit with a round table. The housing situation is actually also a great part of the characters development, not only the dynamic between Abed, Troy and Annie, but in the first season Jeff’s fall from his former social status is completed when he is evicted from his beloved apartment. Jeff has a hard time adapting to his lowered economic situation. He stays with Abed for an episode (1.08 “Home Economics”), who enjoys Jeff’s company and watching television with him all day but has to admit that it is bad for Jeff seeing how he loses himself and gives up everything that was important to him. Thanks to Britta Jeff manages to come to terms with his new small and cheap apartment.

A typical move in Sitcom is to let time progress very similar to the viewers, so that holidays sync up between reality and the show’s world. One season of Community covers a year, two semesters. They celebrate holidays like Halloween and Christmas, as well as reference spring and summer break. The classes are barely shown, not every episode features the group actually going to class or even studying. The summers are never portrayed, instead they are between the seasons and the viewers get filled in about summer activities as the characters tell each other about them. The viewer realizes that there have to be more discrepancies when Jeff and Britta try defending the past semester as not as dark as everybody says by reminding everyone of amongst other events the time that they filled in for the Glee-club, something that never actually was shown.92

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92 Community: 2.21 “Paradigms of Human Memory”; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC April 21st 2011; 02:54-03:37
4-2 Community and Sitcom: Looking at the Pilot

In this chapter I will analyze the pilot episode to clarify the shows overall themes, present the different characters with their motivations and connections (the group dynamics) and above all try to find the shows place in the genre Sitcom.

The episode starts out with establishing the setting of the show: Greendale Community College campus, and for the whole first season we will never leave this campus. We see the square between the school buildings, students walk through the frame as the camera pulls back to stop at a boom box on which a man tries to change away from the music. He is revealed to be standing on a stage and trying to hold a welcome speech from which the malfunctioning stereo is hindering him. The man introduces himself as the Dean (Dean Craig Pelton played by Jim Rash, known for starring in comedies such as That ’70s Show, Help me help you, and Thanks, recently most famous for receiving an academy award for best adapted screenplay 2012 The Descendants and for his parody of Angelina Jolie’s pose during his acceptance speech) welcoming “us” to Greendale Community College. Besides introducing himself and the campus, the Deans speech also introduces that it is the beginning of the semester. Letting us watch the welcome speech is a way to let the viewers feel as if they too are new students at this school. His short speech is very revealing, and a good introduction of the whole show that holds up very well throughout the series:

Good morning! Many of you are halfway through your first week here at Greendale and as your Dean I thought I would share a few thoughts of wisdom and inspiration. What is Community College? Well, you’ve heard all kinds of things. You’ve heard its loser college, for remedial teens, 20-something drop-outs, middle aged divorcees and old people keeping their minds active as they circle the drain of eternity. That’s what you’ve heard, however, I wish you luck! Okay, you know, uh-oh, there is more to this speech, there is actually a middle part that is missing. Can we all look around our immediate areas, I really wanted to…”

During his speech the camera emphasizes his words and gives a first introduction to a bunch of characters that we are going to follow. It also adequately introduces the world of Community, meaning not only its setting but the mood of the show and a first glimpse of its mythology. The malfunctioning sound system and the lost part of the speech are a first indication of the bad administration and facilities and that the school might not be a very good one. In fact, the low standards of the school, and the Deans failing attempts to change that, are going to be constantly emphasized during the show. The first episode alone states them three times verbally through Jeff (the main character, played by Joel McHale known for hosting the comedic clip-show The Soup) states that if he would have

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93 Community: 1.01 “Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 00:27-01:14
wanted “to learn something [he] wouldn’t have come to Community College,”94 he calls Greendale a “school shaped toilet”95 and wonders “why are people trying to teach me something at a school that has an express tuition isle?!"96 as well as visually through for example a student peeing against the wall outside of Professor Duncan’s office.97 This parody, this making fun of the American Community Colleges as not having a good standard of education or of their facilities, basically being a collection pool for random misfits, is a running gag throughout the series. Making fun of the quality of the surroundigs without consequences is something that usually only can be done in a Comedy.

The people shown during the Deans speech, such as Chevy Chase as Pierce Hawthorne, are a sign of what kind of show this is, making casting a first indication of genre. Chevy Chase is in the beginning the most famous comedian in the show, part of the National Lampoon gang he is know for a myriad of comedy films and as first host of Saturday Night Live he once set the hip, self-assured and ironic tone for the influential long-running television show.98 Thus he indicates with his mere presence the genre of the show to be Comedy. Besides Chase, in the first four minutes, before the title credit sequence, we also see other actors known for comedic roles: Yvette Nicole Brown has starred in television Sitcoms like The Big House and Drake & Josh, Donald Glover is a Stand-up comedian and was the only black writer for NBCs 30 Rock, as well as upper mentioned Joel McHale from The Soup where his hosting persona is actually quite alike his role Jeff. Also introduced is Britta, played by Gillian Jacobs who was to point more known for her on stage work in New York theaters and Danny Pudi as Abed an improv-comedian mostly known for his commercials. The last member of the study group, Annie played by Allison Brie who is best known for her role on the Drama series Mad Men, will not be introduced until the latter half of the episode when everybody is gathered around the study room table. Casting generates strong expectations with viewers, generally most viewers know for example that Chevy Chase is a comedian, thus they will expect the same kind of jokes from him as usually, which will be fulfilled in the childish jokes he and Troy share. Thus the introductory sequence is a first setup for these expectations.

In Television and Screen Writing Richard Blum states that in the act structure of half hour Sitcom the first part, the teaser, is 30-60 seconds long, which is in its content

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94 Community: 1.01 "Pilot", Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 03:46-03:49
95 ibid; 19:58
96 ibid; 20:55-21:08
97 ibid; 03:12
comparable to the introductory sequences in the 3-act-structure of feature films; here setting, characters and main conflict are revealed as well as the mood is introduced. *Community* does not exactly follow his proposed structure, creating a separation from classic Sitcom. The structure of *Community* takes with few exceptions about 3 minutes of introduction and thereafter runs the title credit sequence, during those 3 minutes the main plot and all subplots for the episode are introduced (with few exceptions where only one plot level or the mood is presented). Whilst the structure Blum proposes then continues with act one and two, both 10-12 minutes, and then ends with a tag or wraparound that “closes out the action in less than one minute,”*99* *Community*-creator Dan Harmon explains in the article *How Dan Harmon drives himself crazy making Community* *100* that his storytelling technique is based on circles that he calls “embryos”, this circular concept is divided into 8 steps:

![Image 1](image1.png)

1. A character is in a zone of comfort
2. But they want something
3. They enter an unfamiliar situation
4. Adapt to it
5. Get what they wanted
6. Pay a heavy price for it
7. Then return to their familiar situation
8. Having changed

It is this last point “8. Having changed” that is a note on what sets apart *Community* from other Sitcoms. In *I love Lucy* and the other marriage-Sitcoms of that time, there is no change, meaning that at the end of every episode status quo is restored. In the archetypal Sitcoms “[…] there is no new order at the end of the episode.”*102* For this is *I love Lucy* the best example after all it is the show that formed television Situation Comedy for many years: the character Lucy lacks any progress towards real change in her situation. This is still visible in present-day marriage-Sitcoms such as *According to Jim* (2001-2009), here

*100* Raftery, Brian: *How Dan Harmon Drives Himself Crazy Making Community*; Published September 22nd 2011; Wired Magazine; http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/09/mf_harmon/all/1; 2012-05-13
*101* ibid
the husband acts in every episode in a way that hurts his family but his wife still forgives him in the end. Behavior, errors and the response to them are constantly repeated. But this is not unique to the marriage-Sitcom, it is a concept that has stuck quite long, as for example evident in Seinfeld, Two and a half Men and Friends where characters end up “frustrated, unenlightened, unreformed, and quite likely to return soon to the same misguided behavior.”

Whilst Michael V. Tueth also argues that “The basic plot of the television situation comedy is a circle rather than a line,” his understanding of this circle implicates the repetition of the same action with the same results, in Harmon’s model the “having changed” can become a new “zone of comfort”. As in this first episode of Community exemplified, Jeff’s place of comfort is in the beginning only about looking out for himself and concludes the episode with the realization of him not having all the answers, both figuratively and literally, and being dependent on the support of others for success, thus having changed to accepting the presence of others in his life. The circular model of narration has basically the same setup as the general narration system proposed by narratologist Tzvetan Todorov, where every story represents part of or a complete motion from one equilibrium (state of balance) via a disequilibrium (state of lack of balance) to equilibrium. Here too can the story either return to the same state as it was in at the beginning or find a new state of balance. So whilst every episode can be a free story, it does not necessarily require a closed dramaturgy, a difference that has longer been realized in the television drama. The difference between film and television here is that storyarcs have to be carried longer, through more actions and events, throughout the season/show, not only through the closed unit of an episode. Comedy, especially Sitcom, is still a bit behind in this matter, often holding on to this failsafe that always lets the characters return to their point of origin: “Community has no ‘reset’ button like Two and Half Men or The Office, where nothing really affects status quo because it’s forgotten about by the time the next week rolls around.”

Very specific for Community is that it carries developments and details from one episode to another. Often in Sitcom bonds that were forged in one episode are forgotten in the next, still clinging on to an older form of serial narration that is simply bound together by its constant characters and environment but lacking a development and progress in the characters and thus tending to be less

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104 ibid, p.61
realistic but more open for a reboot. Carrying over details between episodes gives fans insight and reward, they can notice what the occasional viewer cannot and thus can feel closer to their fictional friends “– you might think that the attention to continuity isn’t even necessary, but it stealthily helps strengthen the reality of the show, which in turn is why people love it so much.”  

As previously mentioned, the introductory teaser in Community is generally about 3 minutes long, in the “Pilot”-episode it is almost 4 minutes (0:00-3:53). Most of the characters get a brief introduction through a cliché during the Deans speech (Britta as 20-something drop-out, Shirley as a middle-aged divorcée, Pierce as an old person keeping his mind active – of course we won’t learn their names until later). In the next scene we meet Abed who talks fast and overshares on his personal origins. He is also a great source for information as Jeff instantly figures out when questioning him about “the hot girl from Spanish class” whom Abed identifies as Britta and for whom he can deliver a bio as impressive as his own even though he states that he only talked to her once. The fact that we follow Jeff into the next scene directly points to him as the main character, he ties together all scenes. The conversation that now is stricken up between Professor Duncan (John Oliver) and Jeff (now introduced through Professor Duncan as “Jeff Winger – genius at law,” thus giving us the first actual introduction of the main character with name and occupation) gives the answers to the main questions the viewers want to pose in the beginning of every story. The setting is introduced, the main characters have gotten their first brief introduction and now Jeff, the protagonist, gets introduced thoroughly, and through him the story since this show has a character-driven premise: who is he, why is he there, what does he want and how does he attempt to achieve this. It becomes clear that Jeff is only at Greendale because he thinks it is the easiest place to get a college degree which he needs after his license was suspended due to him having forged his law degree, what he wants now is for Duncan to give him “every answer to every test for every class I’m taking.” Closing the introductory teaser and entering the title credit sequence, the conflict of the show seems now to be about Jeff getting his degree whilst chasing the hot blonde. This will however during the episode prove to be a somewhat wrong assessment that deems the premise too simplistic and the character too flat. It is a premature dismissal

108 Community: 1.01 “Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 01:39  
109 ibid; 02:15  
110 ibid; 03:02
as I will show through the employment of the actantial model. When the episode starts the actantial model, based on Jeff as the main character, would look as follows:

Greendale Community College ➔ college degree to be reinstated as lawyer ➔ Jeff

| ^ | all the test answers

Greendale Community College ➔ college degree to be reinstated as lawyer ➔ Jeff

The important goal for the main character, Jeff Winger, is to obtain his degree as easily and effortlessly as possible. He will go to great lengths to avoid any actual work, it becomes his driving force fueled through his cunningness and relativistic view of truth and morals: “I discovered at a very early age that if I talk long enough I could make anything right or wrong. So, either I’m God or truth is relative.” His first obstacle is convincing Duncan to give him all the test answers. His side quest is getting a date with Britta. Both turn out to be much harder and much more uncontrollable than he obviously is used to. Setting Britta against Jeff is one of the clearest ways to see that Community is about the difference between absolute morals and relative ones. The two characters have a short but very revealing dialog when meeting up in the study room where Britta is asked “What is your deal?” and replies to Jeff that it is honesty she values above all. When she asks the same question he reveals more of himself than he realizes: “I would have to say honesty, because I would say anything to get what I want and I want you to like me.” Thus Jeff states early on, and frequently, that he is ready to say anything to benefit from any given situation, without regret. He puts great effort into how he wants to be perceived by others. In the end he does not fully succeed in convincing Britta, who will be the one that discovers Jeff’s con about the study group being only about him wanting to bed her and she will be the one revealing the truth to the group. But this lesson probably wouldn’t have stuck without the one Duncan has prepared for Jeff. Although it seems for a long time that Duncan is easily manipulated by Jeff and that he follows some of the same principles as Jeff, albeit less successful, he actually values the educational system and even honesty to a degree, first revealing this notion in saying “Just by asking that you have insulted the integrity of this entire institution” and then reminding Jeff that “cheaters never prosper.” But it does look like Jeff has convinced Duncan to aid him through reminding him of the legal services he had so excellently provided when Duncan was in court for

111 Community: 1.01 “Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 08:33-08:42
112 ibid; 05:59
113 ibid; 06:36-06:44
114 ibid; 03:08-03:11
115 ibid; 03:44
driving under the influence, and here it becomes clear that Jeff is used to making ridiculous arguments that would not work for anybody else with a somewhat more straightened moral compass, citing that he managed to connect September 11th to Duncan’s crime and convincing everyone that his only real crime was loving America. This of course prays on the prejudice of the stereotypical lawyer being conniving and opportunistic.

Whilst Jeff waits for the test answers he starts pursuing Britta by asking her to join his study group and employing an impressive amount of lies from him being a board certified Spanish tutor over the Spanish rant that fools Britta but actually makes no sense all the way to the faked study group. In this scene we also get to hear a first verbal reference to contemporary media: Jeff reveals to a lunch lady that he was raised on television and corrects her pronunciation of Seinfeld. This is actually a very important setup for the character dynamic between Jeff and Abed, since Jeff at first is the only one that understands Abed’s many references to film and television. Alternating between discussions of morals with Duncan and completely losing control of the fast growing study group thanks to Abed, Jeff always employs the same weapon of much talk with little substance to get the situation back to moving into a direction from which he benefits. He not only gives Duncan big talks about why morals and truth are to be viewed subjectively but uses his skills to get the group to turn on each other causing utter havoc only to get Britta to leave for a date with him. But Britta is smarter than Jeff anticipated (“How was I supposed to know you were smart and cool? I mean, you look like Elisabeth Shue!”) and as soon as she has made him calm down the group, she reveals the truth about Jeff to the group (here she is actually contradicting herself, a trait that will grow more obvious as the show progresses, when she lies to Jeff that she will have drinks with him despite her earlier statement of honesty being the quality she most values). Jeff is utterly defeated, first he lives through utter emasculation in exchanging his beloved car for Duncan’s golf-cart-like environment-friendly car and in being rejected by Britta, and then he receives a package with what he thinks are test answers but what actually turns out to be a bunch of blank pages and Duncan’s way to teach Jeff a lesson. Thus he is broken down and his trust in his own abilities broken, he never achieves any of his goals in this episode, his opponents (Professor Duncan and Britta) win, thus he has to change his approach. The realization that the world of Community College is different than his usual world of upper-class lawyers, forces him to reevaluate the situation and depend on others since he cannot

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116 Community: 1.01 "Pilot", Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 05:28
117 ibid; 15:50-15:54
solve the problem, getting passing grades, by himself which he explains when saying that he never actually had to study before. Thus the actantial model changes at the end of the episode to look like follows:

Greendale Community College $\rightarrow$ degree to be reinstated as lawyer $\rightarrow$ Jeff

| $\uparrow$ |
| studying/learning, passing grades |

The study group $\rightarrow$ Jeff $\leftarrow$ Jeff

Jeff’s situation has changed (in accordance with the last step in Harmon’s narration-circle) and he now has to come to terms with being part of a group, a dynamic that for a self-centered opportunist is quite challenging. This is also obvious in considering how many slots he fills in the actantial model, for whilst he has realized that his first approach was wrong it will not completely change him in an instance and he will continue sabotaging himself by alienating people through his selfish actions. The driving force of the show is Jeff’s “great humbling and needing the help of others for possibly the first time in his life.”

It is in the last scene on the steps of the College building that the actual motive of the show is first revealed: the ability to change. The whole show is about friendship and the ability to change (through it). As Professor Duncan tells Jeff at the end of the pilot episode: “The tools you acquired to survive out there will not help you here at Greendale. What you have, my friend, is a second chance at an honest life.”

It has to take quite a long time for Jeff to completely change, because at his core Jeff is, as the pilot clearly establishes, “a moral relativist whose compulsion for self-interest is rooted in his bone marrow.” However, he shows so much charisma that it is “impossible [for the viewer] not to be won over by him and root for him to change, no matter the terrible things he does, and he is written with great conviction as someone who would be completely lost without his faculties in manipulation and caddish charm.” This means that the study group will first have to teach him how to survive as a caring human being. He reminds me of the latest popular type of lead character in Drama series, thanks to Tony Soprano viewers have learned to root for the guys whose morals and actions might be opposite to ours. Then again, the selfish male lead, that one both kind of likes and kind of hates, has even occurred in the Sitcom for a while, for example in Two and a half Men, According to Jim and Seinfeld. In those shows the characters never change though, their bad behavior and

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119 Community: 1.01 “Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 20:55-21:03

120 Braun, Lloyd: Episode 101 – Pilot; Published December 17th 2011; Greendale A.V.Club; http://aclockworkoffense.com/greendale/2011/12/101-pilot/ 2012-05-13

121 ibid
the constant forgiveness of their amoral actions and them never reflecting about change even being an option (It could be argued that the main character Charlie Harper’s death on Two and a half Men could be the drastic consequence of his actions, however the very public process of Charlie Sheen’s misbehavior leading to him being fired and the fact that none of the remaining characters draw any conclusions and do not attempt to change disproves that argument). Community strives for change, letting the premise become about an amoral individual eventually becoming a good, or at least better and more empathic, person through his affiliation with a group of underdogs (it is a presumed endgame since the show has not yet ended and thus not reached its goal yet). Creator Dan Harmon really believes that people can become better:

For all its apolitical, joyful, empty headed zaniness and experimentation, Community is a passionately humanitarian show. Its only religious and political point of view is that all people are good people, and while we often play the roles of villains and stereotypes to each other, it is always an illusion, shattered quickly by the briefest moment of honest connection.122

This makes for a very character dependent series. In a character-driven series the premise is focused on lead characters and relationships, whilst a story-driven premise is centered on action driven by the circumstances faced by the leads. The Sitcom is generally character-driven. The first episode is very clearly a premise pilot, showing exactly how everybody ended up at Greendale Community College and how they came together in the study group. The episode shows actually the whole premise of the show: Jeff forced to go to Greendale just wants to get through as effortless and fast as possible but has to realize that it might not be possible without help and personal change, excepting the community that the study group offers. Throughout the show he keeps returning to this dilemma, not wanting to be part of the Greendale-society but desperately holding on to his former lifestyle and having to realize that he has become part of the Greendale-world (the best example for this is the episode 2.02 “Accounting for Lawyers”, where he meets a former colleague and visits his old law firm only to realize that he is happier hanging out with the study group). As time goes by, Jeff has to admit how lost he is without the study group, as for instance in episode 2.15 “Early 21st Century Romanticism”, when he misses the others more than he wants to admit after a fight and is disappointed yet humbled by the realization that they may not need him quite as much as he wants to believe. For him it becomes as much about accepting others for who they are as himself. Jeff’s journey of bonding with a group of very different people and learning to accept that the rules are different is one that he has in common with the other members of the study group. This

122 Harmon, Dan: Mea Culpa for Those Needing One. Onward and Gayward; Dan Harmon Poops-tumblr; http://danharmon.tumblr.com/; 2012-04-17
accepting each other and oneself is the journey that every member of the group has to travel, such as Troy finding an identity beyond the high school jock and prom king, and Shirley beyond being a mother and baking, making for the show often relying on its characters development for story, ergo being character-driven. Except for Jeff though the members of the study group are only sketched in the pilot episode, the characters will develop beyond their stereotypes when living through their first changes, such as Troy shedding his high school letter-jacket or Britta trying to decide on a mayor. This leaves room for growth with all the characters. But the pilot episode also sets in motion character dynamics that will hold throughout the show, such as Jeff and Abed’s mutual understanding of television- and film-references and Troy and Pierce bonding over their childish sense of humour, staying true to itself and its mythology. Also, I think that the fact that Troy, Shirley, Annie and Pierce are “portrayed as distillations of the aspects of themselves they want to present to strangers”\textsuperscript{123} is quite reassuring and making them more realistic since this is the way everyone tries to control the perception that other people have of them the first time they meet. Furthermore it is nice to be there from the beginning and learning the groups dynamics in the same speed as they do instead of, as in so many other shows (Seinfeld, Friends, How I met your Mother), being thrown into an already established group and having the disadvantage of having quite some catching up to do.

What then do we learn about Community from looking at the pilot regarding the position as a Sitcom?

A common device used in the genre Sitcom has long been the laugh-track (or live-audience): a clear sign of what physical and with that emotional effect the text should have on the viewer. Community however does not make use of it. Neither does it employ other “old gadgets” like actors breaking character and making the show into more of a sketch show, this device was long used in those early 50s marriage-Sitcoms (that still had clear roots in variety) to lighten up the situation and prevent the viewer from worrying about a serious situation. Taking away the reality also makes certain situations easier and less attacking, an assurance that the depicted is only for fun. The typical camera angle in Sitcom places the camera as the forth wall and is supposed to have the same effect, the cameras perspective as a device should function to take away some of the reality and with that the worry, giving the show a bit of a look as if it was on a stage; this is best exemplified in looking at how the Friends sit around their table at the coffeehouse, always

\textsuperscript{123} Braun, Lloyd: Episode 101 – Pilot; Published December 17\textsuperscript{th} 2011; Greendale A.V.Club; http://aclockworkoffense.com/greendale/2011/12/101-pilot/ 2012-05-13
all of them on the same side, leaving the other free for the camera. These devices together create a system that manages to take away some illusion, and by letting the shows become less realistic Sitcom has more freedom to address hard topics without having to be afraid of making to serious a statement. Sitcoms often challenge social or political status quo, for example mixing liberals and republicans, different classes, races or religions creating a wide range of ideological conflict. Although the setup for a variety of ideological conflict is given in *Community* through the characters different religions, races and ages, the series only brushes by those subjects: a short banter between Jeff and Troy about racism and homophobia in 1.06 “Football, Feminism and You”, Pierces constant inappropriate remarks, Shirley not liking to be reminded of the age difference between her and the other girls. Also Shirley is the only one continuously highlighting her religion, in fact it takes a whole semester for the group to actually state that none of them have the same faith, which is addressed in episode 1.12 “Comparative Religion” where Shirley has to come to terms with accepting the fact that her kind of faith might not apply to everyone.

The most frequently addressed ideological conflict in *Community* is moral relativism, mainly in a Jeff versus everyone else capacity. By freeing itself from these classical traits of Sitcom *Community* sets itself apart and becomes at a first glance more realistic, but considering the many exaggerated episodes and self-awareness of its metatextual enunciation (mainly through Abed’s constant pointing out how much their life is like a television show) the series does not keep this first shallow promise of realism. Comedy, especially Sitcom, is a “scarcely realistic genre, one whose veridictive pact would entail an adherence to worlds that almost never work like the real world works,” as for instance the complete acceptance everyone displays in the face of a campus wide Paintball war in episode 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, where nobody second guesses the situation or its importance. Also, as creator Dan Harmon clearly states on his blog the show does not have a political or religious point of view other than that all people are good people.

The leaping out of character or out of the situation is a Sitcom trait that *Community* chooses to make parody of in the small bids by Troy and Abed at the end of almost every episode (except for the pilot), especially evident is this in the recurring “Troy and Abed in the morning”-sketch where they stage a morning show directly towards the camera luring us to believe that there is a camera when in fact, as Jeff reveals, there is none. This is the only instance where the acting is directed towards a camera. They act similarly during

episode 2.17 “Intro to Political Science” where a new student body president shall be elected and Troy and Abed decide to create a news show covering the event. This sometimes tricks the viewer into believing that the characters address him directly, only to realize that it is just another game that the characters play. At the same time it also ties the show to Sitcom, giving the show back a sketch-Comedy quality that is often found in Sitcom, where sometimes scenes can seem more like sketches laid out entirely around a joke and not important for the storyline itself. The main difference here is that there are no pauses for laughter as in the Sitcoms that use laugh track or sketch shows with live audience. Also the sketches are clearly separated from the rest of the story and more like an appendix than a part of it.

In looking over the four basic functions of categorization for genre identification I realized how little they actually help in trying to place Community, as will be illustrated in the following attempt to use them to fit Community into Sitcom.

1) the audiences emotional expectations meaning the effect on the viewer
2) the heroes main conflict or the structure of the plot meaning the protagonists goals and obstacles from which the nature of the plot is derived
3) the setting meaning location, time and milieu
4) structure and means of narration

The first as well as the forth category are conflicted by the above explained disregard for the classical technical production traits of Sitcom (laugh track, camera angle etc.), in changing the norm it becomes harder for the viewer to directly identify the genre and build expectations, but the viewers expectation building is somewhat saved through casting.

When considering the setting of the show, a college campus, one firstly thinks of all the college and party movies of recent years, whilst most of them have a certain comedic quality to them, the comedy is mostly flat, somewhat vile and oriented at sexual conquest and failure. Being that the show’s title indicates Community College one might first leap to the conclusion of this being in line with or a parody of those movies. But since neither is the case (even though there is one episode, 1.22 “The Art of Disclosure”, in which the subplot is about Troy helping Abed fulfill some of his college-movie based social goals), I thought about if the show could be seen as a workplace-Sitcom. The characters are not bound by blood or heritage but by a place. The setting could most definitely be compared to a workplace since, whilst the main characters are not professional colleagues, all their interaction takes place not in the domestic and private space but almost exclusively in a more public or official space. Technically students could be viewed as costumers, and in
other shows with the label workplace-Sitcom such as *Cheers* the customers are part of the main cast, but whilst teachers and the Dean also are part of *Community*, they are not part of the main cast. Being a student could be seen as work, which would even this out. But the show does “not emphasize the hero’s professional duties,” meaning that the “work” consisting of classes, tests and homework have a lesser part to play, which points away from this concept. Thus, the setting does not force the genre as a hospital or a police station might.

Lastly there is the heroes’ main conflict as an indicator of genre, the achieving of a College degree lined with friendship and personal evolution. This could be from any genre, but Comedy is the one that most frequently and to a larger degree uses friendship instead of romantic involvement. On the other hand, Sitcom is the genre that leaves the least room for change to its characters, and change is after all a major part of *Community*.

Thus it seems like these four basic functions might not be a very good way to determine genre after all, at least not when the most commonly accepted norms and conventions are not obvious on the surface. Can *Community* still be a Sitcom if it does not display the classical traits of one? What is a better way of finding which genre the show belongs to? Is there a more evolved version of the Sitcom genre than the archetypal classical one that might be more fitting for *Community*? These questions will be treated in the following chapter.

### 4-2-1 *Community* and Sitcom: Part 2 - New Comedy

Genre makes only sense if there are a number of core characteristics which are agreed upon by most people. Compared to other genres, the Sitcom is a genre with a quite big array of these characteristics, ranging from shooting style, performance style and types of actors to program length as well as scheduling. The problem here is defining the point when a program stops belonging to a genre. So, does the fact that, as proven in the previous chapter, *Community* not applies many of the eldest agreed upon characteristics of Sitcom mean that it isn’t a Sitcom after all? How much does the show stray from its ancestors?

In *Television Sitcom* Brett Mills states that

> the Sitcom must be a form which signals itself as quickly and unambiguously as possible. Yet, in the same way that semiotics argues that language exists only through a set of cultural conventions, so too does genre, which then affects interpretation of the texts it contains; in addition, it also means that genre definitions are varied and can be individualized. This is why it

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is easy to find many definitions of the genre of Sitcom which, while broadly similar, have enough differences for a text to be read differently depending on which definition is used. Even if a definition always to some point also is personal, there are none the less always those collectively agreed upon ingredients that determine in which genre a piece should be placed. For the Sitcom one of those ingredients, in fact the most prominent, has very long been the laugh track, basically inseparable from the three-camera setup, connecting it to its theatrical roots and creating a sense of liveness and unity for the spectator. The laugh track is in traditional Sitcom the first identifier of belonging and recognition of genre, the clearest separation to every other televisual narrative genre as it is the only one to employ it. This device has also another important function, as Brett Mills notes the archetypal Sitcom does require “an audience for its existence to be at all meaningful.” The laugh track helps the audience to understand the comic moments, sanctioning the effectiveness of the show’s comedic qualities and recognizing the jokes. The laughter is important not only because it is the intended emotional and physical response of the genre, but the laugh track can also be seen as a demonstration of social unity, joining together the studio audience, the imagined audience (of the canned laugh track) and the real audience at home. “[T]he decision not to include a laugh track on a sitcom has usually been justified by the argument that the programme is something other than a sitcom,” or more than just a Sitcom. It is an idea stemming from the development of niche channels in America and Great Britain, such as HBO, MTV and BBC2, wanting to keep their innovative profile also represented in Comedy and continue to be able to state that they were more than mere television. Community however airs on NBC, a channel with a long heritage of being a big player in the broadcasting game, a main channel, thus more conventional. This might render the observation above irrelevant, if it were not for NBC changing its slogan for Comedy night to “Comedy Night Done Right” thus implying that their shows were the only real kind of Comedy, just as HBO once stated “It’s not TV. It’s HBO” to promise something better and more evolved than other channels. Whilst leaving the laugh-track behind has become a more common move in Sitcom over the recent years it has usually been accompanied by a visual style that also extremely sets apart the show, the best example being The Office, both the original British version and

128 ibid, p.29
the American remake are filmed as if they were Documentaries, thus creating a double
play at reality, creating a false sense of reality by misusing the contract of representation
of reality that the documentary form implies. But also setting apart itself sharply from every
other kind of television series to not be confused with or mistaken for a Drama. Losing
some of the genre’s most obvious characteristics such as the laugh track and the three-
camera setup, is by Mills accredited to those traits being perceived as too simplistically
generic:

This suggests there’s flexibility not only within the industrial structures which produce sitcom,
but also within audiences’ reading techniques. It also means that the sitcom is a form which,
despite the simplistic definitions of it often presented, is instead a complex one, commonly
related to many other television (and film) genres.¹³²

I completely agree with that, firstly since the shows, Community too, that have taken this
step still are paired with other Sitcoms in the scheduling and still are reviewed as Sitcoms,
but also because I myself, the implied audience in this case, would have called Community
a Sitcom without reflecting about it more before I started my research. This is however not
enough for a satisfying definition and since there is more than one show that has
developed beyond the classical Sitcom devices, I think it will be fruitful to place Community
in the same canon as the shows examined by Antonio Savorelli in Beyond Sitcom, which
he places under the term New Comedy. The Comedy series he examines are also
contemporary American Comedy series produced over the past decade: Scrubs (2001-
2008), The Office (2005-), The Comeback (2005), Ugly Betty (2006-2010); of which the
first two at least partially aired on NBC just as Community. The series examined by
Savorelli show “links to the realm of situation comedy, and, more generally, show a higher
degree of awareness of their television nature.”¹³³ Neither one of the employed enunciative
structures are completely new or unique elements, as for instance different kinds of
voiceover narration and the use of documentary film style have been employed often
before. But these shows highlight their specific enunciative strategies without making them
necessarily transparent. The important difference here is that in New Comedy the
strategies are consciously deployed, “a definite strategy of enunciation - thus, of
communication - that helps in founding the […] texts’ comic natures, instead of being
nothing more than an accident.”¹³⁴ Most important for those new kinds of shows is their
metatextual nature, which is a great part of Community. However, metatextuality is not a
new occurrence, “classic comedy also has metatextual tendencies, but they are usually

Publishers, 2010), p.5
¹³⁴ ibid. p.13
expressed as intertextual references, aimed at mutual confirmation and validation among
texts of the same genre; a second, important function of metatextual tendencies in classic
comedy is to strengthen, starting from a single utterance, the communication strategies of
a television network.”  

The main difference to the texts of New Comedy being that the
occurrence of metatextuality in classic Sitcom are mostly isolated and “do not constitute
the core of these series’ discursive and narrative strategies, and thus do not alter, with any
substantial variations, the solidity of the original model. Intertextual references become an
occasional form of play, which reinforces the texts’ comic foundations without that play
becoming their main source.” In many newer comic series metatextuality has become
one of the main and often defining elements, Community for instance is completely
depended on it for the story, the character Abed for example basically only communicates
through referencing other media utterances. There are four different levels at which this
process occurs, whilst each series examined by Savorelli only deploys one or two of them,
my hypothesis is that Community is making use of all of them. This will aid in finding how
much the series sets itself apart from archetypal Sitcom by illuminating its self-awareness.

1) Quotations and citations:

First, we find a purely utterative level of quotations and citations – usually verbal, in the
characters’ discourses – alluding to other televisual texts, which are a necessary reference for
the construction of the shows’ identities and the consolidation of a collective imagery. This is
the simplest level, inherited from classic sitcom; despite not being anything new (quoting is
allowed and widespread in all media and art forms), it becomes an integral part of new
comedy’s metatextual system.

This level is the most obviously displayed in Community and whilst it might at times seem
like the dialog is filled up with nothing but pop-culture references it is actually mainly Abed
that uses them (frequently) and in the beginning only Jeff that understands and responds
to them, Abed and Jeff are the ones that are truly pop-culture literate. As their friendship
grows stronger, Abed becomes almost like a mentor to Troy who slowly develops a greater
appreciation and understanding for Abed’s humour, although he already is referring to Jeff
as “Seacrest”138 and Abed as “Slumdog Millionaire”139 in the pilot episode, so Troy has at
least a basic knowledge of pop-culture.

Publishers, 2010), p.14
136 ibid, p.15
137 ibid, p.15
138 Community: 1.01 ”Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 09:26
139 ibid; 09:49
The pilot episode is dedicated to John Hughes (1950-2009) as an In Memoriam-sign before the end-credits shows. Thus it is only logical that the strongest scene showing this utterative level of quotations and citations, and simultaneously one of the strongest character scenes (mainly for Abed, but also for his relationship to the others and Jeff in particular) in the pilot is referencing The Breakfast Club (1985). The scene takes place in the study room and actually begins with a setup remark made by Abed when first talking to Britta and Jeff in the study room, he points out how their situation is kind of like the movie Breakfast Club since they are in a library and he is sure that they all have a bottled up issue that would make them cry if they talked about it. Somewhat later, when Jeff has brought the study group to a boiling point where everybody just keeps screaming weird insults at each other, Abed suddenly slams his hands on the table and quotes parts from the famous Bender-monolog from Breakfast Club. Abed is happy about having found the perfect moment to place his quote, but his remark is met with confused silence and misunderstanding, as for instance Pierce asking “There’s Breakfast?” Jeff reveals to Abed’s great delight, that it was an actual quote from The Breakfast Club. This shared literacy of pop-culture is the main link in their friendship and will be revisited throughout the series as something that puts them both on the sidelines, but whilst Jeff wants to stand apart from the others for fear of being dragged down, Abed enjoys it simply because he enjoys observing and has through the study group found his own little television show to amuse himself with and simultaneously learn about real human behavior. Good examples for this are 2.08 “Cooperative Calligraphy”, where Abed does not tire of calling their situation a bottle episode until Jeff admits so too, and 1.16 “Communication Studies”, in which Abed keeps comparing Jeff and Britta to different Sitcom friends and couples, until Jeff also accepts the analogy.

The quoting and referring is Abed’s predominant personality trait, at times it is the only way for him to communicate due to his Aspergers syndrome. But it does also become an inseparable part of the whole show in that Abed’s habits influence the other characters behavior, as for instance Troy helping Abed to reenact different movies. The entire group embraces Abed’s style, but it takes different amounts of time for them to understand Abed. Whilst Jeff connects with Abed on the level of quotes and references fairly directly, he does not appreciate Abed viewing life as a television show. Troy has to first fill in some knowledge gaps but he embraces Abed’s playfulness and reenactments easily. Also, the

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140 Community: 1.01 ”Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 23:44
141 ibid; 7:13-07:19
142 ibid; 13:26
143 ibid; 11:26
others will start using movie and television references more and more, such as Shirley comparing Jeff and Britta to Sam and Diane (from *Cheers*) in episode 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, but here it becomes obvious that contrary to Abed (and Jeff) the others are stuck in their own period of time when Annie does not know who Sam and Diane are.

2) Thematic construction of characters:

A second kind of intertextual quotation, also placed within the utterance, exploits the characters’ thematic construction, particularly in the choice of actors who play certain roles. Some actors’ professional histories become not only objects of allusion, but often also grounds for discursive and narrative elaboration.  

This refers both to actors reprising elements of iconic roles, as well as actors playing a version of themselves, albeit not in a biographically accurate way.

This level is harder to grasp, since only few viewers have knowledge of an actor’s private life. But in regard to playing similar characters as they are known for, the obvious example in *Community* is Chevy Chase, in the prime of his career he often displayed “a fourth-grade level of humour” and this childish sense of humour is what Pierce and Troy bond over in the pilot episode. Another detail is found in the finale episode, where actors Busy Phillips and Dan Byrd appear in the background, a cameo of great importance for the intertextual referencing between two shows. The setup starts in episode 2.19 ”Critical Filmstudies”, the episode most often defined as the first truly iconic episode of *Community*, it is Abed’s birthday and unknowing of his friends having planned a *Pulp Fiction*-style party for him, he plans his own film inspired celebration by luring an unsuspecting Jeff into a reenactment of *My Dinner with Andre*. Abed strikes up the “real conversation” that is the core of that movie by telling Jeff about an illuminating experience he had when invited to the set of his favorite television series *Cougar Town*. This scene resulted eventually in Danny Pudi appearing in the background of an episode of *Cougar Town* as Abed (2.21 “Something Good coming”). In the upper mentioned season two finale 2.24 “For a few Paintballs more” the actors Busy Phillips and Dan Byrd are cheering on the winners of the Paintball match in the crowd of Greendale students, probably as their roles Laurie and Travis. The exchange of references continues: In episode 3.01 “Biology 101” Abed gets upset over the possible cancellation of *Cougar Town* when it was moved to midseason (a real live event), *Cougar Town* reuses the connection to Abed in episode 3.11 “Down South”, adding a fake quote around the title during the opening theme: “I didn’t know it was

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146 *Community*: 1.01 ”Pilot”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 17th 2009; 20:09-20:22
back on either” - Abed -, thus both continuing the affectionate relationship between the shows and placing a jab against ABCs basically non-existent marketing campaign saying that even obsessive fans like Abed had trouble being reached by the news. Episode 3.12 “Square one” of Cougar Town added to that the change of their title credit to “Cougarton Abbey” referring to the fictitious British television show that Britta introduces Abed to in episode 3.01 “Biology 101”. This frequent exchange between the shows turns the cameo actors as their characters into a metatextual mythology spanning several levels of metatextuality as discursive elements.

There are several more cameos by other actors guest starring as themselves or versions of themselves or roles close to their usual ones, such as Jack Black, Owen Wilson, LeVar Burton and Luis Guzmán (of whom there even is a bronze statue on campus which is unveiled in episode 1.05 ”Advanced Criminal Law”).

3) Insertion of other fictional texts into the primary texts:

“A third kind of metatextual behavior is the frequent insertion, within the utterance, of other fictional texts functional to the existence of the primary text.” Those other fictional texts “become an integral part of the primary text, with notable consequences on the enunciative level.”

Here Community can serve up an array of fiction within fiction. Starting out with the “Troy and Abed in the morning”-segment, the fake morning talk show the friends sometimes play and lure unsuspecting students such as Jeff and Star-burns into, even though there are no cameras the show is very real to Troy and Abed. They also enjoy watching and reenacting a movie called Kickpuncher, the fictitious version of The Terminator, Robocop and similar action fueled Science-Fiction movies. The previously mentioned Cougarton Abbey also fits this category. Abed’s movies fit in here as well.

Besides that, I think that the way Abed sees or stages the world around him as if it were a movie or television show also qualifies, it is a kind of fictional text that depends on the primary texts existence, albeit in a different way (and much more) than the before mentioned ones since it employs the primary texts characters as themselves but in a manipulated (by another character) fashion. Abed has two ways of expressing this. He either treats his friends as if they were characters at his disposal and creates or magnifies the plot around them, as for instance in the beginning of season two (2.01 “Anthropology 101”) when Britta’s and Jeff’s relationship-chicken-race culminates in Abed staging a

wedding. His other way is to turn into an observing narrator, a self-aware action that also the others are very aware of, as shown on an utterative level in episode 1.06 “Football, Feminism and You”:

**Abed:** Will they or won't they? Sexual tension.

**Jeff:** Abed, it makes the group uncomfortable when you talk about us like we're characters in a show you're watching.

**Abed:** Well, that's sort of my gimmick. But we did lean on it pretty hard last week. I can lay low for an episode.\(^{148}\)

Sadly the episode before that did not actually lean on that gimmick at all, otherwise this would have been even more self-referential; instead it indicates that we do not get to see everything that happens in the group’s life, what was last week for Abed is not necessarily last week for us since the show only has 22-25 episodes to display the whole year and still tries to follow the viewers calendar as closely as possible. Abed's ability to divide television from life is a frequently discussed issue, which Abed responds to very concise in 2.01 “Anthropology 101”. After Abed “cancels” Britta and Jeff’s wedding, Jeff gets angry and accuses Abed that his “I can’t tell life from TV-gimmick” is very “season one”, Abed answers “I can tell life from TV, Jeff. TV makes sense; it has structure, logic, rules, unlikable leading men. In life we have this. We have you.”\(^{149}\) Besides strengthening Jeff's position as the main character (Abed points to him as the leading man), this strong self-awareness adds another metatextual level to the text that Savorelli has not listed. This level stands in between the first and the third, a kind of mixture of quotation and fiction within fiction. Whilst the classic Sitcom can be self-aware in the way that its form and aesthetic doesn’t allow the viewer to forget that he is watching a television show, *Community* is freed from this at the same time as it constantly compares television to real life but here meaning the real life within the fiction: Abed not only consciously uses quotations and references to get his point of view across, he also sees the world around him like a television show in a very aware way, as well as the others in the study group are aware of him viewing it that way. But the characters reality is never disturbed, there is never any indication of them being on a television show. This can be seen as part of the insertion of fictional texts into the main text and is completely dependent on the existence of the primary text, so it could very well fit into this third category but it also fits into category one since it is often based in an utterative level, however not consisting of quotes

\(^{148}\) *Community*: 1.06 “Football, Feminism and You”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC October 22\(^{nd}\) 2009; 03:13-03:25

\(^{149}\) *Community*: 2.01 ”Anthropology 101”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC September 23\(^{rd}\) 2010; 15:10-15:19
or references of specific series or films but instead referencing the whole medium as well as itself.

4) Different semiotic system used to produce the main text:

A fourth kind of metatextual behavior involves a further shift of the metatextual mechanism toward the realm of the enunciation, with the *mise en abyme* of uttered enunciative devices, consistent in form with the primary enunciation, yet mostly transparent in its regard. […] This fourth level is a short step away from a more generally metasemiotic inclination. If intertextuality is a reference to texts that actually exist outside the main text’s boundaries, and pure metatextuality is the existence, in different forms, of fictional yet embedded texts, a metasemiotic function is achieved when a discourse is explicitly built *about* the semiotic system used to produce the main text. Even so the reference can be established to empiric, external texts; to fictional, embedded texts; or, in a self-referential act, to the main text itself.¹⁵⁰

The fourth level is the predominant one in certain episodes, not every episode employs the different style of another genre (or movie), but when the episodes are aimed at imitating other genres they do so very strongly and thoroughly. I will address this more in the next chapter.

The metatextual qualities of *Community* have been criticized for being too alienating, and for taking away the possibility for the show to be timeless. The impossibility for timelessness is an argument that I deem unnecessary, because metatextuality is one of *Community*’s strongest qualities and instead of being timeless the show becomes a wonderful example of our time:

Here we have a sitcom that taps into our current cultural subconscious and inverts the traditional artist-audience compact where what we saw in art was mere commentary on the social mores and cultural movements of reality. This show flips the script and suggests that over the last several decades’ society has been marinated in the soup of pop culture to the point that we’ve internalized Star Wars and John Hughes movies and become a reflection of the very art we create.¹⁵¹

This is the truest form of self representation a medium can deliver. Considering all the online tests à la “Which [insert movie/story of choice here] character are you?” and the dependence of today’s language on pop-culture, be it music or audiovisual, a dialogue that does not reference some other mediated expression is less true, less realistic. *Community* is inclusive, with a broad range of characters giving everybody the opportunity to identify with one of the characters and a sense of humour that is very much in the now, very much of this time. Of course, this somewhat limits the demographic to an educated and media savvy young audience because the viewer has to be able to keep up to fully enjoy the charm of the New Comedy.

Closing this chapter, I realize that *Community* does not fit into the stencil for classic Sitcom, but still has ties to it, as its format length (ca. 20 minutes, ca. 24 episodes/season), its temporal point of view is mirroring the viewers calendar, it has some sketch comedy elements and last but not least is presented as Sitcom by its network due to it being scheduled in a slot with other Sitcoms. It is at least Sitcom-like, Sitcom-adjacent or leans on the realm of Sitcom. I conclude that *Community* does fit the label of New Comedy that Savorelli has given the contemporary American Comedy series he examined. It is an evolution of the Sitcom, that will continue, and that offers the genre more depth and creativity, with some luck it might even give the genre more appreciation since this evolution makes it possible to look past the platitudes of the laugh track and the restrained aesthetic of the three-camera setup.
4-3 Community and Genre Adaption

There is another level to Community’s genre definition that makes it different from other shows; the incorporation of many other classically non-comic genres into the show could potentially disrupt the definition of the show as Comedy. Are those episodes still Comedy or are they for example a comic Western? In the following chapter I am going to address and track the use of non-comic genres in Community. For that I chose two main topics with very different genre conventions. In the first part I will be looking at the episodes featuring Paintball, these employ the genres Western and Action. The second part of this chapter will be addressing genre through the character Abed whose interest in film leads him to not only take film classes but make his own movies, eventually leading him to making a movie based upon the conventions of Documentaries which is presented as an episode in 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”. My hypothesis is that the reason why these other genres are so clearly visible/easy identifiable is because they are opposite to Comedy, they are conventionally non-comic in their cleanest form, and it is this superficial version that is employed in Community, reduced to a few most commonly know characteristics and thus not disrupting the universe that is Community but instead aiding the storytelling. I chose episodes that employ genres that very obviously are not connected to Comedy, which is why I for instance chose not to include episode 2.11 “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” even though the clay-mation episode is both the visually most different and the most acclaimed episode, but animation is frequently used for Comedy. Also, I chose episodes late in season one and two as to better differentiate the growth of the characters and their dynamics since the pilot episode. Episode 1.23 “Modern Warfare” is the first real departure the series makes from its usual format, the first episode that completely submerges itself in a different genre and transforms familiar characters into more archetypal and codified versions of themselves.

4-3-1 Western, Action and Paintball

Seeing as the genres are simplified in the way they are used in the show I will also work with a simplified and less nuanced definition of the referenced genres I’m tracking in Community. This chapter is dedicated to the three Paintball-episodes in Community season one and two. The plot setup is the same for both, Greendale Community College is entering a Paintball competition, first the students amongst themselves and in season two eventually against their rival school City College, in the second season the competition will last two episodes. Regarding the episodes from season two, I will only explore the first one of the two-part episode in detail, an explanation will be found at the end of this chapter.
In 1.23 “Modern Warfare” the campus Paintball-tournament references and parodies an array of action movies, such as *The Matrix*, *Die Hard* and *The Killer*. Beside those homages the episodes main character arc addresses the sexual tension between Jeff and Britta that has been building up during the season. I will mainly disregard the specific movie references for the benefit of tracking and highlighting the more general use of Action movie conventions and tropes.

The episode starts out in the study room, as by now has become common for the show, Abed sets up part of the plot by discussing where Jeff and Britta fall on the spectrum of classic Will-They-Won’t-They?-couples in Sitcom (referencing how much the two characters dynamic fits into classic Sitcom schemes) and complains about their lack of chemistry, with which the others agree. Usually, a Sitcom would try to sell the audience on a particular point of view, commonly about how bickering would mean that they secretly love each other; Community however states very clearly that Jeff and Britta are not an epic love story. The Dean enters during their conversation and, setting up the main plot, announces that the spring fling activities will include a Paintball-war with a big price for the last man standing. The scene ends with Jeff leaving to take a nap in his car. First after the opening credits does the episode turn into being presented like an Action movie. With the intertitle “1 Hour later” Jeff awakens to what can best be described as the post apocalyptic wasteland of Greendale Community College campus, and an obvious sign that everything is different now. A student who lies “dying” in a hallway informs Jeff about the ongoing Paintball-war but he is shot by another student before he can inform Jeff about what the price is that made everybody turn on each other, turning their conversation into a typical Action movie setup. The assailant then proceeds to chase Jeff down the hall right towards the first typical action shot: Abed in full battle gear comes running towards Jeff and jumps off the wall shooting at the man pursuing Jeff and thus saving him, establishing Abed as an agile and heroic combatant. It is a common move in an Action movie to first save the hero so that he will be partial to joining the cause. When Abed takes Jeff to Troy the music swells to glorify the moment of a happy Troy meeting a friend he thought lost, a moment typical for a war-themed movie. Abed reveals the price to be priority registration, as Jeff understands the meaning of that, the possibility to create his own schedule, he immediately leaps for a gun. This is the first big character moment of the episode, Jeff regressing to his old self, where he would sacrifice everything if he has to gain something for his personal convenience, his selfishness still gets the better of him. The strongest

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character-scenes throughout the episode are heightened by how well they fit into the Action-motif, for instance do the characters here have to be appropriately distrustful towards one another given the high-stakes circumstances, but it also becomes obvious how much they have bonded over the previous year even though it wasn’t something they, and definitely not Jeff, pursued. It is the reason why they all can put down the guns and why Jeff joins the team. His joining is followed by yet another typical Jeff moment: whilst critiquing others for resorting to cheap ploys he simultaneously pulls of his shirt in an obvious effort to distract opponents with his good looks, flashing of his vanity. Jeff, barely dressed in his white tank top, is clearly visually set apart from everyone else wearing some kind of battle gear or armor. It is common for Action movies to set apart the hero from the rest, be it only by his uniform having a different color, as well as highlighting his muscles. Combined with the fact that Jeff once again has been the character uniting all scenes and guiding us through the story he obviously is the main character in this episode, I will therefore address the plot from a Jeff-centric point of view.

Jeff's project in this episode it to obtain priority registration for himself by beating everyone else in the Paintball-war, he does align himself with his study group peers to better his chances against the opponents which are all other students and Senior Chang who will be revealed to be working for the Dean who set out a prize that doesn't even exist. Jeff is not yet a hero, he is still mainly just in it for himself, and has like many action heroes before him to realize that there are things grander than the self. After teaming up, Troy, Abed and Jeff defeat the chess-club and proceed through the school using hand signs like soldiers would. They find Pierce who shoots his ally in the back to join his friends. Pierce stands guard whilst the others head to the bathroom where they are lured into a stand-off with the girls. It is a typical Action movie scene, the dramatic music underlines the situation whilst Abed discovers a drop of paint rolling down the wall and then sees the outlines of many bodies shot in that very position, whilst behind him feet become visible, and he barely manages to hint a warning before Britta, Shirley and Annie point their guns at them. Resulting in a stalemate standoff with everyone's weapon pointed at someone from the opposite team. From chaotic cutting between the opponents the shot turns to an overview of the situation. This kind of “Mexican Standoff”-trope is a classic Action scenario, found

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153 Community: 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 6th 2010; 05:24-05:30
especially in films by Sergio Leone and Quentin Tarantino. Jeff and Britta resume their bickering that started the episode off, thus uniting all others against them in their annoyance about the two which not only freshens up the subplot but also resolves the standoff and lets them proceed as a team. They sneak through the quad, covering each other’s backs. Troy suggests to Shirley that they might already be the last contestants and that the two of them should bond against the others, but gets shot before he can convince Shirley, thus he fulfills two action-movie character stereotypes, the one that betrays (or tries to) his team and the movie trope that the black guy always dies first. In a hail of bullets (also typical for Action genre) the others flee to safety behind some remains of the tables that had been placed in the squad for the spring fling. After loosing Annie and sacrificing Pierce to pinpoint their opponent’s location in the shootout, it is cut to a shot of the remaining members of the group gathered around a fire in the cafeteria. The scene with the group gathered around a fire and discussing what to do after all this is over, or in the case of Community what they will do if they win the prize, is frequently featured in Action movies, especially war-themed such as Red Dawn (1984). Abed is the only one not to reveal what he would do with priority registration, which suggests that he actually is in this simply for the Action movie resemblance of the situation which is probably why he seconds Britta’s motion to win the prize for Shirley, the only one with a truly urgent reason namely the opportunity to spend more time with her kids. Selflessness is the virtue of a hero, which no doubt Abed strives to be in his movie scenario. This turns into the second major character-scene, revealing both how much comfort these people get out of each other and how save they feel with each other. The sequence that follows is the action heaviest. Whilst the group is under attack from a rollerblading crew the camera circles around them just as the attackers do, and every shot the group fires is a hit sending the victim flying through the air as if hit by an actual bullet. The camera is never still; cutting between shooters and their victims, constantly moving in the same circular motion, these kinds of combination-camera-movement shots are typical for Action movies. Shirley, a gun in each hand quotes a bible verse, fitting both for her character and referencing a common Action-trope, used for example in Saving Private Ryan (1998), The Boondock Saints (1999) and Pulp Fiction (1994). But she is shot in the back and shortly thereafter Jeff’s gun jams leading Britta to slide over the floor and through his legs shooting his assailants who are hit mid jump and fall together on the floor. A typical move in an Action

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154  TV tropes: The Mexican Standoff; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MexicanStandoff; 2012-05-23
155  TV tropes: The Black Dude dies first; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BlackDudeDiesFirst; 2012-05-23
156  Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.60
157  Community: 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 6\textsuperscript{th} 2010; 10:38
film. When the remaining attackers flee, Abed is shot in the leg during the pursuit, leaving only Britta and Jeff to continue. Shirley lying on her back and telling Britta that she is going home qualifies as a tragic and dramatic death and also suffices as the death that the hero has to avenge. Britta discovers that Jeff has been shot, but to his great relief it turns out that it is not paint but blood, thus fulfilling the trope of the injured hero, which turns into the starting point for another classical trope, where the hero finally gets the girl. In this case Britta and Jeff end up in the study room together where she starts, very clichéd, to bandage his wound. Meanwhile the Dean accepts Chang’s offer to enter and win the contest for him after panicking about how the game has gotten out of control, turning Chang into the hired gun. In the study room, Britta aptly points out how the rest of the study group would think that the wounded-soldier-fantasy must mean that they are about to have sex (the nursing with sexual tension is another commonly used trope), but besides them joking about the cliché and sexual tension this turns into the third important character scene amplified by the use of superficial genre conventions. Starting out with them honestly talking about the earlier events regarding the choice to give or not to give the prize to Shirley it is shown how much those two have grown to appreciate each other as friends more than as objects of sexual attraction. Britta reveals her fear of not being a good person; Jeff reveals similar fears in admitting that his insecurity about his own morality are driving him to publicly criticize Britta’s efforts. Fearing that everyone will view him as a jerk by comparison when she does a grand gesture in hopes of becoming a good person leads to him turning morality into a competition. Both fear for what kind of a person they may be. This illustrates how long he has come from that first episode where he firmly believed that something was right or wrong to the extent that he could give an argument for it. When the situation gets to emotional and honest however they return to joking about the sexual tension, eventually leading to them actually having sex on the study room table. Part of why they finally do the deed might be because of their complete commitment to Greendale as a post-apocalyptic wasteland where they might just as well be the last man and woman on earth. It is the main pay-off of the episode, the step that both have been wanting and simultaneously dreading to take. Contrary to most Sitcoms, actually television and movies in general, they only have sex without it being more meaningful than that. They have long been attracted to each other and are now in an emotionally vulnerable situation, and the act does not turn into the constantly meaningful and mystical thing that television often wants it to be. This contrary conception has already been suggested in the opening sequence that sneered at the Will-They-Won’t-They?-dynamics. Just as the outer
circumstances created a situation where it was okay for the two to act on the attraction, it also creates the sense of urgency for the current situation that lets them off the hook afterwards, scratching at what just happened and threatening each other with paint simultaneously. They are on the brink of a fight about their motifs as Britta holds Jeff at gun point, only to have him reveal that he already took her clip out (a classic move of the Action film character), but then they are interrupted by the entrance of Chang, who has dressed up for the occasion thus portraying the “Badass in a Nice Suit” which could also be seen as an “Evil Costume Switch.” The situation immediately turns into a typical action sequence when the scene turns into slow motion just as Chang lifts his massive paintball gun and starts shooting, turning back to normal speed just as Britta and Jeff have leaped into safety. In this fight Britta will turn into the conventional Action movie trope of the heroic sacrifice entering a slow motion duel with Chang that eliminates them both. But Chang is left with the opportunity to expose first the truth about priority registration not existing and then revealing a paint bomb strapped to his chest in an effort of fulfilling the trope “Taking you with me.” Jeff however manages to jump out of the study room in a slow motion movement. During this fight slow motion is very effectively used to highlight certain dramatic action taking. Also, Chang is sometimes shown from a slightly lower angle in an effort to make him more powerful and mighty, highlighting the danger. Jeff is, as so many action heroes before him, left as the sole survivor. He then staggers into the Dean’s office in an homage to Die Hard’s John McClane, adopting both his walking style and dirty outfit. Confronting the Dean he shoots up his office and demands an end to the madness and to be awarded priority registration, culminating in putting a paint-splash on the Deans forehead and closing the Action movie portion of the episode with the “smoking barrel blowout.” But Jeff will only truly turn into a hero at the study groups next meeting when he gives his priority registration to Shirley, surprising everyone including himself in the process. It is one of the rare occasions where Jeff actually obtains his goal. He surprises himself with the realization that getting what we want might not always be what we actually need deep down. Wining the prize of priority registration gives Jeff an opportunity to act like the good man he wants others to see him as. Once again, Jeff has changed through an experience with the study group.

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158 TV tropes: The Badass in a nice Suit; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BadassInANiceSuit; 2012-05-23
159 TV tropes: The Evil Costume Switch; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EvilCostumeSwitch; 2012-05-24
160 TV tropes: The Heroic Sacrifice; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HeroicSacrifice; 2012-05-23
161 TV tropes: Taking you with me; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TakingYouWithMe; 2012-05-23
162 TV tropes: The Sole Survivor; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SoleSurvivor;2012-05-23
The approach to Action in this episode is very grounded, attempting to come across as if this is just another day at Greendale, a place where something like this can just happen for no apparent reason. No one ever doubts or criticizes the event. Everybody is all-in and fully committed. Adapting this genre into the episode puts character dynamics under pressure and forces them to take action as well as admit to flaws and fears that they would rather have kept hidden, relationships are pushed to a breaking point and examined in this context. Even though many tropes of the Action movie are employed, as well as many visual tactics such as the highlighting slow motion, Community still manages to tell a grounded, relevant, and essentially character-driven story. The superficial resemblances to an Action film make it easy to know what kind of movies are referenced. The greatest difference to an Action movie is that there is no graphic display of violence, death or sex thus staying within the family-friendly realm of Sitcom. Everybody’s complete commitment to this vision of Greendale as a post-apocalyptic wasteland in the midst of a giant Paintball war is completely surreal which makes it funny. The references are both specific and to larger tropes of the genre in general. The details are kept comic, be it Pierce misunderstanding the others, certain lines of dialogue, Chang’s manic laughter or Annie jumping out of a garbage can, letting Action and Comedy comment on each other.

Whilst “Bloodless Carnage”\textsuperscript{164} also is an Action trope I do believe that the fact that no blood (more than a splash on Jeff’s shirt that could just as well have been paint) is shown has nothing to do with the genre referenced, but with Community being (at least partially) a Sitcom. The genre is family friendly and does not display violence, just as in this episode also in the other Paintball episodes the violence is marginal and non-graphic. The next Paintball-themed episode is 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, showing that whilst the first thought about the Western usually goes to a story dealing with life in the western United States in the later 1800ths, it does not necessarily have to be a historical genre, in fact many recent cop shows/Procedurals set in the now display certain qualities of the Western, the lone hero protagonists of Longmire (2012-) and Justified (2010-) are never seen without a Stetson and a gun. Even Action and Science-Fiction movies can display qualities of the Western, because the Western entertains a certain pattern of society, a story of lost individuals gaining or regaining their humanity, a story of creation of society and citizenship, where society works as a merger of free individuals but still is mostly a dream in a lawless/anarchistic world and a story of protecting this new society. Hope is essential and authority does not exist as a functional but as a mythological unit since

\textsuperscript{164} TV tropes: Bloodless Carnage; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BloodlessCarnage; 2012-05-24
society is organized around codes of honor and personal justice. It is a form predominated by a strong lead around whom the story identifies, the lone hero whose mission has not been given to him but is a chosen path.\textsuperscript{165} He can bond with other alone-at-heart individuals, as long as they have the same basic goal. Even many Science-Fiction films lend from these heroes and societal ideals, which is why the claim is often made for films like the \textit{Star Wars}-franchise being a kind of Western. It is also obvious when considering the endgame of series like \textit{Battlestar Galactica} (2004-2009) being to settle on a new territory, to rebuild civilization and create a better society. The similar views on heroism and society are why these genres work well together as they are connected in \textit{Community}. Also, all of them use similar aesthetics; camera movements are often quick (except for lengthy views of landscape in the nostalgic Western) and there are many detailed representations of extraordinary acts, as for example an explosion being repeatedly shown from different angles, highlighting the event. Angles can also be used to strengthen hierarchy or hint at danger. But even though those techniques are employed, \textit{Community}'s episodes never fully leave the established visual storytelling completely, for instance do angles not change into extremes but are only slightly different, there are still mainly close-ups, thus limiting the changes for the benefit of the viewer who has build a trust in the way \textit{Community} tells its stories and has to trust that the devices still mean basically the same thing as always, sticking with the invisible cut/camera of the Hollywood cinema.\textsuperscript{166} This is not only true for episode 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, but also for 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs” and 2.24 “For a few Paintballs more”, which are based in spaghetti Westerns, as the titles illustrate, but move then over into a kind of \textit{Star Wars} adaptation. Whilst 1.23 “Modern Warfare” was mainly referencing Action in general, the other two episodes are more specific in what they reference, the first reference of course being the titles as spoofs of Sergio Leones \textit{A Fistful of Dollars} (1964) and \textit{For a few Dollars more} (1965). 2.23 “A Fistful of Paintballs” takes aim not just at Westerns but at spaghetti Westerns specifically. Where “Modern Warfare” was a wide-ranging take on the Action genre, “A Fistful Of Paintballs” leaves more room for the character stories in that it does not try to fit quite as many genre references and conventions in. Generally a western would first be identified by its setting, the later 1800ths in an unspoiled landscape of western America. In an extent this setting will also influence clothing style. Thus, the third category of Joachim Friedmann and Stefan Wilkes system for genre identification is usually the predominant one for the \textit{Western}: 3) the setting meaning location, time and milieu. However, as \textit{Community} shows

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{Hickethier} Hickethier, Knut: \textit{Film- und Fernsehanalyse} (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.204
\bibitem{Ibid} ibid, p.143
\end{thebibliography}
the setting is not all there is to Western. In episode 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs” the setting is supplemented by the clothing, starting out as a Western-themed picnic everybody is appropriately dressed (Jeff is wearing the same Cowboy-outfit he used in 1.07 “Introduction to Statistics”, proving Community’s sense for continuity). Whilst “Modern Warfare” essentially was a Jeff-centric story concerning mainly him and Britta, this episode addresses Annie’s and Pierce’s separate journeys this season. Annie is almost desperate to keep the group together, whilst Pierce has felt more excluded throughout the season culminating in him actually placing himself opposite the group as the villain of this Western movie thus fully excepting his role as a villain that he had been approaching throughout the season. Even though Annie was the one standing up to keep Pierce in the group the episode will conclude with her announcing that he should be excluded after considering what he has done to them once again. The episode ends on the dramatic climax point of the season. In this it is similar to 1.23 “Modern Warfare” in which the season long Will-They-Won’t-They-arc of Britta and Jeff reaches its outlet, letting the Paintball episodes become highpoints of season character dynamic arcs. 2.23 “For a handful of Paintballs” is displayed from Annie’s point of view, she is the strong loner heroine of the Community-Western, defying the typical damsel in distress tag she usually wears and turning into a strong heroine like Cat Ballou (1965). The episode starts out directly establishing Annie as the hero when she saves a fellow student, a situation she uses to present herself as standing alone when she refuses to grant him a gun to defend himself with. She is also described as a Western hero by the fact that she shoots incredibly, almost inhumanly, quick. The next indicator of the Western theme is the introduction of her as “Ace of Hearts” in a blend of Wanted-poster and Poker-cards, simultaneously hinting at the in a later flashback mentioned card vote in which she is the only one to use a red card to vote for Pierce staying in the group, all the others will be presented as black cards. The overall tone of the picture is much darker than any episode so far, adopting the often grittier tone of the Western. The opening credits are also changed, in different color-splashes they are displaying the characters in shadow cutouts underlined with appropriate music reminding me of the score for The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966), just as most of the music for the episode. Also, in this episode contrary to all others, the title is actually shown as if it were a movie. The font for all text has turned into the kind typically associated with Western. After the opening credits, Annie retreats to her layer where she precedes to cook beans, which are a common food of the time referenced. It seems she is reminiscing about.

the events when a flashback takes us back a couple of hours to the Last-day-of-school picnic with a very soft filter in extreme opposite to the dark world she now resides in. The Dean announces a Paintball game that is sponsored by a Cowboy-themed ice-cream company whose mascot announces the prize to be 100,000 dollars which suffices as an explanation to why the game got out of control. Just as in 1.23 “Modern Warfare” a couple of hours are skipped jumping directly into the transformed post-escalation world of Greendale under siege without showing how exactly the situation got out of hand. Back in Annie’s layer, Abed visits her wearing a serape channeling The Man with No Name (1977) in his outfit and also being part of the Mexican orientation of classic spaghetti Western. His mission is to bring Annie to Jeff in hopes of her joining up with them against Pierce, who as it turns out has become somewhat of a “Cattle Baron”\(^{168}\) having turned the cafeteria into Fort Hawthorne since he has become the wealthiest contestant by forcing people to pay bullets to use the bathroom. In his saloon like setup he employs B-cast members as the iconic “Piano Player”\(^ {169}\) and dancers. Before Annie, Jeff and Abed can get to him they meet the other villain, the Black Rider, this episodes hired gun. He wears a “Badass Longcoat”\(^ {170}\) which of course is black because “Dark is evil”\(^ {171}\) as well as being equipped with the most classic Western attire, the “Bad Ass Bandolier”\(^ {172}\) which is a kind of belt hanging across the chest that holds ammunition. In fact, the episode sticks to many such details, showing how the Black Rider reloads his gun,\(^ {173}\) Troy spitting on the floor as if he had been chewing tobacco,\(^ {174}\) and the classical Western trope of a “Wanted Poster”\(^ {175}\) featuring Jeff.\(^ {176}\)

Annie, Abed and Jeff barely escape the Black Rider only to then be captured by Britta, Troy (popping out of a garbage can in a continuity reference to Annie’s hiding spot in 1.23 “Modern Warfare”) and Shirley (with her clothing representing the Western stereotype of the “Badass Preacher”)\(^ {177}\) who are working for Pierce and guide them to Fort Hawthorne. There the six of them will be presented with the task to recover an untapped supply of ammunition from the previous year’s game rumored to be located in the Dean’s office. However, Pierce sends them into battle giving Jeff a gun loaded with blanks, which ends up saving Annie when she chases after Chang with Jeff’s gun and is surprised by the

\(^{168}\) TV tropes: The Cattle Baron; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CattleBaron; 2012-05-22

\(^{169}\) TV tropes: The Piano Player; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThePianoPlayer; 2012-05-22

\(^{170}\) TV tropes: The Bad Ass Longcoat; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BadAssLongcoat; 2012-05-21

\(^{171}\) TV tropes: Dark is evil; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DarkIsEvil; 2012-05-21

\(^{172}\) TV tropes: The Bad-Ass Bandolier; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BadAssBandolier; 2012-05-23

\(^{173}\) Community: 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 5\(^ {th}\) 2011; 06:20

\(^{174}\) ibid; 10:56

\(^{175}\) TV tropes: The Wanted Poster; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/WantedPoster; 2012-05-19

\(^{176}\) Community: 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 5\(^ {th}\) 2011; 07:08

\(^{177}\) TV tropes: The Bad-Ass Preacher; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BadAssPreacher; 2012-05-21
Black Rider, who reveals himself to be a hired gun and then proceeds trying to shoot her in the foot with Jeff’s non-functioning gun. This gives the others the opportunity to sneak up on the Black Rider and results in the first "Mexican Standoff" of the episode ending in a classic shootout. The scene makes use of slow motion to highlight the importance of certain moves and the skills of the players, for example showing two blue bullets flying towards the Black Rider in slow motion whilst he ducks under them spinning around himself simultaneously shooting at Jeff and Abed before fleeing. After retrieving the remaining Paintball-equipment, adding another continuity reference with the gun used by Chang in 1.23 “Modern Warfare”, Annie leads the confrontation with Pierce outside a destroyed Fort Hawthorne. She gives him a gun thus making use of a morally inverted Western-trope: usually it would be a bad guy provoking someone else into a pistol-duel to justify a cold-blood shooting. But instead it leads to Pierce explaining how he always feels left out by the group and Annie disclosing that her vote kept Pierce in the group. Eventually Pierce holsters the gun, setting up a classic mano-a-mano pistol-duel between him and Annie. The shot sequence is very iconic for a Western, alternating between the contestants and their trembling fingers closing in on the holstered gun. At the highpoint of the suspension everyone turns away as the clicking sound of spores announces the Black Riders entrance, culminating in the next "Mexican Standoff." Pierce resolves it quickly by pretending to have a heart attack and shooting the Black Rider as he bows down to check on the old man. He then proceeds to turn his gun on the study group and quickly flees the scene announcing that they are no longer part of his group. This is the high point of the season arc of a delusional Pierce placing himself outside of the group, just as the pistol-duel marked the turning point for Annie’s arc. Whilst the characters have reached their dramatic climax, the story itself is yet evolving. The next episode is setup further as a blindfolded Chang runs across the quad and is merciless gunned down by a squad of what looks like storm-troopers from Star Wars. More of these attackers ascent from a truck together with the ice-cream company mascot as the music swells dramatically, leaving the Western behind as the mascot exclaims “Initiate Plan B. Total invasion!” Being the only cliffhanger of the series, the episode certainly leaves a few storylines open heading into the finale, episode 2.24 “For a few Paintballs more”. The tag scene at the end of 2.23 “For a Fistful Of Paintballs” is also uncommon for the series narrative setup, being the only time that Community shows what is going to happen in the next episode and it becomes

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178 TV tropes: The Mexican Standoff; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MexicanStandoff; 2012-05-23
179 Community: 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 5th 2011; 13:10
180 TV tropes: The Mexican Standoff; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MexicanStandoff; 2012-05-23
181 Community: 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 5th 2011; 20:36-20:40
obvious that the tone will be different once again, no longer the dark and contemplative Western but a straight on war against the rival City College who set the first part of the Paintball war in motion to destroy Greendale and now enters the fight themselves in an effort to break down the last resistance. It introduces itself as lighter and faster moving.

What made 2.23 “For a Fistful of Paintballs” into a Spaghetti Western was firstly the basic storyline of a bunch of rebels working to free the world they know, in this case hoping to end the Paintball war by taking away Pierce’s monopoly through obtaining more weapons and ammunition. The style of the spaghetti Western is referenced with showdowns, shootouts and standoffs, all featuring the requisite close-ups and aided by music. But the Western pastiche is mainly limited to Sergio Leone-style spaghetti Western, addressing less of the darker view of the 1800ths as the Hollywood Western often would and also disregarding the type of Hollywood-Western that would address the Native Americans issues and give an idolized view of the unspoiled nature. Thus the episode also stays closer to the theme of Mexican revolution, even though the revolution here is more against Pierce and the game as a whole, wanting to return to a calm and united Greendale instead of a freed Mexico, without becoming political.

2.24 “For a few Paintballs more” differs from its prequel in that it much more references a specific film instead of a genre, namely Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope (1977) and Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back (1980). This starts with the already in the previous episode introduced storm-trooper like opponents, continues with the opening credits being the classic scroll-up text through space and culminates in Abed actually stating during the debriefing of the remaining Greendale students that they now are leaving the Western-motif and instead are entering more of a Star Wars-scenario. Abed then also starts to channel Han Solo and at one point corners Annie like Han did Leia in The Empire Strikes Back quoting the movie. The very specific referencing means however that this episode even though in title and story-wise connected to the previous episode 2.23 “For A Fistful of Paintballs” does not suffice as exemplary for the use of other genre conventions in Community. Instead I shall continue this exploration in the next chapter, which is concerned with the use of Documentary conventions in Community.

183 Community: 2.24 “For a few Paintballs more”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC May 12th 2011; 02:01-02:04
184 ibid; 06:42-06:48
4-3-2 Documentary and Abed as the Filmmaker
As in the previous chapter I will work with a simplified and less nuanced definition of the referenced genre since the genres are used in a simplified way in the show. The episodes that reference the Documentary film and the role of the filmmaker have to be seen with a focus on Abed. It is Abed that makes the films, be it his very first work the self-biographical semi-documentary short film starring an unwitting Jeff and Britta as his parents in episode 1.03 “Introduction to Film”, his shorts based on the study group as characters played by other students as in 1.09 “Debate 109” and 1.16 “Communication Studies”, his religious film project for Shirley that turns into a meta-catastrophe and makes him drunk with filmmakers-power in episode 2.05 “Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples” or his detailed Documentary on Pierces faked deathbed in 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”; as well as 3.08 “Documentary Filmmaking: Redux”, in the third season Abed revisits documentary filmmaking when following the Deans process of making a new commercial for Greendale. Those two episodes based on Documentary conventions completely leave the camera to Abed. His main source of material are his immediate surroundings, it is only when he uses them that he succeeds. The one time he strays from his path, he ends up utterly devastated by the results of his work and has to realize that there is something as too much meta. Maybe a commentary on the creators of Community understanding why many viewers felt overwhelmed even though they should have felt engaged, involved and represented. As mentioned in chapter “4-3 Community and Sitcom: Part 2 New Comedy”, Abed is often more of an observer than a participant, being somewhat of an audience surrogate. A position he in fact already sets up during the pilot. For what gets lost in the Jeff-centric analysis is that it actually was Abed that united the group, he was the one that picked out the other members after Britta invited him. Considering how enthusiastic Abed is about the gathering and how keen he is on making the situation as much like Breakfast Club as possible, it is presumably he who is responsible for the diversity of the group, considering that the group after which he modeled it also consisted of wildly incompatible seeming stereotypes. At first he continues observing, but soon they will turn into the material for his movies as he for instance casts actors to play the roles of his friends and directs short sketches that mirror their life. But these are all subplots or side-jokes supporting other plots. Two episodes however are entirely devoted to Abed’s filmmaking.

In episode 2.05 “Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples” Abed is tasked by Shirley to make a promotional video for her church after Shirley is disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm for YouTube-videos with a Christian message. Abed is reluctant to take on the
task due to him wanting to separate his filmmaker/storyteller from his religious side, but after reading the new testament makes the character Jesus interesting to him ("He was like E.T., Edward Scissorhands and Marty McFly combined") he takes on the role to such a degree that he gets lost in the idea of his own metatextual masterpiece, eventually admitting that he himself doesn’t even understand it anymore. But the visual component of Community remains unchanged and Abed’s film is never shown, only his process, there is no actual genre that influences or changes the mythology of the show, the episodes main plot is solely about the characters evolution into realizing that he needs his friends, in this case Shirley, to humble him and keep him grounded.

The second episode with Abed as a filmmaker is 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, it takes a completely different approach in that the entire episode is as if it was filmed by Abed as a Documentary about Pierce on his faked deathbed after a period of addiction to painkillers which he uses to bequeath his friends with cryptic and/or mean-spirited gifts. This approach changes up the whole flow of the show, presenting the events through Abed’s lens instead of an outside observer. It is important to the plot that Abed stays somewhat outside it since he would most probably have seen through Pierces agenda right from the start, so Pierce needed to acquire his loyalties by giving him something else to focus on, this being the first indicator of Pierces almost shocking insightfulness to the other characters insecurities considering how often he otherwise just seems like a cartoonish villain or offensive old man. It differs however from other mockumentary television series like Modern Family and The Office where the man behind the camera mainly remains hidden (few exceptions on The Office), a fly on the wall. Abed however does not stay “on the wall”, he takes a place amongst the ones he observes, explaining early on why he is doing this and that he likes the “talking heads” that are commonly used in this format, in fact it is the way he shows himself. Talking heads are a feature not all documentaries use, but it is frequently used in mockumentary style television series and gives great opportunity to highlight the thoughts and emotions of characters. Abed notes that documentaries make it easier to tell stories because of the possibility to present the characters feelings and emotions as well as his/her perception of a situation when one can simply let the character talk about them. Acknowledging the cameraman allows Abed to remain an active character.

It is clear from the first second that this episode is different, the picture has a greyer filter than usually, the camera is a bit shakier, more zoom in and outs, and the first shot is 185 Community: 2.05 “Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC October 21\textsuperscript{st} 2010; 04:36-04:38

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taken from behind a plant making it much more consciously voyeuristic than the series usual head on approach of letting the viewer forget the camera. The camera is actually addressed fairly quickly even verbally, at the hospital bed of Pierce Jeff asks Abed what he is doing and the realization of there being cameras in the room causes everyone to act self-conscious or un-natural like Annie quickly fixing her hair or Troy making a gesture reminding of the way ancient Egyptians painted humans.\footnote{Community: 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC February 17th 2011; 00:40} Abed quickly explains that Pierce asked him to document his life, which he was reluctant to do since he feels bored by Pierce as a subject, but he was excited about the narrative facility of the documentary format. Abed becomes a kind of narrator and commentator, telling both the story and commenting on the format. After Jeff asks what Abed is doing and Abed tells everyone to act natural, he cuts away to a talking head of himself where he explains what is going on. There must however be more cameras than Abed lets us be aware of. In the head shot of Abed we see two other students with a camera in the background and of course Abed is filmed with another one, there are however too many different positions and shots in for example Pierces room and too many events happening simultaneously in different rooms (Pierce room, the waiting room, following the last person that was bequeathed upon) for there to only be two or three cameras. Besides that talking head shot of Abed we only see one more camera in the picture when Abed films himself and the other two crew members holding a camera each in a bathroom mirror at the end of the episode, making for only three confirmed to exist cameras.\footnote{ibid; 19:56} There are no other cameras visible, even though we should for instance see one more in the cut that happens at 03:08; first the camera is on Pierces left side, hiding behind some hospital equipment shooting in an upward angle as Shirley enters with presents for Pierce from the gift shop, after the cut the camera stands behind Shirley’s shoulders and films Pierce, whilst the frame is cut off where the bed ends considering the limited space of the room there should still be some part of the other camera visible. Neither does the first camera see the second one when Shirley enters and the door closes behind her or when the second one is intercut with reaction shots. It is the same way every time Pierce calls someone into his room. Those two cameras are needed to keep up the reaction shots common to fictional storytelling, so whilst they keep up the sense of the shows own identity they are used at the expense of the credibility of the documentary format.
The repeated use of certain techniques lets them become associated with certain texts and eventually become what is used to define these certain types of texts, turning techniques into conventions. Mockumentaries often call heightened attention to conventions in order to make fun of them, the episode 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking” of *Community* is not a mockumentary for it takes the format seriously as a way to convey a story about its characters and the dynamics between them, and uses this particular format to, as pointed out by the character Abed, more easily convey the feelings of the individual characters. It also becomes obvious that the format is appreciated when Abed at the end says “I'm not mocking it. It works.” Of course not all Documentaries posses all traits, and Documentaries have different subgenres for which certain techniques are more effective than others. Led by documentarysite.com I present the six most common conventions of Documentary films as exemplary traits to look for in the Documentary-episode of *Community*: Real people, Re-enactments, archival footage and photographs, talking heads, shaky camera, voiceover narration. These traits do not necessarily have to appear within the episode, as they do not necessarily all have to appear in one Documentary, but are instead the most often commonly perceived conventions of Documentary films and are thus the most important ones to look for.

**Real People:** The Documentary genre is tightly knit to reality, its subjects are real, the people portrayed or questioned are real as we could actually meet them. This is a problematic concept in regard to *Community* for the shows characters, settings and events are fictional. Nonetheless they are treated as if they were real, there is no mention of their fictional existence; their reality is to be understood within their own universe.

**Re-enactments:** A re-enactment stages real events that already have occurred, mostly the parts of the involved are played by actors. As Abed films his Documentary whilst the events happen he does not make use of this convention. Which is odd considering that he in earlier episodes had actors re-enact scenes from the groups life.

**Archival Footage and Photographs:** Archival materials include old photographs, newsreel footage, and even shots from fiction films. Abed’s Documentary does not use any archival footage, which he could considering that he probably has a lot of photographs of his friends, instead the only visual material used from outside the situation displayed is a

188 *Community*: 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC February 17th 2011; 19:35-20:00
189 Admin of Documentary Site: *Documentary Conventions*; Published October 13th 2010; Documentary Site; http://www.documentarysite.com/?p=40 2012-05-13
picture of a signed autograph of actor LeVar Burton, which is what Troy wishes for regarding his bequeathal. There is also a recording that Pierce made of the study group trying to get them to badmouth Shirley behind her back but instead only having them defend her, this recording however is played as part of the situation happening in front of the camera and not edited in by Abed, the imagined filmmaker.

**Talking Heads:** Talking heads are people interviewed to explain or comment on the text’s subject. They are referred to as talking heads because they are usually shown in a head-and-shoulders shot. If they are professionals/experts often the background setting will reflect that such as an office or a lot of books, if they have personal attachment to the text’s subject they will often be shown in their home. As mentioned before, this is the most important and frequently used feature of Abed’s Documentary, due to it being the part of the narrative format that he as the filmmaker is most interested in. Pierce is interviewed in his hospital room, Abed outside the hospital with part of his camera team in the background, the others will be sitting at a table or in a hallway where they are alone or at least away from each other. Shirley is the exception because she actually steals the camera to make her own talking head interview in a closet.

**Shaky Camera:** A more unsteady camera and a somewhat lower picture quality are often attributes of Documentary, because whilst those cameras are more affordable and smaller thus easier to carry they also are more unsteady when following the action. *Community’s* cameras are not quite as shaky as for example in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), but their shakiness when for example running after Shirley reinforces the Documentary-style sufficiently. Also, due to fewer cameras and filming something as it happens thus not having the chance to retake a scene, the Documentary makes much more use of zooming than most other forms that rather just cut to a close up. The zoom also sets the episode apart from the rest of *Community* where it is only a very rarely employed technique.

**Voiceover Narration:** In voiceover narration the narrator is heard on the soundtrack without a source in the image, the speaker is not visible. The voice is there to explain and/or comment the visual. It is however a convention that was more frequently used in early Documentaries, in many contemporary Documentaries the narrator interacts directly with the subject. In *Community*’s Documentary there is no classical voiceover, sometimes

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191 ibid; 13:15
though the words from an interview are audible before the actual interview becomes visible, as for instance when Abed starts explaining that Pierce asked him to document his life (00:42) before he is visible in the picture (00:45) or Jeff commenting on him screaming at Pierce (18:33) before appearing in the picture (18:41). Regarding the sound, it is also to note that there is no music or other sounds edited in that do not come from what is visible in the picture, other than the dialogue what is heard are typical hospital waiting room sounds like announcements and requests through the PA(public address)-system, this highlights the difference in format especially considering how much music the series usually uses. The only exception is at the very end, when Abed both adds music and does a voiceover narration commenting on the process of wrapping up his movie with a montage set to sappy music in an effort to create a (false) sense of resolution through simple techniques.¹⁹²

There are five modes of Documentary as identified by Bill Nichols: expository, observational, participatory (also referred to as interactive), reflexive and performative.¹⁹³ Community’s episode does not completely fit into one of them, but the mode that it is closest to is the performative mode. In this kind of Documentary the maker (and crew) interacts with the subject, Abed does this on several occasions, for instance does he ask Jeff whether he wants to meet his father.¹⁹⁴ Also, the creator comments on the process of making the Documentary, just as Abed does as earlier described in the beginning of the episode but even more clearly at the end:

So, I thought the documentary format would be like fish in a barrel, but, as is the case with a real barrel of fish, after a while it can become cramped, chaotic and stinky. Fortunately if in the end your Documentary is turning out just as messy as real life, you can always wrap it up with a serious of random shots which when cut together under a generic voiceover suggests a profound thematic connection. I’m not mocking it. It works.¹⁹⁵

Abed is more interested in the format than in the story, he wants to know how Documentary films work. A performative Documentary does often try to investigate a subject and does not necessarily come to a satisfactory conclusion - just as Abed explains in his final voiceover that the end of his Documentary turned out just as messy as real life. Also this kind of Documentary often addresses the audience in an emotional and direct way, considering that the story starts out being about Pierce on his deathbed and then evolves into self-insight of characters that are beloved and well-known to the audience this

¹⁹² Community: 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC February 17th 2011; 19:31-20:00
¹⁹⁴ Community: 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC February 17th 2011; 11:10
¹⁹⁵ ibid; 19:35-20:00
Documentary most certainly addresses the shows devoted viewership on an emotional level. Besides that, Abed also tends to address his viewership directly when commenting on the format. The self-insight fulfills another part of the performative modes requirements, the subject of such a film often concerns itself with identity rather than ‘factual’ subjects. However it is not the aim of the episode to completely follow the lines of the Documentary format, but rather to tell a story about the characters learning valuable lessons about themselves and about the dynamics between them through the benefit of being aware of the camera. The other characters are also very aware of the process and comment on it, such as Jeff warning Abed not to intercut with images of him freaking out and Shirley stealing the camera to create her own talking head interview.

In *New Documentary* Stella Bruzzi works with the theory of documentaries inevitably being the result of the filmmakers (and cameras) intrusion on onto the filmed situation which leads to the films being performative “because they acknowledge the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film and propose, as the underpinning truth, the truth that emerges through the encounter between filmmakers, subjects and spectators.” This becomes first visible when the characters change the way they position themselves after realizing that they are being filmed, continues in the talking head interviews when the characters are more honest about their feelings, such as Britta noting that if the camera hadn’t been there she would have kept the money that Pierce gave her for a charity of her choice. Thus the episode manages to achieve a level of intimacy and honesty that others might have lacked, especially regarding Jeff for whom the viewer reaches much more understanding when seeing the anguish and confusion he suffers due to Pierce’s lie about his father. Jeff admitting to having issues about his father that he has neglected to work out is another step on his journey towards personal growth.

The genre inspiration for the episode is very clear, following many of its conventions and using them to benefit the story and carry it forward, but it does not happen to the disregard of the shows own genre, the universe and mythology are kept. It is still just as metatextual on every other level, but now the fourth level of metatextual enunciation is added. The episode does still feed the other metatextual levels, for example by employing the actor LeVar Burton as himself (2nd level, thematic construction of characters) and letting Britta reference him as Kunta Kinte which was his role on *Roots* (1977) and Troy sing the theme song of his show *Reading Rainbow* (1983-) and then saying “set Phasers

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196 *Community*: 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, first aired on NBC February 17\textsuperscript{th} 2011; 11:25-11:36
197 ibid; 13:57-14:15
to love me” as a reference to the actor being part of the Star Trek-franchise (1st level, quotations and citations). The episode being a Documentary filmed by one of its characters makes it part of the 3rd level, fictional texts within fictional texts and dependent on the existence of the primary text. It being a Documentary simultaneously generates the 4th level where the metatextuality lies in the semiotic system (here: the language of the Documentary format) used to produce the text. The Documentary gives the episode shape, but does not let it loose its defining metatextuality nor its comedic ties, for example does Troy bring in a lot of physical comedy such as being in so much shock about meeting LeVar Burton that he cannot speak to his idol and breaks down crying and singing in the bathroom. The episode does not neglect to use classical Sitcom tropes such as the “Gilligan Cut,” when Jeff warns Abed not to intercut with footage of him freaking out and that is exactly what Abed does. It is a classic cut in Comedy where something that is forcefully announced not to be done is immediately cut to. A swearword is bleeped out as is common in Sitcom due to it being a family friendly genre (although it is the only time that a curse word is bleeped out instead of simply cut off on Community and considering the looser censorship for Documentary and its claim on realism it does seem like an odd choice that I attribute to trying to bring the episode closer to the family friendlier Comedy genre as to not loose itself in the Documentary format). Also the show stays true to its carrying over details from previous episodes, starting out with the fact that Pierce is in the hospital due to pill addiction, using the different instances when Pierce was excluded from the group as jokes (forgetting his birthday and not inviting him to a Dungeons and Dragons game or secret trampoline), as well as reaching back to 2.05 “Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples” where Jeff and Britta became Pierces emergency contacts and thus are the first ones to arrive (with exception of Abed and his cameras which Pierce must have called in personally), and even further yet to 1.20 “The science of Illusion” where it is first stated that Britta is such a buzzkill that even a deadly disease would be more fun. Another typical trait for Community has at this point become the little sketch at the end, but it is not instantly obvious whether or not it belongs to the Documentary, my theory is that it does not since the shot-reaction-shot frequency is higher as well as the pictures color brighter and also because it comes after Abed’s closing voiceover and a black-out screen, but the

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200 ibid; 12:00-12:19
201 TV tropes: The Gilligan Cut; http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GilliganCut; 2012-05-15
203 ibid; 14:50
sketch does still make use of LeVar Burton and Troy’s fear of hanging out with his idol because he does not want to disappoint him.

Whilst episode 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking” very clearly uses conventions of the Documentary it does not let those stand in the way of being itself and keeping true to its own tropes and identity adopting the other genres style and techniques into its own world. Thus this episode was not just a concept-episode and did not let that high concept get in the way of the premise but instead uses it for the actual purpose of storytelling. The documentary device creates an added illusionary level of reality to the proceedings. The format helps the characters to reveal sides of themselves that they weren’t even completely aware of, and through that making them more real, like Jeff’s actual issues with his father and Abed’s realization that real life only rarely conforms to the format he wants to fit it into or Shirley’s insecurities about where she fits in with the group.

In the true spirit of Sitcom the episode still finds ways to joke about the issues thus not taking itself too serious. Simultaneously it manages to comment on how different television (Comedy) formats work (or don’t), particularly when Abed talks about how easy it is to boil down a complex plot when the character can just explain it (talking heads interviews). The episode allows for commentary on the format and the many crutches that Comedies using the Documentary-style lean on both verbally through Abed and through taking full advantage of those crutches itself. In a way it is also a comment on Community’s own narrative setup, when Abed in his final voiceover explains how helpful it is that one can just wrap up a documentary by cutting together generic shots to a voiceover that suggests a profound connection between them and gives a satisfactory ending to a story that might not have a fully conclusive ending, his speech also reminds of the Winger-speech that has become part of Community’s model of narration. By now it has become an integrated part of the series that every episode introduces a challenge to the group and somewhere in its final beats ends on a pompous speech made by Jeff, his friends soon start to call them classic Winger-speeches, in which he uses metaphors and platitudes to gather the group and remind them of the profound bond they share, as time progresses his speeches grow more honest and he believes more in them himself. In 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking” this story wrap-up is left to Abed whose place as a hidden main character is aided by this episode. Also, the third season will become less Jeff-centric and become more truly an ensemble Comedy in that there are more episodes that leave his story on the sidelines for the benefit of predominantly Abed, as for example episode 3.15 “Visual System Analysis” which follows Abed and Annie.

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5 Conclusion
Some scholars may try to make a case for the irrelevancy of generic labels, as for instance in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre*,204 or even proposing that it is detrimental to the works to which they are applied, but as I look at *Community* and the importance of genres for the series story, how plot and character growth can be based in the use of superficial genre conventions, I think we have to realize how important genres are both for the workings of the industry and for the viewers ability to understand a text. For instance does the viewer build a different story around floating objects in a Science-Fiction movie, where the different rules of that universe allow the general rules of our world to change, than he would around the same scene in a Melodrama, where the floating objects only can be read as a metaphor for a characters dreams or emotional world. Thus stories are dependent on the viewers understanding of their genres world. Of course with the continuously growing body of works it gets more complicated to find definitions that do right by the texts and art, nonetheless are genres not only vital part of everyday life but of history. The way a genre is defined during one period in comparison to another does say much about societies perception of what is for instance comic, sad or fantastical. And only by challenging those definitions and conventions can society learn about itself and grow. Thus genres have a responsibility outside their own world of movies, television, books etc. In challenging how reality is viewed and conveyed the texts that surround us and the fictional characters that we bond with are part of our legacy. Looking at genre gives much opportunity to learn about society and history, how it was perceived in different periods tells a lot about circumstances and priorities. Television is still a reflection of reality, which is after all ever changing. *Community* mirrors a society that lives and breathes media, mirroring a viewer that is literate in the expressions of modern media. In the course of exploring *Community* through genre I have come to realize that I follow a more recent stance within genre theory where fiction, or any other kind of narration or expression for that matter, does not have to be forced and jammed into the frame of one particular genre, but rather can make use of genre and even of several different genres conventions.

The aim of my thesis was to find out whether, or to which degree, the television series *Community* is a Sitcom. Whilst I during the analysis had to realize that some of the methods I originally intended to use and expected to be useful were far too restraining to lead to a clear conclusion (I am referring to the four basic functions for categorizing films into genres as devised by Joachim Friedmann and Stefan Wilke), I did manage to find a

worthy successor when looking at the shows potential to redefine its own genre by separating itself from the traditional Sitcom archetype: Antonio Savorelli's New Comedy, a concept that looks at the different metatextual levels employed in a contemporary show. *Community* has left the most prominent agreed upon identifiers of Sitcom behind for the benefit of multiple metatextual levels that are beginning to be the mark of a new kind of Comedy. Even though the show does not suffice as a conventional Sitcom, which is best “defined through technical traits of textual production,”¹ but as part of the evolution of the genre on its way to a new redefinition, it does still carry some of the traits of Sitcom. *Community* does follow some basic production traits such as the format length, every episode being 20 to 30 minutes long and every season having slightly more than 20 episodes, it is aired on Thursday nights which is NBCs main Comedy night thus it is scheduled together with other Sitcoms, as well as the temporal point of view mirroring the viewers calendar. Actors are cast that already have a connection to at least Comedy and their performance can be comic even on a more physical level. Sitcom makes a point of character representations being a reflection of the viewer, *Community* gives here an especially broad range considering the difference in race, faith and age of its protagonists.² With the small sketches at the end of every episode, for example Troy and Abed’s fake morning show, a quality is brought to the show that is only found in Comedy and often in the looser structure of the Sitcom where story can be sacrificed for the benefit of a joke. However, since it is just a small sketch at the end of the episodes it does not influence the actual story told but is more like a bonus. *Community* also follows the story pattern “Group and family ties,” which is the classic setup for Sitcom character conflicts in television series: “This pattern involves a group of characters who normally would have nothing to do with each other, but because of circumstances, are tied together in the story. Because of the arena/setting, they are forced into interrelationships that become the thrust of the story.”³ None of the seven main characters has chosen Community College but is there due to other circumstances that have driven them to Greendale where they are brought together which creates the thrust of the story to being their journey of changing through friendship. The premise being character-driven, meaning focused on lead characters and their relationships as opposed to the story-driven premise that is driven by circumstances faced by the leads, is also typical for Sitcom. Thus *Community* is at least close to Sitcom, leaning on some of the basic structures and setups, but disregarding

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other conventions of it. What mostly sets apart *Community* from other Sitcoms is its keen awareness, its great metatextuality and its freed up visual element. This component is freed up by firstly leaving behind the three-camera-setup and stale soundstage used as a stable set, thus opening up for the possibility of exploring other genres in addition to Comedy. In abandoning the laugh track the series is set further apart from classical Sitcom, in an extent also freeing up the visual and performance by no longer forcing the actors to take breaks in their dialogue to leave room for the laughter and thus being able to create a more realistic flow in the story, it also diminishes the need for the actors to laugh at their own jokes. Unity between the audience members is instead gained through reliance on their knowledge of pop-culture, and the validation of the humour is needed less due to trusting that every viewer can find his own level of comedic confirmation in either one of the characters, in the utterative or the physical carrying out of jokes. Another point where *Community* sets itself apart from archetypical Sitcom is its characters, whilst they are in their basis stereotypical as Sitcom characters are, they also have the ability to change and it is in fact their goal. The classic Sitcom will employ stereotypical characters who lack the ability to change themselves or their circumstances despite constantly trying and thus repeating the same or similar actions in a comic fashion. *Community*'s main characters are also stereotypical. Jeff is representing the vain and narcissistic player and typical lawyer being chauvinistic, conniving and opportunistic. Britta is a typical blond, somewhat stupid and clumsy, but also hypocritical in that she doesn’t always live up to her high convictions. The plus-sized Shirley is the typical nurturing mother type, part of the stereotype mammies that is often dragged onto Afro-American women, her Christianity and love for baking are an extension of that. The high strung Annie is a typical overachiever and teachers pet, but also filling the religious stereotype of Jewish people being smart. Troy fulfills the prejudice of Afro-Americans being good at sports, but he also stands in for wanting to be a typical strong male whilst still being an emotional kid inside. Pierce is the proverbial rich old white money, prejudiced against all he can always find something offensive to say without actually realizing how offensive he is. Abed than is somewhat less stereotypical, he is on one side a typical nerd, but he also stands in for both the viewer and the whole show, being self-aware and self-referential, he can both be an observer and take action. Abed might seem less able to change than the others, hiding his emotions under layers of pop-culture references, but he is able of coming to profound realizations about himself, such as needing his friends to keep him grounded and he also learns to compromise sometimes to a small degree for the benefit of his friends. All in all it
is the characters capability to change and learn that sets apart them from usual Sitcom characters. Another point of distinction is found in comparison to "a standard definition of Sitcom [that is] concentrating on the recurring set-up and characters, the happy ending and the fact that individual episodes rarely refer to events in previous ones," Community does place great value on continuity and will reference events from previous episode, one part of that is also the characters learning about each other and keeping that knowledge thus also growing in their relationships. At a first glance Community manages to set itself apart from archetypal Sitcom by seeming more realistic, especially in the visual component considering how it is more cinematic and moveable due to freeing itself from the constraints of the three-camera setup and also by making the characters more realistic through their ability to evolve, but then the different levels of metatextuality (particularly through the character Abed’s constant pointing out of how much their life is like a television show) come forward and considering the many exaggerated episodes the show does not intend to keep this first shallow promise of realism.

Community fits the label of New Comedy that Savorelli has given the contemporary American series he examined, but unlike Savorelli's point of those shows thus becoming excluded from the realm of Sitcom, and even though Community employs all of the four levels he defines, I want to state that Community does also keep a leg in the realm of Sitcom. I think that New Comedy should best be perceived as an evolution of the Sitcom (or Comedy as a whole) that will continue and that offers the genre more depth and creativity, with some luck it might even give the genre the appreciation it deserves when viewers and critics finally can look past the platitudes of the laugh track and the restrained aesthetic of the three-camera setup. I set out on a journey seeking to define a series place in its own genre, and had to realize that Community might mostly be part of what is happening or has yet to come. Compared to other genres, the Sitcom is a genre with a quite big array of set and long since agreed upon characteristics, ranging from shooting style, performance style and types of actors to program length as well as scheduling, but just as every other genre does at some point even the Sitcom has to start evolving, for a long time that has been restrained solely to content, now the change has reached the visual/stylistic component, surely because the success of hybridization and the successful deployment of other genres (visual) conventions. In an attempt not to fall into the same deep, dark and fear filled limbo that radio and cinema often seem to reside in, television has made changes that let it stay a contestant against the internet that still has its very

central part in our lives, mainly by connecting with it through the networks creating their own online streaming services. But television has also managed to attract viewership that disregarded it before by opening up the stage to creators and giving them free hands, with HBO and FX in the lead, authorship in television has risen and attracted talent away from the big screen. Comedy is the one genre that has been limping behind the innovation. Not daring to change, just as its characters, the Sitcom has lost novelty and spunk. There should be no need to tell the viewer something is funny, television has educated him long enough to know what is funny. Viewers find joy in re-watching and discovering new layers of jokes in episodes they already have seen. The fact that the methods of watching have changed for that watching television is no longer an activity restrained to unwinding and thus does no longer need to be easily accessible in its storytelling but can very well work on different levels and challenge the viewer. Today it is common practice to watch a whole season or at least a bunch of episodes at once, the characters need to be on a kind of journey, they need to change and evolve to stay interesting and real. The unity and engagement that the fan-community has shown is a sign of this show hitting a nerve. The viewer is a higher educated, younger person that cares about his on-screen friends, and that does not want to be dumbed down, the viewer of today manages to keep up with a constant stream of information on different devices and wants the same awake spunk from his television shows. Media today bursts with interactivity, a one-way communication medium like the television series thus needs to try and communicate with something else to stay relevant; a heightened metatextuality seems like a possible way to go. New Comedy is part of the Sitcom, but it is also part of other comedic hybrids where the comedy aspect is the dominant expression. It attracts the young and educated viewership and generates strong fanbases that stay dedicated and loyal to their show. These viewers love television, talk about it and live it, they are marinated in pop-culture and the social media around them; television needs to reflect that. The different metatextual layers are a way for the viewer to connect to television, being rewarded for his consumption when he recognizes the references. “Even though much of its patterns and techniques are universal and timeless, it must speak in contemporary and recognizable words and images to the society which it entertains, and the audience must certify its success by chuckles, giggles, and guffaws.”

Community does not make a strong case for a Sitcom, but a strong case for cult television and how well a medium that is a one-way communication street can

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209 Nussbaum, Emily: When TV Became Art: Good-Bye Boob Tube, Hello Brain Food; Published December 4th 2009; New York Magazine; http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/; 2012-05-22

manage to engage its consumers. In *Community*, the Sitcom remains in basic assumptions of for example stereotypes, in the surrounding casts roles as support for jokes, in the display of everyday life situations, but tropes are amped up and the story tweaked with a self-awareness of the medium that leaves no doubt for the love of it. On one hand the text stays simple, like the Sitcoms, but on the other becomes an intriguing self-commentary that might just lift up the genre from its position where it is dismissed as somewhat brainless and just simple entertainment. But *Community* is not the kind of show that generates a mass appeal, it is too quirky, too metatextual, too much of a creators personal vision and asks for too much involvement, contrary to the archetypal Sitcom. The upside of this is that it is a classic setup for a cult show, working for “the industry by creating small but highly engaged fanbases, and they can leverage that engagement to create buzz, ancillary sales like DVDs, and hopefully longer-term syndication or crossmedia deals […]”211 The negative being that many viewers will feel distanced by the meta-techniques especially if they do not care about the characters yet, which makes it hard or impossible to jump into the story at any given point, which is an ability the Sitcom usually values.

In regard to the use of other genres within the show; other genre formats and conventions are used as highlighters, as a means to telling a specific story about the characters that drive the premise, they are amped up and magnified to become instantly visible. Using superficial versions of genres that are traditionally seen as non-comic makes them very visible and easy to identify. Yet the story and the characters do not get lost in the concept, instead it helps magnify relationships and carries stories forward. As shown in chapter “4-3 *Community* and Genre adaption” the genres are not just used as a gimmick but help the characters to come to realizations about themselves (2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”) or forces them to finally act (1.23 “Modern Warfare”, Jeff and Britta). The show does not make a parody of other genres but instead uses their conventions for its own purpose, accelerating character developments or storylines. The metatextuality in *Community* always has a reason; it is a core part of the series narrative strategies, at times becoming a main source for the story (2.19 “Critical Film Studies”: Plot based on the movie *My Dinner with Andre*; 1.21 “Contemporary American Poultry”: Plot based on Mafia-movies; 2.16 “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking”: Form and partially plot dependent on Abed wanting to explore the genre). The theme-episodes stay within the boundaries of the reality of that world (the universe of *Community*), nobody leaves their

211 Mittel, Jason: *Community and Dan Harmon’s Imploding Author Function*; Published May 19th 2012; Just TV; http://justtv.wordpress.com/2012/05/19/community-and-dan-harmons-imploding-author-function/; 2012-05-19
place within that universe. “The style of the story is always dictated first by story – this is what will make this effective.”

The use of other genres or specific films (or television formats) is a main element that is part of the general definition of the show. But it does not turn the series into a hybrid, foreign conventions are used without straying from Comedy. Comedy here is not a mode, but the strongest and most defining objective, being produced as and perceived as Comedy. Community uses other genre formats and conventions to tell stories without altering the primary definition of being a Comedy even when the series’ visual rhythms are completely switched, because even in morphing into different genres and formats the episodes always manage to combine homages and other high-concepts with parody and with genuine stories about the characters and their problems. The overwhelming sense of the show’s identity is never lost. Every episode still remains a “miniature essay on friendship and belonging, and nearly every incident and every obscure line of dialogue works toward those themes.”

I’d like to come back to genre labeling always in part being the question where a genre ends. Community most certainly is not an archetypal Sitcom. The show has kept certain elements of the genre. My aim was to find where in the genre the show could be placed, or if it has crossed the border into another genre. Going back to a definition of Comedy as made by Geoff King, that I presented in chapter “2-4-1 Television comedy and Sitcom”, he states that the closest his book comes to a general conclusion, is that comedy tends to involve departures of a particular kind – or particular kinds – from what are considered to be the ‘normal’ routines of life of the social group in question. In order to be marked out as comic, the events represented – or the mode of representation – tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world. Comedy often lies in the gap between the two, which can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration. Incongruity features in a great deal of comedy […]. Comedy can result from a sense of things being out of place, mixed up or not quite right, in various ways. One set of examples is found in films that derive much of their comedy from temporal, geographical or other forms of displacement.

When we look at the definitions for Sitcom, which is best “defined through technical traits of textual production,” we find that Community disregards big chunks of it, but looking at King’s definition of Comedy we find that Community most certainly fits it, and even when employing other genre conventions in concept episodes it never strays from this definition as Comedy. Whilst I can see why it can be referred to as Sitcom, I am doubtful to defining

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212 Harmon, Dan: The Paintball Finale: From Script to Screen Part 2; 2010; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvI3u6F-v5A&feature=endscreen&NR=1; 2012-05-29
it as solely Sitcom. It is related to Sitcom, definitely. It is close to Sitcom even in disregarding prominent elements of it, but it does no longer suffice as instantly recognizable as Sitcom, which is as Brett Mills points out an important part of the text labeled as such: “[…], for many genres the very ‘naturalness’ of genre conventions is vital to efficient understanding of them. If comedy cannot function successfully in confused communication, the Sitcom must be a form which signals itself as quickly and unambiguously as possible.”

Summing up the parts of Sitcom which Community disregards, it does no longer communicate to be instantly identifiable as Sitcom; instead it will take the viewer a few beats to understand what he has stumbled into.

My conclusion is Community being an evolved version of Sitcom, one whose definition is no longer mainly dependent on superficial production features. This asks for a closer examination of narrational structures, especially in comparison to older versions of Sitcoms and television storytelling to understand the development. Further research should therefore be aimed at narration in television series and at the still very limited field of theoretical research regarding genres specifically in the context of television and its difference to the literary- and filmstudies approach, especially in considering “some of the industry and audience practices unique to television.”

As a part of that should also the storytelling mode of television be considered as different from the one employed in movies. Further research needs thus include a keener look at television series narrational mode, highlighting more of the difference of contemporary television series storytelling to older forms and films, as well as the difference between daytime Soaps and primetime series. I see here the by Jason Mittell proposed theory of Narrative Complexity in contemporary television series as helpful. It also clearly applies to Community. Whilst New Comedy, as the name shows, is aimed at one specific genre, Narrative Complexity is aimed at the whole form of television narrative. In his book Complex TV - The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling (which is under development but can be followed on the homepage futureofthebook.org) Mittell makes an argument for Narrative Complexity or Complex Television as a mode of contemporary television storytelling, an innovative narrative form that emerged during the late 1990s and continued growing throughout the 21st century. Thus it spans the same time-frame as New Comedy. This narrational mode is growing increasingly more common, has and is also changing genre definitions in television. Mittell also highlights the importance to differentiate the narrational mode of

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television from the narrational mode of the film as defined by David Bordwell, although his definition too “crosses genres, specific creators, and artistic movements to forge a coherent category of practices,” Mittell points at the complication of a cross-media comparison since it is not entirely possible “to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of television series where ongoing continuity and seriality are core features.” He aims at developing a vocabulary for television narrative on the medium’s own terms. As Mittel puts it, the attempt to employ a cross-media comparison can obscure more “than reveal the specificities of television’s storytelling form. Television’s narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the series structure that sets television apart from film and literature, and distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms.”

What I suggest then is that Community has not changed the genre of Sitcom (nor left it), but adapted the storytelling mode that Mittell has tracked through the last decade, I have however left too little room for the specific medium’s impact on genre. Whilst I consciously left aside the socio-psycho-economic departure common for television studies, there too should further research be done, in Community especially in regard to the mixture of the presented group, the presented educational system and metatextuality as part of modern day society; Sitcom is after all a strong representative of a culture’s identity and ideology, a way in which culture defines and understands itself. Here Community makes also a great example for impact on the society it is part of in regard to the strong involvement of the fans from viral chatter to art-exhibitions. The upheaval that the recent firing of creator Dan Harmon initiated and the future change of show runners will also make a great basis for examination of authorship within television series, especially in Sitcom, generally regarded to be the least auteur-friendly form. Also I have not addressed performance within Sitcom and its new forms sufficiently, nor certain character dynamics that also seem to be conventional within Sitcom, such as the male bonding yet somewhat childish friendship between Troy and Abed, it could be comparable to for example Joey, Chandler and Ross in Friends especially in regard to all of these characters fondness of childish games such as building forts.

The move away from laugh track and the theatrical setup of the production techniques is as previously stated not unique to Community, whilst there still are many series following

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220 ibid
221 ibid
222 ibid
the archetypal model of classical Sitcom there are also many Sitcoms on the air that do no
longer employ those (and that without using the mockumentary format, for in none of them
do the characters behave as if they know they are being filmed). So whilst there are
contemporary Sitcoms such as Two and a half Men and 2 Broke Girls, which are easily
identifiable as traditional Sitcom identical in setting, performance style, production
practices and laugh track as the kind of programming being produced for decades, there
are also “series such as Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Larry Sanders Show, 30 Rock (NBC, 2006-) and Scrubs (NBC, 2001-) [who] all reject the traditional sitcom style, and have
abandoned the laugh track, resulting in series with more complex narrative space and the
lack of ‘artificiality’ which can be seen as defining sitcom for its first few decades.”
A clear evolution of the genre Sitcom has or is taking place. I think that even though there
still are successful examples, Sitcom in its classic form is outdated. I am quite certain that
the time for laugh tracks and stale camera-setups is past. Savorelli's term New Comedy is
an update to it, but since it is not restrained to Sitcom, the term still troubles me in this
particular regard. An exact genre definition is incredibly hard if not impossible, especially
considering how smudgy Comedy's subgenres, besides archetypal Sitcom, are defined.
Does it make sense to open up a new genre category? Or has the change of the
narrational mode of storytelling in contemporary television series solved the problem? It
often seems like everything comic on television is simply called Sitcom.

I think that Community should be placed on the brink of Sitcom for even if it might not
feature the prominent production techniques that make Sitcom instantly visible and set it
so very much apart from all other television genres, it still employs core characteristic in its
story and when boiling down the genre term into its essence it still fits; a situation is a
position, locale or a state of affairs, the latter can be seen as a metaphoric extension of the
first, a story based on situation told with the intention of comedy is then a Sitcom.

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