Chapter 9

The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom

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When the hosts of the BBC's successful motor-themed programme *Top Gear* (BBC, 2002–present) indulged in some racist comments about Mexican culture (e.g. 'Mexican cars are just going to be lazy, feckless, flatulent, overweight, leaning against a fence asleep looking at a cactus, with a blanket with a hole in the middle on as a coat'), most people stopped laughing. The joke wasn't funny anymore. In his commentary on the incident, British comedian Steve Coogan argues (2011):

> It's not entirely their fault, of course. Part of the blame must lie with what some like to call the 'postmodern' reaction to overzealous political correctness. Sometimes, it's true, things need a shakeup; orthodoxies need to be challenged. But this sort of ironic approach has been a licence for any halfwit to vent the prejudices they'd been keeping in the closet since *Love Thy Neighbour* was taken off the air.

Debates about the offensiveness of humour and comedy on television are as old as the medium itself. It seems, however, that in recent years, the past decade in particular, a shift in the tone of comedic discourses is evident across the spectrum of televisual formats and genres. From the racist jokes of British stand-up comedian Bernhard Manning in the 1970s, via what might be termed the 'decade of irony' in the 1990s, to the ascent of embarrassment humour in the 2000s through programmes such as *The Office* (BBC, 2001–2003), mediatised forms of humour now seem to be more interested in 'laughing with' rather than 'laughing at' the butt of the joke.

The shift in taste from 'laughing at' to 'laughing with' seems to emerge most manifestly in American television comedy. In the early twenty-first century, American sitcoms like *Community* (NBC 2009–2015), *Parks and*

Recreation (NBC 2009–2015) and *Louie* (FX 2010–2016) represented a markedly different tone of humour from postmodern shows. They also seem to mark a new trend in the American sitcom. Showrunner Mike Schur has continued his exploration of human kindness in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (FOX 2013), which treats the cops it is about as decent albeit goofy do-gooders and *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–) a high-concept science fiction that even poses the questions: 'What does it mean to be a good person?' Louis CKs *Louie* has been quite influential, and we can trace the tendency to be 'laughing with' in the Louis CK–produced semi-biographic anthology comedies *Better Things* (HBO 2016–) and *One Mississippi* (Amazon 2015–). In these two comedies the viewers are invited to laugh with Pamela Aldon and Tig Notaro, respectively, and their everyday lives. *Community*'s live action aesthetics has perhaps not been as influential but can be found in *Son of Zorn* (FOX 2016–) where animated characters are mixed with real actors in order to dwell on the alienated relationship between father and son. We can also trace this development of 'laughing with' in other Anglo-American countries like the British sitcom *Catastrophe* (Channel 4 2015–) and Australian *Please Like Me* (ABC 2013) which both are 'laughing with' their flawed and deeply human characters in their search for human connection.

If this new generation of sitcoms is compared with some of the comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, a subtle shift in tone becomes apparent. Instead of the blank parody in shows such as *Family Guy* (FOX 1999–present) or the self-conscious superficiality and cynical resentment in *Seinfeld* (NBC 1990–1998), *Parks and Recreation*, *Community* and *Louie* encompass a human warmth often missing in their predecessors and are often characterised by a sincere yearning for meaning. There are still plenty of stylistic and formal similarities with postmodern practice, and it is not like the 'new' comedy can't be parodist, self-conscious or cynical, let alone superficial; they still appear, though, to signify a distinct change in the overall tone in humour. But what does this new tone of television humour entail? We understand tone in accordance with Pye, as 'the complex but seemingly automatic process which enables us to understand the kind of film we are watching and how it wants us to take it' (2007, 7). Tone thus lies in a film or, in our case, sitcom's address and how it communicates with its viewers.

This chapter explores the shift in sitcom tones and aesthetics from a postmodern to what we will argue is a metamodern comedic sensibility, and asks what this new metamodern tone and aesthetic of television humour might entail. We conceptualise what we take to be representative for the metamodern sitcom by investigating two different aesthetic categories, namely style and tone. These categories are interrelated: a programme's tone is inflected by its choices in style, but tone also encompasses how a programme communicates with its viewers through choices in narrative, dialogue, performance and music. Furthermore, we consider how choices in style and tone facilitate a distinct thematic sentiment. This metamodern sensibility is explored in detail by analysing three contemporary American sitcoms as follows: (1) *Community*'s style and how it seems to represent a metamodern sitcom aesthetics; (2) the performance tone and temperature of *Louie* which is located in a historic context of the stand-up as performer sitcom; and (3) the narrative scope and socio-cultural trajectories of *Parks and Recreation*. The latter analysis enables a discussion of a metamodern sitcom discourse and themes. Finally, these new shows are juxtaposed with two dominating postmodern sitcoms *Family Guy* and *Seinfeld*. We will focus on *Community*, and in particular *Louie* and *Parks and Recreation* because of their influence on current Anglo-American comedies.

SITCOM: HUMOUR, GENRE AND SOCIETY

In his study of contemporary sitcom, Antonio Savorelli asserts (2010, 176):

> Even some less conspicuous shows may have relevant roles as pressure valves, as fields of debate, as sources of inspiration. The public's mere need for laughter could not explain the success of a genre that remained for decades, if not unchanged, at least firmly anchored to its own productive principles.

In trying to identify a shift of tone within the sitcom genre, the question arises: how does situation comedy reflect the socio-cultural agenda(s) of the *zeitgeist* or, put in other words, how does humour take societies' temperature?

The vast and interdisciplinary field of humour studies proposes three main theories in order to explain what makes people laugh and why we experience jokes, performances and situations as funny: superiority, incongruity and relief. Without exploring these theories in detail, they all point to the fact that humour occurs as a result of social interaction between individuals and social groups. Hence, the kind of humour chosen reveals something about the values, codes and hierarchies prevailing within that certain group. Following out of that, we argue that humour in one of its most dominating mediatised forms, situation comedy on television, reflects on the social norms and taboos, as well as a general cultural *status quo* of (Western) society. Thus, we can assert 'a remarkable parallel between the themes of successful situation comedies and the social history of modern society' (Paterson 1998, 66).

No doubt, humour's volatile nature has influenced the sitcom genre throughout the past decades – from the anti-authoritative, feminist and politicised spirit of the 1970s, visible in shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–1977) and *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972–1983), via the dichotomy of

domestic conservativeness and subversiveness in 1980s sitcoms such as *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982–1989), *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992) and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997) and the postmodern irony of the 1990s in *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989–present) and *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–1998) to the 00's excesses of mockumentary embarrassment in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 1999–present) or *The Office – An American Workplace* (NBC, 2005–2013) and intertextual play and self-reflexivity in live action sitcoms *Scrubs* (ABC, 2001–2010) and *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006–2012). Just as society changes, humour changes. In the next section, we turn our attention to one of the most recent tonal shifts of humour in a more detailed analysis of three contemporary sitcom formats: the intertextual and self-reflexive live action *Community*, the stand-up–based genre-defying *Louie* and the mockumentary *Parks and Recreation*.

FROM AN AESTHETIC OF FARTS TO HEARTS

Community, a comedy created by Dan Harmon, is about a group of different misfits attending Greendale community college. They end up in the same study group and eventually become friends. It centres on the hipster lawyer Jeff (Joel McHale); the overachieving, young girl with a former addiction to Adderall Annie (Alison Brie); the political correct idealist and buzz-kill Britta (Gillian Jacobs); the stupid jock Troy (Donald Glover); the divorced housewife turned student Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown); the old, racist pig (Chevy Chase); and the borderline Asperger, pop-culture geek Abed (Danny Pundi).

The programme is often heralded for its clever self-reflectiveness, intertextual play and meta-referentiality (see, e.g., Emily Nussbaum's top ten list of 2010, *Entertainment Weekly*'s list of the top twenty-five Cult Shows from the past twenty-five years). *Community* has episodes spoofing everything from Louis Malle's (1981) film *My Dinner with Andre* ('Critical Film Studies' 2:19), Ken Burns documentaries ('Pillows and Blankets' 14:3) to spaghetti Westerns ('A Fist Full of Paintballs' 23:2) and zombie movies ('Epidemology' 6:3). With its use of parody, pastiche, intertextual play and irony – identified as some of the central characteristics of postmodern aesthetics by the likes of Eco (1993), Huyssen (1986) and Jameson (1991) – *Community* can, at first glance, be conceived to be a postmodern sitcom. Indeed, *Community* shares many aesthetic similarities with other live action comedies like *Scrubs* and *30 Rock* and animation comedies like *Family Guy*, with their excessive use of popular cultural references, irony, pastiches, parodies and throwaway jokes. Of these, *Family Guy* appears the most postmodern in style and will therefore serve as a point of comparison in our analysis of *Community*.

Crawford contends *Family Guy*'s use of parody, irony and pastiche results in a kind of magic realism and should be understood in light of the 'concerns of the postmodern age' (2009, 63). Drawing on Jameson's argument about postmodern aesthetics and culture she continues: 'The fact that *Family Guy* and many other prime time sitcoms are so sophisticated intertextually is due to the anxieties that the postmodern writer experiences. The postmodern writer feels there is nothing left to say' (63). *Family Guy* has translated this postmodern notion into an aesthetic often criticised for being blank and empty. Certainly, Trey Parker and Matt Stone have, for instance, criticised *Family Guy* for relaying too much on gag humour that has nothing to do with the story (Gillespie and Walker 2006). Crawford continues to argue that the pleasure of *Family Guy* lies in its aesthetic deconstruction.

The aesthetic function of *Community*'s intertextual play and use of parody and pastiche, however, does not appear to be deconstruction. It rather appears to function as an aesthetisation of the characters' quest for friendship and community. Take, for example, the episode 'Contemporary American Poultry' (21:1). The entire episode is more or less a pastiche on *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) from the (freeze) framing and camera movements to the doo-wop music and the voice-over. The plot centres on something as silly as chicken fingers. The student-cafeteria's chicken fingers are immensely popular and run out fast. *Goodfellas*-style, the study group takes control of the production and distribution of the chicken fingers, turning it into a neat black market operation. As Abed states in his voice-over: 'The entire campus is controlled by our group. Our group is controlled by chicken and the chicken is controlled by me'. However, not everyone is happy with Abed obtaining so much power as the chicken finger cook/mob-leader. Jeff, the study group's unofficial leader starts to sabotage Abed's operation. In the inevitable comedown between the two, the episode takes an unexpected turn. The episode is revealed to depict something as real and raw as Abed's struggle with his un-diagnosed Asperger syndrome; Abed and Jeff share an incredibly sweet moment, deepening the characters' relationship and their emotions for each other. As such, what at first seemed like just another *Goodfellas* pastiche transcends into a character-developing vehicle for Abed and highlights Abed's struggle to connect to other humans. Indeed, the episode also resonates on a more general level, as it exposes and thematises the struggle to make genuine human connections and communities, thus connecting with the viewers emotionally.

Community's articulation of emotion and affect through parody and pastiche, and herein lies its difference to *Family Guy*, is perhaps most visible in the sitcom's animated episodes and sequences. In 'Foosball and Nocturnal Vigilantism' (3:9), the programme featured an anime-styled sequence of Jeff and Shirley playing foosball as they work through their childhood trauma

of being, respectively, the bullied and the bully. As the game is at its most dramatic, the scene switches to animation and Shirley and Jeff are, during their game of foosball, transported to the top of a dramatically drawn mountain cliff in the style of Japanese anime. At once, the animation visualises the emotional drama underlining each angry scream and emotion, as well as distancing the spectator from the characters' human selves. Similarly, in the episode 'Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas' (11:2), Abed is only able to process his feelings towards his absentee mother when he and the other characters are turned into stop motion animation figures and transported to a nostalgic, fantasy winter wonderland, indicating that he has to go back in order to move forward. In 'Digital Estate Planning' (3:20), the group is turned into eight-bit game animated characters, as they play to help Pierce win a game his dad made before he died as a battle for his inheritance. During the game, both Peirce and his father's assistant, revealed to be his brother, come to terms with the passing of their father.

The animation sequences are interesting because they disrupt and distance the viewers from the physical actors. The animation indeed allows for a kind of magic realism but, unlike *Family Guy*, the magic realism does not function as deconstruction. The choice in animation style visualises and underscores the characters' emotional states and the themes of the episode. The use of animation simultaneously creates aesthetic distance as well as a space wherein real emotional connections occur. Thus, *Community*'s use of parody and pastiche cannot be understood as empty and blank. Rather, it endows the programme with emotional realism and meaning. If, as Jameson argues, postmodern aesthetics' main characteristic is emptiness and blankness, *Community* cannot be postmodern.

If *Community*'s use of pastiche, parody and irony is not postmodern, it should be conceptualised in the context of what follows postmodernism, namely metamodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that we have arrived at a stage where postmodernism can no longer explain certain tendencies in the arts and culture. Their account of irony, in particular, seems apt to describe *Community*'s use of aesthetics. They write: 'Metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy' (2010, 10). *Community* does bestow its use of parody, pastiche and intertextual play with ironic knowingness, but at the same time, perhaps because intertextuality and irony have – after decades of postmodernism – become so common, our desire to obtain connections, affect, feelings of sincerity and empathy has to be articulated through popular cultural parody and pastiche.

What this analysis of the use of style in *Community* demonstrates is that the metamodern comic sensibility is not so much a question of a distinct style, but is rather defined by the tone of the humour and the meaning the stylistic

tropes are imbued with. Thus, a metamodern sitcom is perhaps in particular defined by a specific comic tonality. Therefore, to conceptualise this shift in the sitcom genre we will now turn our attention to what appears to be a change in tone by comparing two on the surface very similar yet incredibly dissimilar sitcoms, and contextualise them more broadly in terms of the history of sitcom performances and humour.

PERFORMING COLD AND WARM: *SEINFELD* VS. *LOUIE*

There is an interesting moment in the HBO special *Talking Funny* (2011), in which four of the world's most well-known comedians (Ricky Gervais, Chris Rock, Jerry Seinfeld and Louis CK) engage in a conversation about their careers, comedy and humour. Jerry Seinfeld re-tells one of his favourite jokes by Louis CK. CK, watching in awe, concludes: 'That's a completely Seinfeld-ed version. You really polished it up'. Leaving the specifics of this particular joke aside, the little episode strikingly illustrates the fundamental differences between the comedians, as performers, as crafters of jokes, indeed as representatives of different comedic trajectories.

Jerry Seinfeld started out as a stand-up comedian on New York's comedy circuit in the late 1970s before gradually establishing himself as one of the most influential comedians on a global scale culminating with the sitcom *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–1998). Seinfeld created a unique comic voice based on his observational humour about the inanities of the everyday life faced by mostly white urban middle-class Americans, developing a comedic discourse about nothing. Interestingly, over a decade later, CK has had a similar ascent from the comedy clubs of New York City to the world of television sitcom. His humour, though equally observational, nevertheless has a more straightforward, personal, edgier, perhaps even tragic feel to it. For the purpose of this chapter, we will now juxtapose the performance styles as part of the comedic trajectory of both sitcoms, locating them within different historical camps with varying temperatures and identify them as representatives of respectively a postmodern and a metamodern humouristic tone.

Seinfeld: Romantic Love Is Not an Option

Whether *Seinfeld* can be described as the sitcom defining the 1990s is a tedious argument. Instead, it seems more appropriate to include it in a cluster of formats such as *Frasier* (NBC, 1993–2004), *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992–1998), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996–2005), *Will and Grace* (1998–2006) and *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989–present), which successfully illustrate the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s and

represent the last heyday of successful sitcom programming on American network television before the arrival of the digital broadcast age. For instance, NBC's Must-See TV Thursday night line-up (1981–2014), which combined episodes of various sitcoms back-to-back into one generic televisual text, can be regarded as one of the most successful examples of attaching an audience to a particular slot of television programming. What *Seinfeld* did, however, was to carve out a distinct kind of humour, which interestingly contradicts many of the basic rules of trying to attach an audience to a television sitcom format and, as a consequence, established a postmodern notion of cynical detachment.

In the show, we encounter stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld playing a fictional version of himself, as well as his friends George (Jason Alexander), Kramer (Michael Richards) and Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus). There are various plots the characters engage in, seemingly meaningless activities triggered by the urban experience of a life in Manhattan, with memorable plots such as a contest of who can withhold masturbation the longest ('The Contest' 11:4), an encounter with a bossy soup salesman ('The Soup Nazi' 6:7), a frustrating wait for a table in a restaurant, presented in real time ('The Chinese Restaurant' 11:2) or the desperate search for a parked car in a multilevel shopping mall car park ('The Parking Garage' 6:3). The storylines are framed by excerpts of Jerry Seinfeld performing routines as stand-up comedian, which often take up the themes of the episode.

The series successfully established a functioning world for its characters to exist in. However, *Seinfeld* neither actively tried to attract the largest audience possible nor play up to a lowest common denominator sitcom humour. Indeed, as Hurd suggests, 'The show actively resisted popularity: it even openly invited network disapprobation in its flagrant contempt for the firmly entrenched sitcom conventions so revered by network executives as indicators of commercial success' (2007, 763). It did so by refusing to indulge in the many possible options of soap opera narratives. Even though Jerry and Elaine have been dating in the past, there is no overarching narrative or plotline trying to get them back together in contrast to, say, *Friends*' Ross and Rachel, and they actually seem quite happy to not be together anymore ('The Note' 1:5, 'The Mango' 1:5). Even more so, all romantic relations of the main characters seem to have the single purpose of being objects of ridicule or serve as battle grounds for the protagonist's quirks, ticks and social anxieties – from Kramer's long line of bizarre dates – in 'The Puffy Shirt', Kramer dates a woman who is a 'low talker'; he converts a lesbian to heterosexuality ('The Smelly Car'); and dates a woman whose sole personification is that she has long fingernails ('The Pie') – via George's ill-fated engagement to Susan, which results in her death ('The Invitations' 24:7) to the portrayal of Jerry's

parents whose depiction is first and foremost a parody of Jewish pensioners living in Florida. As O'Brien suggests, 'Seinfeld is defined by a series of refusals. Romantic love is not even a possibility' (1997, 13).

The series, again unlike *Friends*, does not necessarily opt for the 'friends as substitutes for family or partners' approach either. Rather, it presents its main protagonists as a group of highly neurotic people randomly stuck together and, possibly out of laziness and convenience, not bothering to move on to other personal relationships or indeed to, socially and psychologically, develop themselves. One could argue, of course, that this facet is mostly a result of the genre's elliptic nature denying its protagonists a true sense of growth and character development.

There is another aspect where the series is deliberately trying to avoid an audience's deeper emotional attachment or to encourage any kind of serious interest in the notion of empathy when engaging with its (main and supporting) characters: the aspect of cold performance. Mills, in his attempt of theorising sitcom performance, hints at this phenomenon when he admits (2005, 92):

> I find *Seinfeld* virtually unwatchable, and know I'm in a minority for saying so. Yet my problem with the programme has nothing to do with its politics, setting, characters, or any other of a number of factors; I just think it's really badly performed, with an overeager excessiveness that feels like the programme is trying too hard to demonstrate its funniness.

Even though there seems to be a general tendency to accuse Jerry Seinfeld in particular of 'bad' or 'slack acting' in the series (in fact, there are numerous websites dedicated to his tendency 'to corpse' in scenes and reacting with genuine laughter to the joke deliveries of his fellow actors), it seems more appropriate to ascribe the performance concept of *Seinfeld* to a constant desire to foreground the jokes and punch lines, and by no means to engage in an authentic portrayal of characters and behaviour. It thereby creates a 'cold performance style', which, in turn, reflects the cynicism and detachment of the series' comedic trajectory. Hence, *Seinfeld* was playing to an audience in the 1990s which was aware of the potential 'meaninglessness' of its everyday lives and which, through the series, was able to reconcile its fragmented and postmodern existence with the generic workings of a sitcom on prime time network television. In the words of Hurd (2007, 771):

> The world of *Seinfeld* is an aesthetic one, in which the meaning lies in each well-made episode and the show's thematic negation of the world of work its viewers are bound to. Rather than minutely dissecting 'the real world', as is often supposed in discussions of the meaning of 'nothing', *Seinfeld* transforms it into humour.

Thus, *Seinfeld* is indeed drenched in postmodern ironic apathy where the humour is first and foremost observationally distanced, highly judgmental and very often serves as an end in itself.

Louie: Drunk, Angry and Humanly Imperfect

If, then, the humour performed in *Seinfeld* is 'cold', we argue that the humour of *Louie* (FOX, 2010–) might derive from a cold world but is nevertheless performed with warmth. Louie CK has developed two sitcom formats to date: *Louie* and *Lucky Louie* (HBO, 2006). The latter, which only ran for one season before being cancelled, tried to combine the traditional multi-camera sitcom look, recorded in front of a live audience, with adult themes and language. *Louie*, CK's second attempt at the genre, proved more successful. In itself, it would be an interesting task to compare the comedic discourses of both of CK's sitcoms to determine why his first attempt failed to find an audience, but it extends the scope of this chapter. In this section, we juxtapose the aesthetics, narrative and performance style of *Louie* with our previous analysis of *Seinfeld*.

Louie is produced as a single-camera hybrid sitcom. A hybrid sitcom abandons the traditional generic features of sitcom, such as the laughter track, multi-camera shooting style and theatrical setting. On an aesthetic, narrative and performance level, it successfully borrows from other genres, such as television drama, soap or reality TV. The premise of *Louie* reads like a sibling to *Seinfeld*. Louie CK plays a fictional version of himself, a quite successful stand-up comedian living in New York City, divorced and sharing custody for his two daughters. There are a few recurring characters, most notably his daughters, his friend and, at times, love interest Pamela (Pamela Adlon). Although they are not featured as regular recurring sitcom characters, the sitcom also includes his brother Robbie (Robert Kelly), his shockingly young-looking agent Doug (Edward Gelbinovich) and his ex-wife Janet (Susan Kelechi Watson). The plots and storylines do not follow a linear structure; instead, the episodes are fragmented, consisting of bits and sequences, similar to a stand-up comedian's dramaturgy. Just like in *Seinfeld*, actual footage of Louie CK performing in comedy clubs frames most of the episodes. However, *Louie* is less a show about 'nothing', but much more about CK's own fictionalised accounts of how to reconcile his divided 'single-dad'/'stand-up comedian' personas. Explorations of the latter especially feature various meta-narratives commenting on the world of comedy with many actual comedians playing fictionalised versions of themselves.

On an aesthetic level, *Louie* departs significantly from the traditional sitcom-ness of *Seinfeld*: instead of laughter track or single camera shooting style, *Louie* opts for a sophisticated mixture of mockumentary arbitrariness

and the cinematic mise-en-scene of the more recent films of Woody Allen (Susan E. Morse, Allen's regular editor, co-edits the series). In a way, the series' intro sequence perfectly encapsulates this dichotomy: it captures Louie CK on his way to work, ascending from the metro stop at Washington Square, walking to the streets of Chelsea and grabbing a slice of pizza before descending the stairs to the Comedy Cellar. CK's demeanour is passive, thoughtful, even world-weary and contradicts the chirpy cheerfulness of Jerry Seinfeld in his series. Similarly, the theme song, a re-recording of Ian Lloyds 1970s song 'Brother Louie' (an excerpt from the lyrics: 'Louie, Louie, Louie you're gonna cry/Louie, Louie, Louie you're gonna die!') sets the tone for the melancholic, often lethargic tone of the series and could not be further from *Seinfeld*'s slap-bass happiness.

Despite *Seinfeld* and *Louie* fictionalising the same world – the life of a stand-up comedian in New York City – their depictions could not be more different. Where the experiences of *Seinfeld*'s protagonists are drenched in sitcom wackiness and populated by artificial characters who mostly serve as targets for the distanced and cynical mockery of Jerry and his friends, the world of *Louie* consists of gritty New York streets and apartments, the shabby and narrow backstage areas of comedy clubs, populated by 'authentic' people. The tonality of the series is fuelled by its main protagonist's feelings of oscillation between personal doubt and self-loathing on the one hand and a desperate search for love and human kindness on the other.

Returning to our analogy of performance temperature in the sitcom genre, *Louie* serves as a striking example of what Mills identifies as the switch between serious and comic modes of sitcom performance, arguing that 'sitcom performance is not purely comic performance, just as all comic performance, in theatre, stand-up, film and radio, often uses a variety of interpretive modes' (2005, 90). To illustrate the length to which *Louie* is willing to go to display the serious mode of performance with the sitcom genre and how this influences the comedic tonality of the show, we would like to single out a sequence of the episode 'Eddie' (9:2). Here, Louie runs into his old friend and fellow comedian Eddie (Doug Stanhope) whom he has not seen in years. The two started out together as young comedians, before Eddie got jealous of Louie's success and broke with him. Now he is back and invites Louie to take a nightly drive. Louie soon realises that Eddie has truly hit rock bottom: he is living out of his car and is an alcoholic. When they stop at an open mike show in a small club in Brooklyn, Eddie goes on to perform and actually delivers some funny material, but on their way back to the car, with the Brooklyn Bridge looming in the background, he reveals to Louie that he is thinking of ending his life. He indulges in a rant of self-pity where he claims: 'I don't want anything. I don't want anybody. That's the worst part. When the want goes, that's bad'. Louie, visibly disturbed by the entire encounter, then

delivers a monologue in which he reflects on Eddie's failures and general outlook on life:

> Fuck you, man. I got my reasons to live. I worked hard trying to figure out what they are, I am not just handing them to you . . . ok. You want a reason to live? Have a drink of water, and get some sleep, wake up in the morning and try again like everybody else does . . . You know, you're laying this shit on me . . . (*a couple, loudly arguing walks by and interrupts them*) . . . Listen man . . . I . . . I haven't seen you in twenty years, and you're right, I don't think much about you . . . I hope you don't kill yourself . . . I really do . . . but I gotta go home. I gotta pick up my kids in the morning.

After the fragmented nature of the episode's plot up to this point and Louie CK's performance as passive observer, among other things subtly playing out how his fictional self struggles with drinking too much cheap booze out of a bottle – a nuanced, but nevertheless sitcom(ic) moment – he then switches mode into serious acting and grounds his character in a way which used to be unthinkable for this genre only some years back, delivering the speech with a humble sense of bewilderment that his character is confronted with these thoughts, at this hour, in this place. *Louie* compared to the apathy of Eddie (and *Seinfeld*) is filled with a detached desire for life. As TV critic James Poniewozik observes (2011):

> It would be so easy for the scene to become preachy. It would be easy to deflate it, to lower the stakes and puncture the tension, to assure us that, nah, Eddie not really going to off himself in a crappy motel in Maine. Instead, Louie never relents on the idea that this is a dead-serious moment, and it has the character Louie make the case for life in a drunk, angry, humanly imperfect way.

This kind of acting, then, which refuses to sacrifice all of a characters' frictions and contradictions for a joke or a laugh (like the more postmodern *Seinfeld*), and is primarily interested in portraying authentic emotions in realistic human beings, is metamodern and what we call 'warm performance style'.

PARKS AND RECREATION: TAKING ON THE TOWN

The transition from cold to warm performance style, we argue, signifies a shift from a postmodern to a metamodern tone and sensibility. *Community* and *Louie* both represent a warmer tone of humour that we would term metamodern. The metamodern tone of humour seems to encompass a certain sentiment and world view, and like the metamodern discourse seems to be 'inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern scepticism, the

metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5).

This sentiment – and the constant oscillation between naïveté and scepticism, and the commitment to the impossible possibility – is perhaps particularly evident in NBC's critically acclaimed mockumentary comedy *Parks and Recreation*, created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur. It centres on the life of the employees of the Parks and Recreation Department in the small fictional town Pawnee, Indiana. Through six seasons, viewers have been able to follow the main character, dedicated civil servant and the assistant director of the Park Department Leslie Knope (Amy Phoeler), fight to fill a hole and turn it into a park, organise a Harvest Festival, run for city council and fight to keep her city council seat under the threat of a recall vote.

What sets *Parks and Recreation* apart as a comedy is its focus not only on the core group of colleagues but also on political process and the town of Pawnee. For a sitcom to focus on an entire town's politics is quite unique; usually, sitcoms focus on the family, a group of friends or a workplace. The situations in the sitcom usually arise in a domestic or a workplace setting; thus the fictional world of the sitcom has traditionally been limited to the family, the family of friends or the work place family (Mills 2009). Often, characters seem to only interact with the core ensemble with some recurring characters and guest stars. *Parks and Recreation* with its focus on local government has a rather unique all-encompassing world view. Schur has even compared his sitcom to the expansive socio-political urban drama *The Wire* (HBO 2002–2007) in terms of scope (see Rosenberg 2012). Like *The Wire*, the bureaucracy in *Parks and Recreation* is sometimes treated as surreal, irrational and – as Leslie's libertarian boss would argue – a giant waste of money. Unlike *The Wire*, though, bureaucracy and civil servants are mostly represented with sincerity and as something positive.

Take, for example, the episode 'Sweetums' (15:2). The Park department has struck a deal with the local candy factory, Sweetums, and is supposed to start selling its energy bars from concessions stands. When it turns out that the energy bars only contain high fructose corn syrup and are extremely unhealthy, Leslie and her friend the nurse Ann (Rashinda Jones) try to stop the deal by hosting a town meeting to inform the public of the health risk. However, during the town meeting it becomes clear that the citizens of Pawnee are happy eating sugar, as one of the citizens argues: 'If sugar is so bad, why did Jesus make it taste so good?' Even after Leslie and Ann have explained how bad the energy bars are, the citizens still vote to let the 'heartless corporation, Sweetums stuff [their] children with sugary "crap"'. After being defeated Leslie mutters: 'We did our job, we informed the public, that's all we can do'.

Leslie's idealistic spirit is often crushed by the citizens of Pawnee, but she still continues fighting for the best of its citizens, whether they want her to

or not. The season six storyline – where angry citizens want a recall of the city council election because, among other things, Leslie fought for a law banning enormous soda cans – is telling precisely because Leslie fights for the citizens' best interests, even though if she ultimately loses her job. What separates the postmodern *Family Guy* and *Seinfeld* and the metamodern *Parks and Recreation*, *Community*, and *Louie* lies in a difference of sentiment informing the tone of humour and style.

Postmodernism is often associated with the death of meaning and grand narratives, a disbelief in progress and reason, and the idea of linear progress is replaced by deconstruction, irony, nostalgia and nihilism. This sentiment was in the late 1980s first translated into a handful of dysfunctional family sitcoms like *Married with Children* (FOX 1987–1997), *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons*, and eventually into the blank and entirely cold *Seinfeld* and *Family Guy*. The characters in *Community*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Louie* seem to live by a 'this is going to hell, but in the end at least we tried' mentality. It is particularly visible in *Parks and Recreation* because of its grand scope and focus on politics, but it is also apparent in how *Community* tends to end every episode with all the characters rallying to help each other establish a tiny community. It is also apparent in *Louie* and how, despite being tough, he always seems to lose the girl or the job; he is still aiming to be a good comedian, friend, boyfriend (material), lover and dad. The characters Eddie and Louie in the scene discussed earlier are perhaps the perfect manifestation of postmodern and metamodern sentiments, respectively. Where Eddie has lost all desire, Louie has also struggled with finding 'a reason to live', and knows that he has to pick up his kids tomorrow. These characters seem to be defined by their commitment to impossible possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Tracing tendencies in the sitcom is difficult because of the wide variety of (often-conflicting) formats, styles, temperatures and sentiments that characterise both the history of the genre and the contemporary American sitcom. Our case studies – *Parks and Recreation*, *Louie* and *Community* – are contemporaries of other comedies, including (to mention a few): the very Seinfeldesque *The League* (FX 2009–2016); many traditional multi-cam sitcoms like the somewhat 'cold' *Two and A Half Men* (CBS 2003–present) and the 'warmer' *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007–present); a 'cold' cynical animation sitcom like *Archer* (FX 2008–present) and a 'warm' one like *Bob's Burgers* (FOX 2010–present); and warm mockumentary sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC 2009–present). However, *Community*, *Louie* and *Parks* and

Recreation stand out in their balancing acts, constantly oscillating between parody and sincerity, apathy and desire, naïveté and scepticism.

The shift in tone from the coldness of *Family Guy* and *Seinfeld* to the warmth of *Community*, *Louie* and *Parks and Recreation*, as well as their distinct world view and discourse indicates that a shift in comedic tone is prevalent. As *Parks and Recreation* and *Community* ended in 2015 and *Louie* is on hiatus, their legacy is as mentioned continued. *Parks and Recreation*'s focus on human idealism is continued in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* where the cops portrayed come across as the idealised version of cops – true civil servants. *The Good Place* drives this exploration even further focusing on the afterlife. The answer to what constitutes a good person seems to be that there are no really good people just flawed ones who do their best. Louie's search and longing for genuine human connections is continued in *Better Things* where viewers follow Pamela Aldon's everyday struggles as a single mom and aging actress and *One Mississippi* as Tig Notaro's return to her home town to deal with the passing of her mum. Like *Louie* these two programmes focus on felt everyday situations, like a the death of a parent or the struggles of single parenting facilitate an affective feeling of lived-in-ness not found in the postmodern sitcoms

These situation comedies feel metamodern because they derive from a specific cultural logic within Western capitalist societies (van den Akker and Vermeulen, this volume) in which sitcoms as products of television entertainment merge the mode of production with their distinct mockumentary aesthetics and focus on everyday life. It is here that a clash between irony and authenticity emerges, reconciling audiences with flawed and complex, but ultimately lovable characters.