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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Sitcom as refuge, sitcom as prison: Nostalgia, anti-nostalgia, and the embedded multi-camera sitcom in *WandaVision* and *Kevin Can F**k Himself*

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Abstract

This article claims that the recent trend in television and web streaming drama series to feature segments shot in the style of a multi-camera sitcom, a phenomenon which is termed "embedded sitcom," reflects the current popularity of nostalgia in popular culture. Situating the sitcom in the context of television history and theories of nostalgia, the article argues that embedded sitcom reveals the nostalgic quality of the sitcom genre as well as of the medium of television, and negotiates a larger cultural conflict between the lucrative potency of nostalgia for past media formats and a wariness of nostalgia as politically regressive.

INTRODUCTION

Of all television genres, the situation comedy is the most long-lasting and arguably the most iconic. As the "most prominent instance of a TV-specific genre development" (Voigts-Virchow, 2005, 214), the sitcom is widely recognized as "television's quintessential genre" (Kompare, 2005, 122). In its 70-plus-year history, the sitcom's narrative structure and multi-camera production format has essentially remained the same. This article argues that the sitcom's enduring existence, association with the repetitive rhythms of early network television, and technical and narrative features have transformed multi-cam sitcoms into prime sources of televisual nostalgia in the early 21st century.

This article begins with discussions of nostalgia theories and nostalgia's affinities with the sitcom form in its historical context, before illustrating how *WandaVision* (Disney+, 2021) and *Kevin Can F**k Himself* (AMC/AMC+, 2021–2022, afterward *KCFH*) indulge and challenge sitcom nostalgia via a process this article calls "embedded sitcom" – traditionally produced multi-cam sitcom segments contained within a framing single-camera drama series. *WandaVision* and *KCFH* faithfully and convincingly recreate the stylistic conventions of multi-cam sitcoms from specific

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historical periods. In doing so, the series resurrect idealized versions of the televisual and cultural past. Over the course of *WandaVision* and *KCFH*, they also question the nostalgic idealization by showcasing how drama series diegeses render nostalgic sitcoms morally and politically untenable. Ultimately, *WandaVision* and *KCFH* view the sitcom format as an inadequate mode of televisual representation that the drama series' protagonists must overcome and leave behind.

Juxtaposing the drama format with the embedded sitcom segments in both series illustrates how present-day popular culture simultaneously seeks to profit off nostalgia *for* the past and to establish itself as progressive by distancing itself *from* the past. At the end of *WandaVision*, the series finally abandons the sitcom form, but that does not undo the recreation's nostalgic effect. While the problematic disconnect from reality that goes hand in hand with nostalgia is on full display, nostalgia also has a positive function in the show. It provides an imaginary refuge in which the protagonist finds shelter from the traumatic events that characterize her dramatic superhero existence. In contrast, *KCFH* presents the sitcom form as a prison from which the wife/protagonist is trying to escape. The show uses the sitcom format to engage in an anti-nostalgia that works to denounce and destroy the reactionary patriarchal ideology that supposedly defines multi-cam sitcoms. Contributing to the ongoing interdisciplinary debate about the prominence and functions of nostalgia, this article argues that *WandaVision* and *KCFH*'s use of the embedded sitcom highlights the profound ambivalence toward nostalgia in contemporary popular culture.

NOSTALGIA, TELEVISION, AND THE MULTI-CAM DOMESTIC SITCOM

Svetlana Boym explains that nostalgia, "from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*— longing," is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (Boym, 2001, p. 11). In literature, Odysseus' deferred journey toward and yearning for his homeland in Homer's *Odyssey* epitomizes this longing. Concomitantly, nostalgia is "a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood" (2001, 13). First defined in the 17th century as a medical condition akin to homesickness, the meaning of the word has since broadened to indicate a generally available human emotion (see Sedikides et al., 2015, pp. 191–194). Until roughly the turn of the 21st century, nostalgia was often understood as "essentially inauthentic, ahistorical, sentimentalizing, regressive and exploitative (particularly in commercial terms)" (Holdsworth, 2011, p. 103). However, since approximately 2000, an ever-expanding interdisciplinary literature has tended to stress the positive aspects of nostalgia, reframing it as "a search for ontological security in the past" (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 921) that provides people with a "sanctuary of meaning" (Wilson, 2005, p. 87).

In the early 1970s, Alvin Toffler first postulated that nostalgia had become a widespread social phenomenon when, in the context of his broader diagnosis of what he called "future shock," he wrote about a "wave of nostalgia" (Toffler, 1970, p. 407) sweeping the nation. This condition of "shattering stress and disorientation" had, in Toffler's estimation, gripped the United States in the 1960s in the wake of rapid social, economic, and technological changes. Those developments caused a "break with the past" (12) that paradoxically led people to seek refuge in fantasies of a "simpler, less turbulent past" (407). At the end of the decade, Fred Davis contended that the 1970s nostalgia wave differed from earlier instances because it focused on media and media products. Previously, nostalgia had been chiefly concerned with "persons, places, and events of political or civic character." However, in the 1970s, nostalgia selectively turned toward "media celebrities, old movies, TV shows, popular music styles, and dated speech mannerisms" (Davis, 1979, p. 125). Thus, the 1970s mark the moment in US history when media became nostalgia's central "passage point" (Niemeyer, 2022, p. 152). Nostalgia became mediated as well as media-focused.

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Much of 1970s nostalgia fixated on the 1950s and that decade's television programs, particularly domestic sitcoms. This is evidenced in people's fascination with 1950s programs and in hugely popular 1970s shows set in idealized versions of the Fifties (most notably *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984)). This article argues that in the domestic sitcom, a range of distributional, formal, and narrative elements converged to turn it into the perfect conduit for, as well as object of, mass-mediated nostalgia.

First, from the 1970s onward, constant reruns of 1950s sitcoms on local and national television made the mediated past more readily available than before (Becker, 2018, p. 250). Indeed, the nostalgic notion of the 1950s as the "golden age of television" preceded the perception of "the Fifties" as a golden age of economic prosperity and cultural and political stability in later decades (see Kompare, 2005, pp. 107–11). As Daniel Marcus contends, the very concept of the Fifties came to stand for "the contemporary notion that life had really been as simple and comforting as a television sitcom" (Marcus, 2004, p. 201) back then – and implicitly suggests that it could be again.

Sitcoms' portrayals of families proved similarly influential. Arguably, 1950s domestic sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC, 1954–63) and *Leave it to Beaver* (ABC, 1957–1963) established the nuclear family as the template of the "normal" American family in popular culture. Specifically, as Mary Beth Haralovich explains, the families featured a "breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and growing children placed within […] the suburban home" (Haralovich, 1992, p. 61). Stephanie Coontz has argued that this pervasive, idealized image led many Americans in later decades into a "nostalgia trap," or "the tendency… to view present-day family and gender relations through the foggy lens of nostalgia for a mostly mythical past" (Coontz, 2016, p. 14). This is problematic, because the 1950s' "seemingly attractive features were inextricably linked to injustices and restrictions on liberty that few Americans would tolerate today" (2016, 14). Yet, as Horace Newcomb points out in *TV: The Most Popular Art*, 1950s family sitcoms were themselves built on nostalgic longing for the "morals and values of an older time" (Newcomb, 1974, p. 55). Ironically, that time, which was characterized by uniformly happy, white, middle-class nuclear families, never actually existed. The later nostalgia *for* the Fifties was based on nostalgia *in* the Fifties.

The medium of television, which itself became inextricably associated with notions of home and the family, made this longing for nowhen and nowhere all the more ubiquitous and powerful. As Amy Holdsworth demonstrates, "both nostalgia *and* television are attached to the idea of the home…" (2011, 97 orig. emphasis) as a result of "television's embeddedness in domestic space" (2011, p. 15). Further, Tim O'Sullivan notes, watching TV became the "essential social habit of the age" from the 1950s onward (1998, p. 203) and families engaged in it together. Therefore, segments of people's television viewing memories "function as quite powerful points of symbolic, biographical and generational reference" (O'Sullivan, 1998, p. 202), which makes domestic sitcoms particularly potent anchors for nostalgia for many individuals.

In addition, sitcom's mode of broadcasting itself has nostalgic connotations. The network television text is a flow marked by "cyclicality and endlessness" (Holdsworth, 2011, p. 34), and "repetition is actually the primary structuring factor of commercial television in the United States," as Derek Kompare shows (2005, xi). As Gary Cross argues, nostalgia is partly a reaction against the modern idea of time as linear progress. Television's repetitive, reliable, ritualistic rhythms allow viewers to reconnect with a pre-modern sense in which "time was experienced mostly as a cycle of seasons and festivals" (2015, 6). American network television is an inherently nostalgic medium that constantly re-plays, and thereby re-lives, its own past. Sitcoms were the most rerun and syndicated television genre in the network and network and cable eras. They are "the consummate repetitive program form" (Kompare, 2005, p. 92), and consequently, "the most common form of nostalgia TV" (Cross, 2015, p. 120).

Most intriguingly, traditional sitcoms are narratively structured in a manner that parallels the nostalgic journey exemplified in the *Odyssey*. A stable cast of more or less strongly

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stereotyped characters find themselves in a new comic predicament every week. At the end of each chaotic episode, the scenario and characters return to the equilibrium of its starting point. As Newcomb points out, the funny situation that will inevitably follow next week "will be entirely nondependent on what happens tonight" (1974, 31). For Newcomb, the episodic, repetitive reliability with which a "sense of completeness… a happy ending" (57) will be accomplished explains sitcom's persistent appeal. Sitcoms allow audiences to experience a successful homecoming every night. In their endlessly repeated return to an ideal state of blissful domestic normalcy, sitcoms are nostalgic wish-fulfillment fantasies.

Sitcom's theatrical mode of production further amplifies its nostalgic potency. In traditional multi-cam sitcoms, three or four cameras film the action that unfolds continuously scene by scene on a sound stage. Often, the actors perform in front of a live audience. The audience's reactions are recorded and broadcast along with the action and dialogue as an audio laugh track. Aesthetically, the traditional sitcom features what Jeremy G. Butler calls a "zero-degree style" that "does not call attention to itself" and "emphasizes the performance of the actors and the dialogue" (2019, 39). This invisible style's function is to create "the illusion that the program is being broadcast live and that the viewer is sharing an event with the studio audience in real time" (Butler, 2019, p. 29). Viewers can therefore experience the format as both authentic *and* inauthentic, a paradox embodied by the laugh track, which for many viewers defines the genre. The recorded and frequently manipulated version of the studio audience's response to sitcom performances suggests liveness and thus authenticity (Smith, 2005), while also drawing attention to "the artificial, theatrical nature of the genre" (Mills, 2005, p. 50).

This contradiction has been at least partially responsible for the recent decline in the popularity of the laugh track, along with the multi-cam format as a whole. In the early 2000s, the lack of a laugh track became a marker of prestige and quality (Butler, 2019, p. 33) in a new breed of single-camera comedies often deemed more flexible, relevant, inclusive, and funny (see Savorelli, 2010).[1] This suggests a further reason why the laugh track has become a key ingredient of nostalgia for the traditional multi-cam sitcom. For Boym, nostalgia is an expression of "an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym, 2001, p. 11). In US television, the rise of cable precipitated fragmentation as it splintered audiences into smaller groups that increasingly lacked the common ground that characterized television viewing in the early network era (see Lotz, 2018). By suggesting that the individual audience member is still part of a larger community of viewers who are watching a live event together (see Kompare, 2005, p. 15), the laugh track now evokes memories (or triggers fantasies) of how the sitcom family living room used to represent the shared home of the imagined community of the television audience as a whole.

CRITICAL NOSTALGIA: SITCOM AS ENIGMA, REFUGE, AND PRISON IN *WANDAVISION*

In *WandaVision*'s penultimate Episode 8, hero Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) re-lives a number of traumatic events from her childhood in the fictional, war-torn Eastern European nation of Sokovia. The dramatic flashback retroactively reveals the origin of the astonishingly accurate stylistic recreation of vintage sitcom formats in Episodes 1 to 3 and 4 to 7 of *WandaVision*. Each of these episodes is shot as a sitcom episode that simulates the narrative, thematic, and technical conventions of American domestic sitcom production and broadcasting of a particular decade. Beginning with the 1950s in Episode 1, the sitcom formats progress toward the present by one decade per episode. While Episodes 1 to 3, respectively, mimic *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961–1966), *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965–1970), *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), and *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–1974), Episodes 4 to 7 simulate *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982–1989) and *Full House*

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(ABC, 1987–1995), *Malcom in the Middle* (Fox, 2000–2006), and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020) (see Salem, 2021).

In the Episode 8 flashback, young Wanda is obsessed with American sitcoms, which her father supplies on pirated DVDs. The DVD covers present a selection of the sitcoms that the earlier episodes of *WandaVision* had mimicked. Teaching his children English and echoing Newcomb's nostalgic definition of traditional sitcom, Wanda's father suggests that sitcoms are about "shenanigans… a silly mischief that always becomes fine" (00:14.02-05). In an archetypal scene of family watching that mirrors both the communal viewing experience associated with early network TV and the prototypical sitcom family harmoniously united in "peace, love and laughter" (Newcomb, 1974, p. 55), Wanda, her twin brother Pietro, and her parents watch "It May Look Like a Walnut," one of the most iconic episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. WandaVision's first episode had closely imitated the visual style and sense of humor of this episode.

When an airstrike hits the building and kills Wanda's parents, the sitcom fantasy is violently transformed into a drama. Terrified, Wanda, and Pietro cower in the rubble next to an active Stark Industries-made bomb that has failed to explode. The bomb's flashing red light belatedly reveals the traumatic origin of the uncanny commercial for the "all new Toastmate by Stark Industries" (Episode 1, 00:10:38) that interrupts *WandaVision*'s first episode. Thereby, it also reveals childhood trauma, which is *WandaVision*'s central "narrative enigma," as the origin of the sitcom format (Mittell, 2015, 25, orig. emphasis). The conclusion of "It May Look Like A Walnut," in which Rob Petrie awakens to find that it had all been a nightmare, continues to play on the family television set amidst the debris. As the silly sitcom shenanigans cast an eerie light into her own drama reality of destruction and death, young Wanda expresses a desire to wake up in a world in which a happy ending is guaranteed.

The flashback sequence in episode 8 concludes with Wanda magically creating her own safe and peaceful nostalgic dreamworld. She fills the generic template of the sitcoms she adored as a child with personal wish-fulfillment fantasies, interspersed with repressed traumatic memories that, like the bomb, appear on her sitcom in symbolically encoded form. Converting the real town of Westview into the setting of a suburban sitcom, Wanda creates a sitcom husband version of her deceased significant other Vision (Paul Bettany) out of thin air—a "memory made real," as Vision later states (Episode 9, 00:36:19). Then, she transforms herself into the 1950s sitcom wife the viewer first met at the beginning of Episode 1.

Thus, the flashback explains the sitcom that makes up the entirety of most early episodes of *WandaVision* as a nostalgic illusion, resulting from Wanda using her superpowers in the attempt to avoid facing the loss of Vision (as shown in *Avengers: Infinity War* [Anthony and Joe Russo, 2018]). As a child of the 1980s, Wanda does not channel her super-powered longing into a return to her actual homeland. Instead, she escapes to Westview. The historical summation of "suburbia-on-screen" (Black, 2021, n.p.) is her nostalgic recreation of the United States that she viewed on sitcoms during childhood.

Wanda's mediated illusion points to a contemporary understanding of nostalgia in line with what Ryan Lizardi has termed "narcissistic nostalgia." This "focus of yearning on an individual and solipsistic level" creates "individualized pasts… defined by idealized versions of beloved lost media texts" (Lizardi, 2014, p. 4). However, the theory suggested by the flashback sequence in Episode 8, like the television sitcom format itself, harkens back to the mid-20th century, when psychoanalytic accounts characterized nostalgia as a "substitute for mourning" (Werman, 1977, p. 396). The repetitiveness and dependability of the sitcom becomes an expression of Wanda's psychological state, which this school of thought ascribes to nostalgics more generally: "[n]o resolution takes place; everything remains suspended. In fantasy a deep attachment continues despite awareness of the reality (and the irreversibility) of the loss" (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1980, p. 122). In blending media formats and theories of nostalgia that

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bridge the mid-20th century and the present day, *WandaVision* envisions sitcom and nostalgia as interlocking forms of denial.

Wanda's sitcom-formatted variant of what Boym calls "restorative nostalgia," an anti-historical, regressive attempt at a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 2001, p. 16), results in her alienation from reality as well as from her own fantasy world. Upon first entering her sitcom as a newlywed arriving in Westview in Episode 1's cold open, Wanda finds that she is not readily accepted there. Although appropriately humorous in tone, the first three episodes of *WandaVision* revolve around Wanda and Vision's attempts to hide their superpowers and conform to their neighbors' expectations. Wanda finds herself repeatedly ridiculed for her foreign manners, and Vision's boss (Fred Melamed) lets her know that he does not "break bread with Bolsheviks" (Episode 01, 00:11:39). Sitcom existence is also presented as "an exercise in laughter and forgetting" (Vanderbilt, 1993, p. 154). Neither Wanda nor Vision can initially recall where they are from, or what they are doing in Westview in the first place, which illustrates that indulging in nostalgia demands forgetting real history. The moment Wanda begins to remember, at the end of Episode 3, is also when her sitcom world begins to destabilize. Further, the audience here first becomes aware of the embedding Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) drama reality.

WandaVision presents the MCU "reality" in a format that is largely identical to Marvel's superhero blockbuster movies, in terms of both its cinematic style and action-oriented narrative. The drama format is literally embedding Wanda's sitcom. An almost impenetrable wall of televisual static surrounds Westview, containing the sitcom town while separating it from the drama world. From Episode 4 onward, Wanda's sitcom turns out to be not only psychologically unhealthy but also politically repressive. Wanda adopts the exclusionist, xenophobic practices directed against her in earlier episodes, most immediately by violently expelling S.W.O.R.D. agent Monica Rambeau (Teyonah Parris), the only major Black character in the series, for being "a stranger and an outsider" who is "trespassing" (Episode 04, 00:25:27–25:33) in Westview. Wanda's nostalgic restoration can exist only at the price of the psychic and physical imprisonment of the other inhabitants, whom she either coerces into playing various bit parts on her sitcom or reduces to human props.

Wanda's sitcom reflects Coontz' observations about the exclusionary nature of nostalgia. To provide a sanctuary of meaning for some, sitcom has to be a prison for others. By embedding its sitcom in superhero drama, *WandaVision* attempts to engage viewers in what Gary R. Edgerton calls "critical nostalgia" (Edgerton, 2011, p. XXVII). The series encourages its audience to develop a "metafictive awareness" (Twomey, 2018, p. 40) of the problematic consequences of idealizing the past through its media products, and particularly of any attempt to impose that ideal onto others in an act of restoration.

Yet the drama also embeds the sitcom on a formal level: it imposes its own linear form of seriality onto Wanda's fantasy. For all the accuracy of its historical recreation of past sitcoms, Wanda's refuge fails because it lacks traditional sitcom's most important nostalgic feature—the reliable return to a stable, unchanging state of safety and happiness after each episode. From the beginning, various clues indicate that Wanda's vintage sitcom will ultimately abide by the parameters of serial drama. There are visual format changes (e.g., aspect ratios that contract and expand, changing with the simulated decades); the animated credit sequence in the style of a typical MCU blockbuster that disrupts the sitcom format at the end of each episode; and numerous uncanny glitches in sitcom style and narration that attest to an underlying drama reality. Thus, in Episode 1, Vision's boss chokes on a piece of food at dinner, while his wife frantically and repeatedly shouts "Stop it!" (Episode 01, 00:19:00). As the un-sitcom-like incident unfolds, tense, dramatic music temporarily replaces the laugh track, while the wide and medium wide shots customary of the multi-cam format give way to claustrophobic closeups. Similar multi-cam-disrupting visual and sound effects mark several incidents in Episode 2, among them the ominous appearance

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of a beekeeper who emerges from a manhole. However, this time, the entire scene visually rewinds to just before the uncanny moment begins.

Collectively, these televisual alienation effects prompt the audience to search for a contemporary drama reality hidden beneath the vintage sitcom surface from the very start of the series. Once the Episode 8 flashback has explained its existence and nature, the sitcom format disappears from the series altogether. As history moves inexorably toward the present represented by the superhero drama format, the object of Wanda's infinite regress of longing becomes ever less attainable the more desperately she tries to will it into reality.

Wanda's nostalgia for a life in the "comforting predictability of old television" (Shaw, 2021, p. 289) responds critically to a paradox built into Wanda's native screen genre, the MCU superhero blockbuster. In contrast to the episodic, repetitive rhythm of sitcom, MCU blockbusters generally follow "a linear form of serial progression, continuation and development" (Denson, 2011, p. 536). Yet this linear seriality co-exists with "mythological characters" (Singer 2013, p. 358), giving rise to a contradiction between the superhero's "unchanging, deathless nature" (Flegel & Leggatt, 2021, p. 49) and the "open-ended, unpredictable, progressive, but ultimately finite development" of the story in which the character finds herself (Singer 2013, p. 358).

As a result, as Felix Brinker notes, modern superhero dramas such as those in the MCU "tend to put their heroes through seemingly unceasing series of dramatic situations and follow-up complications" (2022, 75). Still, similar to sitcom characters, audiences expect superheroes to bounce back from those situations as if nothing had happened. "Even the most devastating traumata… often turn out to be strangely inconsequential, as the hero is bound to return and perform additional amazing feats in the future" (Brinker, 2022, p. 75). Where sitcom characters are suspended in a self-perpetuating cycle of domestic happiness, the generic co-existence of ever-compounding consequences with fundamentally static characters in the serial superhero blockbuster leads to an infinite series of traumata that can never be worked through because they never end. As Frank Kelleter asserts, "the hero requires a suitable villain as one episode requires the next. There is no end to it" (Kelleter, 2017, p. 9). If *WandaVision* encourages a reading of sitcom nostalgia as a problematic refuge from drama reality, that reality is itself constricted by similarly limiting generic conventions—conventions that make the amusing, peaceful, mundane life of a sitcom character look very attractive indeed.

ANTI-NOSTALGIA: SITCOM AS REFUGE AND PRISON IN *KEVIN CAN F**K HIMSELF*

KCFH presents a different variation of the embedded sitcom. The series faithfully recreates the 2010s multi-cam sitcom format and contrasts it with a single-camera drama narrative. The show aims its satirical crosshairs at *Kevin Can Wait* (CBS, 2016–18), a traditionally produced domestic sitcom that was generally unsuccessful. However, the show achieved brief media notoriety in 2017 when it gratuitously killed off its sitcom wife character in between seasons. In an attempt to cash in on nostalgia for Kevin James' earlier hit sitcom, *The King of Queens* (CBS, 1998–2007), woman lead Erinn Hayes was replaced by Leah Remini, while James' male lead remained in place. *Kevin Can Wait* trades in the "schlubby husband with hot wife" trope that peaked on television in the early 2000s (see Marin, 2004), but its airing coincided with the rise of the #Metoo movement. Focusing on a feminist reinterpretation of arguably sexist multi-cam sitcoms from the more recent past (see Enns, 2023), *KCFH* displays a very different attitude toward sitcom nostalgia: in the words of director Anna Dokoza, the show aims to "shatter […] the multi-cam experience" (cit. Chaney, 2021, n.p.). *KCFH* pursues an anti-nostalgic agenda.

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At the beginning of *WandaVision*, the audience is bound to wonder why MCU superhero Wanda appears in the role of a 1950s sitcom wife. On *KCFH*, the viewer may likewise be surprised, but the effect works in the opposite direction. The first two minutes of *KCFH* are straight multi-cam sitcom presented in a classic zero-degree style, including a three-walled living room set, high-key overhead lighting, and bright colors. Interrupting her husband's beer pong match with a request for more adult behavior while carrying a laundry basket, protagonist Allison (Annie Murphy) is immediately recognizable as the archetypal sitcom wife, the "spiritual and moral arbiter of the house" (Frazer & Frazer, 1993, p. 168). Allison's husband Kevin (Eric Pedersen) and his friends react to Allison's "moral strictures which spoil so much fun" (Frazer & Frazer, 1993, p. 168) with a barrage of belittling jokes and sexist bullying to applause and cheers from a raucous laugh track. Yet, when Allison walks out of the sitcom living room at scene's end, the format suddenly changes to a drably lit single-camera drama world, filled with cockroaches, depression, drug addiction, and broken dreams. Throughout the series, this drama format takes over whenever Allison leaves Kevin's sitcom-inducing presence. *KCFH* gives a sitcom wife a separate dramatic existence.

On *WandaVision*, Wanda retreats to nostalgic sitcoms to evade the trauma she endured in a superhero drama. In *KCFH*'s drama world, the trauma of being a sitcom wife becomes visible. At the same time, the drama format is a site of resistance where Allison uses increasingly drastic means to recover the dignity and agency denied to her by the multi-cam form, which culminates in repeated attempts to murder Kevin. However, on *KCFH*, the drama format does not displace the sitcom. Until the series finale, the amount of screen time allotted to single-cam and multi-cam segments per episode remains stable, denying audiences the sense of progressive closure that ultimately justifies their indulging in sitcom nostalgia on *WandaVision*.

In *KCFH*'s first episode (Season 01 Episode 01), Allison's daydream is emblematic of the series' anti-nostalgic attitude. Triggered by seeing a real estate advert for a suburban home, the daydream situates Allison's series-long struggle to free herself from her sitcom wife role in the history of the domestic sitcom genre. The sequence is optimistically lit and shot in a commercial-like style, albeit not quite zero degree, that notably contrasts with the usually dull lighting and muted colors of Allison's drama world. It displays and gradually subverts an updated version of a perennial symbol of 1950s culture—the beer commercial. Seated and dressed unusually neatly in a shirt and dinner jacket, Kevin looks on fondly as a smiling Allison serves him a beer in a sparkling new kitchen. Dressed in a 1950s style shirtwaist dress and wearing heavy makeup, Allison clearly enjoys the nostalgic pose (Season 01 Episode 01, 00:09:01–09:17). Even in her own drama format, Allison at this point still exemplifies the "normative fantasy" (Marcus, 2004, 2) of 1950s domestic life, embodied by traditional sitcom's representations of suburban middle-class happiness.

However, in several reruns of the fantasy sequence during the episode, Allison becomes increasingly more distressed as Kevin's egocentric, manipulative nature becomes ever harder to ignore. When the real Kevin asks Allison to pour him a beer in their kitchen at the end of the episode, the final iteration of the fantasy turns the generic tables on him. Allison smashes the beer mug, pulling Kevin over into her drama world as the overhead lighting goes out and the laugh track falls silent. Importantly, this is the only time this happens while Kevin is on screen before the series finale. Then, Allison stabs Kevin in the neck with the mug handle and looks on fondly as her husband bleeds out. Even though the fantasy turns out to have been just another daydream that quickly dissolves back into the sitcom format (where Kevin uses the occasion of her bleeding hand to make a crude joke about Allison's menstrual period), breaking out of her own nostalgic fantasy sets Allison on the path to eventual liberation.

In the repeated reruns with minor variations that grow more and more disturbing, the 1950s-esque daydream sequence reveals the dark side of traditional sitcoms' nostalgic returns. No matter what the sitcom husband does, the sitcom wife must reappear contentedly in the next episode. Like the genre he embodies, Kevin's existence is episodic. This makes him physically

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and mentally indestructible, despite Allison's strenuous drama-world efforts to stab, poison, and shoot him. Character development is neither possible nor necessary for Kevin either. As Lucas Gagliardi contends, "Kevin remains in his initial mold, safe in a structure that excuses his behavior" (Gagliardi, 2022, pp. 27–8, my translation). The multi-cam format is a refuge for Kevin because he lives in the nostalgic sitcom's certainty that "[w]hatever the extent of the transgression, all is forgiven by story's end…" (Pugh, 2018, 6). Kevin's catchphrases, most notably "I'm the gift that keeps on giving Baby!" (Season 01 Episode 02, 00:02:34–02:38) and "Kevin and Allison, together forevah!" (Season 01 Episode 03, 00:17:38–17:40), sound ominous because sitcom conventions have continually made such proclamations true.

By contrast, Allison's experiences unfold linearly. In the serial drama narrative between the sitcom scenes, she has to deal with the oft-disastrous real-world fallout of Kevin's irresponsible behavior. Consequently, the sitcom that is Kevin's refuge is also Allison's prison. Since her husband's presence on screen precipitates the sitcom format, turning life into a game that is "rigged" in his favor (Season 01 Episode 08, 00:32:06), the multi-cam sitcom in *KCFH* becomes the equivalent of being stuck in an abusive marriage.

On *KCFH*, the struggle between sitcom and drama also reflects a set of broader cultural conflicts. As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine demonstrate, in the early 2000s, a discourse of distinction facilitated the rise of so-called quality TV. That discourse culturally legitimated a new, purportedly better kind of television, represented by drama series such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008). Serial drama represented quality in the discourse, while the multi-cam sitcom and its laugh track was a remnant of the disgraceful past that television was leaving behind. Echoes of the "contempt for the traditional sitcom audience's tastes, and for the television industry for pandering to it" (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 75) reverberate throughout *KCFH*. In particular, the laugh track implies that sitcom audiences, as well as the multi-cam sitcom genre, enthusiastically support the regressive patriarchal ideology that Kevin stands for. The political implications become explicit in Kevin's widely cheered run for public office on a right-wing, populist platform (Season 01 Episode 08). The series finale, in which Kevin's sitcom format finally collapses into drama after all his enablers have abandoned him, likewise implicates the viewer of traditional sitcoms in Kevin's abuses.

Not only does *KCFH* mark Allison's difference from the rest of Kevin's sitcom crew via her insistence on more respectful modes of social interaction but her yearning for class and cultural sophistication also sets her apart. This includes her dream of reading *Ulysses* by "Joyce Something" (Season 01 Episode 02), owning nicer furniture, moving to a better neighborhood or traveling to Paris. Allison's former job as a paralegal, from which Kevin got her fired, made her feel like she was "worth something" (Season 01 Episode 04, 00:40:02), unlike her current employment at the liquor store. Her doggedly working-class sitcom husband, who does not share in her ethos of self-improvement, perpetually thwarts Allison's aspirations.

A flashback in Season 02 Episode 03, in which Allison remembers her father's wake, is particularly instructive. In a stunning deviation from the otherwise unambiguous identification of the sitcom format with Kevin's brand of toxic masculinity, in this scene the one and only appearance of Allison's mother Donna (Peri Gilpin) brings about the multi-cam sitcom style and laugh track. The callous way in which Donna undercuts Allison's ambitions and self-confidence, metaphorically weaponizing a honey-glazed ham Allison has bought for the wake, connects the scene to the other multi-cam segments on *KCFH*.

Donna: It's too fancy… It's not that you bought a ham. It's that you think we're ham people… You're just like your father. Real lofty goals, terrible follow through…
Allison: Actually, I was thinkin' about going away to school.
Donna: Oh, Allison. College is for ham people. [Laughs derisively] (Season 02 Episode 03, 00:17:11–18:08).

By implication, multi-cam sitcoms are for those who are *not* ham people; those who do not have "lofty goals"; and those who do not leave their hometown or go to college. This is the traditional sitcom audience despised by advocates of quality TV.

Although less obvious than *WandaVision*, nostalgia provides a crucial perspective for understanding the intergeneric dynamics at work in *KCFH*. *WandaVision*'s recreation of "the emblematic genre of the traditional small screen" (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 79) constitutes an (ultimately doomed) effort to actualize Wanda's idealized memories of traditional sitcom. By contrast, *KCFH*'s sitcom is an attempt to highlight everything that is structurally, aesthetically, and politically *wrong*—at least in the eyes of *KCFH*'s creators—with "old TV." In *KCFH*'s portrayal of a battle between single- and multi-cam formats in which single-cam ultimately prevails, the show dramatizes quality TV's larger goal of "relegating [the multi-camera comedy] to the past, or to the realm of the… passé" (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 79). Essentially an anti-sitcom, *KCFH* pits its satirical anti-nostalgia against the nostalgia that it portrays as complicit in keeping the politically unconscionable multi-cam format alive in shows such as *Kevin Can Wait*, *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003–2015), and *Last Man Standing* (ABC/Fox, 2011–2021). Yet in its attempt to right one form of injustice, the series perpetuates and legitimizes discourses based on a set of questionable cultural hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The embedded sitcom discussed may prompt audiences and scholars to rethink our relationship to the mediated relics of the pop-cultural past. As in other cases of televisual genre mixing, "unstated generic assumptions rise to the surface through textual juxtapositions, production decisions, and reception controversies" (Mittell, 2004, p. xiii). This encourages a revaluation of the sitcom format via present-day production standards, narrative conventions, and politics. The embedded sitcom provides a textual example of what Lynn Spigel, writing about Nickelodeon's Nick At Nite sitcom rerun-network, characterizes as television's "recontextualiz[ation] [of] the past in terms of contemporary uses and perspectives" (Spigel, 2001, p. 362). This recontextualization simultaneously hits the viewer with "a fair-sized dose of romantic nostalgia for the good old days of television when everyone lived in shiny happy suburbs" (361) and makes "the idea that the viewer is somehow more enlightened than the characters (and audiences) of the past […] absolutely central to the interpretation the network solicits" (362). Thus, embedded sitcoms embody television's own nostalgia strategies. Recombining tried and true generic formulas, embedded sitcom delivers nostalgia and its critique in one neat consumable package, allowing audiences to indulge in the past while shoring up progressive identities in the here and now.

Longing for the sitcom form and the televisual past to which both series discussed in this article respond is akin to yearning for a sense of community associated with the act of watching traditional TV. Gary Cross argues that late-capitalist "consumed nostalgia… *binds together not community or families but scattered individuals*" (Cross, 2015, 10, 14, orig. emphasis). But nostalgia's attraction consists in the promised return to a time before this isolation. The dialectic of refuge and prison engaged in both series is an acknowledgment that a community is always defined against an outside group of those who do not, and perhaps do not want to, belong to it. A nostalgic refuge for some can be one only because others are kept out and might well be experienced by some on the inside as stifling. As Boym explains, the longing is what we all have in common. Once we try to replace it with belonging, the community often splinters into isolated groups (2001, 13). Yet this realization does not eliminate the need to belong, and that is why nostalgia will always be both problematic and attractive.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Representative examples include *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000–2024), *The Office* (BBC TWO, 2001–2003/ NBC, 2005–2013), and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020).

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