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Stephen Glynn

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Introduction

1.1 ARE YOU BEING SERVED? THE SITCOM SPINOFF FILM AND ACADEMIA

A popular British pub-quiz question (until rendered obsolete from over-use) would ask: what was the biggest ever box-office success of Hammer Film Productions (1934–1979)? From the studio synonymous with Gothic horror, the expected answer would have been something with Peter Cushing and/or Christopher Lee. If inflation warned against choosing the ever-menacing *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958) or Britain's first colour horror film *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957), one might have ventured the updated *Dracula A.D. 1972* (Alan Gibson, 1972); the Lee-centred *Scars of Dracula* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970) perhaps, or Cushing's saga-concluding *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (Terence Fisher, 1974)? Maybe something more exploitative like the sexed-up *Lust for a Vampire* (Jimmy Sangster, 1971)? No, no, and no again. The answer was far removed from Transylvania, insane asylums, or Castle Karnstein. Far more terrifying for some, the correct response was the cheaply made feature-film spinoff of a popular ITV television sitcom and Hammer's first return to comedy in over a decade. The answer to the pub-quiz question, and to Hammer's then seriously declining fortunes, starred Canning Town-born music-hall entertainer Reg Varney in *On the Buses* (Harry Booth, 1971), a comedy feature film which reworked the 'great life' adventures of bus driver Stan Butler and his depot workmates,

a set-up which had, for over a year, been keenly followed most Friday nights by UK (and later Commonwealth) television audiences.¹

The tagline for the film's publicity materials, 'From Telly Laughs to Belly Laughs', could (but for its medium specificity) serve as a subtitle for this volume, which explores the intermedial phenomenon of comic creations such as *On the Buses*. The Varney vehicle is a prime example of the British sitcom spinoff film, a low-budget domestically marketed and commercially successful production strategy largely associated with the 1970s but which, like its source texts, has proven a persistent and important component of British popular entertainment from the 1940s to the present day. Any investigation of these films risks being adjudged, rather like Stan Butler's working and amorous activities, as somewhat insalubrious, taking as it does a route through the more blatantly commercial and coarse byways of the film industry. Indeed, given their near-total absence of any pretence to artistic merit, the sitcom spinoff film has largely been seen, by both press critics and academia, as less the 'belly' than the 'armpit' of British cinema production, an unpleasant, even gross area resistant to prolonged examination. For instance, Hammer historian Sinclair McKay wrote of *On the Buses* that 'It is gob-smackingly mortifying. And it makes any one of the *Carry On* films look like Richard Brinsley Sheridan' (2007, p. 146).

This 'mortification' or (to overwork the body metaphors) 'cold-shouldering' of the genre has been a prevalent response. Pioneering early works on British film history, produced at the outset, end and after the sitcom spinoff's perceived 1970s pinnacle/nadir, simply ignored the genre (Durgnat, 1970; Armes, 1978; Curran & Porter, 1983). This was a common response to 'low' and popular genres as UK academic film criticism, seeking to establish the same medium legitimacy and significance enjoyed by literature, focused on the twin bastions of realism and quality (hence Sheridan before *Carry On*). As the importance of British film history as an area of critical enquiry gathered momentum from the mid-1980s, it began to explore the body of films this dominant realist discourse had marginalised, famously termed by Julien Petley (with a different metaphor) the 'lost continent' of British cinema (1986, p. 98). The next two decades saw this bias rectified, with myriad genres such as melodrama, the musical, crime, horror, and science fiction, once intellectually derided, now fully re-evaluated, while within the British comedy film, its music hall, seaside, and indeed *Carry On* traditions all came to benefit from the new revisionism (Medhurst, 2007; Kerry, 2012; Gerrard, 2016).²

One area, though, has remained relatively unexcavated, still seemingly unworthy of concerted academic attention or recognition in screen culture's dialogic democratic processes—the sitcom spinoff film. As Brett Mills observed in his pioneering studies of its source text and small-screen staple, 'the academic community seems much more comfortable writing about ... "comedies of distinction" rather than "traditional sitcom", and does so using criteria which foregrounds those aspects of such programmes which most actively distinguishes them' (2009, p. 134). The same holds true for the sitcom's film spinoff versions, rarely commended while often additionally vilified for their 'nakedly' economic imperative (as if this constitutes a difference in kind rather than degree from other genres)—that is when not again ignored in economic/industrial histories of British cinema (Baillieu & Goodchild, 2002; Barber, 2013). There have been tangential appreciations from fan culture, celebratory and anecdotal volumes on specific British sitcoms aka 'Britcoms' with, where relevant, a short treatment of ensuing film versions (Webber, 1999, 2001; McCann, 2001; Galton et al., 2002; Walker, 2009; Fisher, 2010). There are also concise (and accomplished) critical compilations of television comedies, list books with plot summaries, yet these add only cursory personal assessments and/or quality ratings to any spinoff iteration (Taylor, 1994; Lewisohn, 1998). Even the first academic treatments of specific (and incontrovertibly 'distinctive') British sitcoms give but brief attention to any ancillary cinematic exploitation (Hunt, 2008; Wickham, 2008; Walters, 2016; Weight, 2020).

There have been tentative and isolated academic incursions to the big-screen versions of small-screen favourites. Andrew Higson significantly noted how the television sitcom film adaptation was an 'important if under-valued' strand in British cinema and 'a means of maintaining a stake for British film-makers in production and for British films in exhibition', but then straightaway joined in the habitual kicking by terming it 'a rather desperate strategy' (1994, p. 233). Such disparagement has continued largely unabated. For example, Dave Rawlinson decries 1970s British cinema as being bogged down in 'sitcom spin-off hell' (cited in Harper & Smith, 2012, p. 97), while Andrew Roberts notes how, in the period, 'the British sitcom spinoff soon became synonymous with utter grimness' and with 'relentless levels of tat on display' (2018, p. 78). So much for academia, but Britain's national press has also been—and remain—equally dismissive. For instance, one of the earliest British spinoff films, the wartime morale-rouser *Happidrome* (1943), caused P.L. Mannoek to rage against what he termed 'a real fillip to my celluloid-saving campaign. So

amateurish and puerile is this effort that it made me uncomfortable to watch it ... To me the picture lowers the prestige of British studios' (*Daily Herald*, 8 May 1943). Advance to the height of the 1970s spinoff boom and Gerard Dempsey, amidst a review of *The Lovers!* (1973), decried how 'There is something desperate about 30 minute television comedies trying to be full-blown, widescreen feature films. At best, they are loosely strung episodes hopefully looped along a sagging story line. At worst, a tired little sketch stretched to breaking point' (*Daily Express*, 15 May 1973). Move on another 40-plus years and Camilla Long opens her review of Ricky Gervais' *David Brent: Life on the Road* (2016) with a complicit hatchet-job on the genre: 'I guess we'll have to agree that most sitcom films are a mistake—dreadful, ugly, sprawlingly self-interested sewers of comic neediness featuring angry past-it comedians who hate you because they have failed in Hollywood, and whom you're not sure you ever liked anyway. The sitcom film is the preferred medium of the small, disappointed middle manager: it's like watching tennis played on sand by one of your dad's furious pub mates' (*Sunday Times*, 21 August 2016). Not a fan then, Camilla?

Amidst the academic brickbats and bad press (and myriad metaphors), the British sitcom spinoff film has twice received discrete (and skilled) academic attention, from Adrian Garvey (2010) and Peter Waymark (2012). These, though, came via single chapters in edited collections, and remained firmly focused on the genre's 'heyday' in the 1970s. There has, in short, been little sustained engagement with the spinoff genre. Thus, this volume presents the first full-length single-authored study devoted to the British sitcom spinoff film, a study that explores the genre's longevity both before and after the infamous 1970s zenith/nadir, and thereby proposes a comprehensive and nuanced counter-argument to the prevailing reductive (and sometimes ridiculing) view of its place in film history. With due democratic process, all qualifying examples will be investigated, and while the study will show itself at times partial to the preferred practice observed by Mills in highlighting distinctively progressive examples of the genre, it will be emphasised that even these retain a dependency on 'traditional' sitcom tropes, differing largely in degree of application rather than kind.

1.2 EVER DECREASING CIRCLES: SPECIFYING METHODOLOGIES AND DEFINING PARAMETERS

The above caveat with regards to ‘qualifying examples’ indicates that empirical parameters need to be drawn for this undertaking, both for practical and methodological reasons. *The British Sitcom Spinoff Film* is open to several analytical frameworks and, when deemed appropriate, will venture into the domains of television, radio, and adaptation studies, teasing out the specificities (the similarities and differences) of the different media in industrial and aesthetic terms. Overall, though, the work is intended to sit firmly within the field of film studies and to operate as a discrete genre study. This specificity still needs attention, though, since film genres are notoriously ‘easier to recognise than to define’ (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010, p. 91). Attempted definitions and explorations (such as this one) habitually adopt a textual approach, but any taxonomy is beset by problems of circularity, seeking to delineate recurring features in films assumed a priori to belong to the category. Helpfully, Christine Gledhill sees genres functioning as a ‘conceptual space’ where ‘issues of texts and aesthetics—the traditional concerns of film theory—intersect with those of industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences—the central concerns of political economy, sociology and cultural studies’ (2000, p. 201). The British sitcom spinoff film, with its explicit financial imperative, yet re-presenting popular tastes across several decades, offers such a conceptual space and is here understood as a work of cross-media adaptation, one that takes the *blueprint* of a British-made radio or television sitcom and extends it, without great expenditure, to feature-film length for cinema exhibition. This blueprint will comprise the main characters (and habitually their associated actors), their sitcom situation (at least initially), and (for the most part) all associated names, topographies, musical motifs, and writers. This study will contextually demonstrate the British sitcom spinoff film’s economic imperative (especially in the industry’s financially difficult 1970s), with textual analysis employed to focus both on genre development—how/if the films delivered their popular appeal over time—and also on how the films function as vehicles for social history.

The ‘conceptual space’ of the British sitcom spinoff can thus be assessed both for form and for function. These concepts, though, work across axes

of fluidity and fixity. Another issue with film genres, as Steve Neale emphasises, is that they are ‘inherently temporal’ (1990, p. 56): they are dynamic entities that develop across the years through reaction between the text, its producers, and its audience. While such shifts will be evident across this study, the films’ source texts, the television sitcom, retain an influential core of commonly agreed characteristics. How, then, to define the sitcom? One important characteristic is the shooting style, the ‘sitcom aesthetic’, often referred to as the ‘three-headed monster’ and built on a three-camera set-up, usually with studio audience, that eliminates any stiff stage restrictions and allows close-ups both on speaker and responder/reaction shot, thus doubling any potential laughter (Putterman, 1995, p. 15). Regarding their structure, the sitcom is categorised by Larry Mintz as ‘a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour’ (1985, p. 114). This definition, of course, is not unique to the sitcom genre, nor consistently applied, and fails to register content and function, in particular the comedic imperative. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik more narrowly offer up ‘a short narrative-series comedy, generally between twenty-four and thirty minutes long, with regular characters and setting’ (1990, p. 233). Rod Taylor, accepting that ‘there are grey areas all round’, looked succinctly for ‘continuity of situation and/or character in a work that intended to amuse through either’ (1994, p. 10).

Indicatively, these continuities have a structuring economic base. The three-camera set-up and repetition of locations—and uncomplicated interpersonal relationships—are financially significant, allowing for the use of a handful of embryonic sets (and few, if any, film inserts), while a stable set of characters means the hiring of tried-and-trusted actors (and production crew) on extended cost-efficient contracts, all of which concurrently establish a reassuring familiarity for the audience, who immediately recognise the textual codes and conventions at play. After its radio popularity established in the 1940s, the UK television sitcom had proved its viability on both major channels, the licence-fee-funded British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and the commercial (advertisement-funded) regional companies grouped as Independent Television (ITV), with prime-time scheduling throughout the so-called Golden Age of the 1970s. It had also shown its malleability—and additional profitability—by forming a regular

feature of Christmas scheduling, and by touring the nation (plus occasionally abroad) in seasonal stage versions. A similar modulation, all the while adhering to the same economies of scale, will be demonstrated in the filmed spinoff, almost invariably retaining the same cast and crew and, with contract extensions, being shot between series or soon after the source text's radio or television run.

This tight financial imperative underlies all that follows in this study. Thus, while one can factor in desires such as the early raising of wartime communal spirits and later realising of cine-literate creators' personal ambitions, the core reason for the existence of sitcom spinoff films is commercial, predicated on exploiting the cultural viability of material already proven in the marketplace in order to secure audience attention and focus advertising targets. In this, I would again stress, it is no different to other forms of adaptation or remediation: with an in-built industrial logic of repetition and textual expansion, the move to feature-length spinoffs helps to 'pre-sell' a film through instant recognition, offering a pre-packaged genre signifier that both cushions against unwelcome surprise while presenting the intrigue of how the sitcom will be adapted to the big screen (Sheridan adaptations, as with Jane Austen and even Shakespeare, do the same). With sitcoms (as with more recent writers) it also increases the commercial reach of still-copyrighted material, creating (in its relatively minor British fashion) ancillary licenced domains such as records and novelisations for further exploitation. Indeed, as Sue Harper noted of the safe returns ensured by these 'residual' British film products,³ sitcom spinoffs can be read as 'a sort of equivalent to the industrial product in high capitalism—with interchangeable components, predictable outcomes and long historical roots' (2010, p. 25).

Alongside its economics, the sitcom, in its television iterations, has proven a distinctively stable semiotic form across the decades. Mark Eaton, an early investigator of the genre, cogently argues that the sitcom is driven by an 'inside/outside' division of plot and characterisation, whereby outside influences can temporarily challenge or disrupt the situation but never fundamentally change the sitcom world, which always ends in reaffirmation. The narrative is always circular since, as Eaton emphasises, 'it is clear that the narrative of each episode of the series must not allow for a resolution of the two sides or the problematic/hermeneutic of the show would be eliminated, another "situation" would have to be established, another series written' (1978, p. 79). Mintz concurs, emphasising that 'The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy

of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored' (1985, p. 115). Here, as will be demonstrated, one can perceive a difference across media, since, as a linked but self-standing entity, the film spinoff need not slavishly subscribe to this rule, and new narratives, new 'situations' can be advanced for audience pleasure (and can be ignored by an ongoing television sitcom).

Both Eaton and John Hartley posit an enduring 'typology' for the sitcom with two broad settings, the home and the workplace. Family or domestic sitcoms, for Hartley 'perhaps the bedrock of broadcast television', specialise in dramas of internal family roles or 'family comportment' and have consistently proven a training ground for viewers' developing media literacy and broader life skills. Not always safe and gentle, the sitcom can explore what Hartley terms the 'not-quietness' of family life and its surrounding social issues: e.g. the Garnett family in *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1966–1975). (Evident here is a degree here hybridisation/overlap with soap operas' coverage of neighbourhood comportment). By contrast, workplace sitcoms are frequently driven by dramas of sexual exploration, with the workplace largely a pretext for risqué dialogue and suggestive actions, and typically a site for 'sexual chemistry rather than occupational specificity' (Hartley, 2001, pp. 66–67): e.g. the Grace Brothers' department store in *Are You Being Served?* (BBC, 1972–1985).

This binary is partial as with all such categorisations (especially as the genre developed), and one could offer up anomalous British sitcoms without a stable family or workplace setting, such as the student-house locale for the 'alternative' comedy movement's *The Young Ones* (BBC, 2 series, 12 episodes, 1982–1984), or else hybrid sitcoms that combine family dynamics with workplace relationships, as with the (rare) female-centred *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992–2004). Nonetheless, the twin locales of home and workplace have proven enduring contexts not only for the sitcom but especially for the sitcom spinoff film and the division will be employed, when pertinent, as a structuring factor in this study. That said, the extra length of the sitcom's cinema versions has consistently encouraged excursions to new topographies. It is a strategy Guy Lodge summarises in his review of *The Inbetweeners 2* (2014): 'Sitcom spin-offs are always a risky proposition for film-makers. There's a vast difference between what audiences are happy to watch for 25 minutes and what they're willing to sit through for four times that length, particularly when they're paying for the privilege. Time and again, then, they resort to the old "let's go abroad" trick: by placing familiar characters in unfamiliar surroundings, usually ones with a little more widescreen appeal, the risk of

self-repetition is reduced' (*London Evening Standard*, 8 August 2014). The point is well made, especially as the spinoff films from *The Inbetweeners* (E4, 2008–2010) had the gumption to employ the 'old trick' twice. However, whether the transposition gains more than is lost by vacating the source text's habitually claustrophobic setting will prove a frequent point of debate in this volume.

Whether focusing on home or work dynamics, or else departing on holiday, it remains important to differentiate the sitcom from the comedy sketch show which, with its short and usually single-scene structure leading to a humorous 'payoff', has a different set of generic criteria lengthily rehearsed elsewhere (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, pp. 176–208; Neale, 2001, pp. 62–65; Hunt, 2013, pp. 98–127) and which, because free of an overarching narrative or defining situation, has a less restricted relationship with any feature-length transfer. Given this significant difference in both source text and shaping expectations, there will be no discussion here of the films created by the cast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC, 4 series, 45 episodes, 1969–1974),⁴ works that in any case have already received extensive academic treatment (Smith, 2012; Egan & Weinstock, 2020). Nor, though their influence will be acknowledged, will it explore sketch show spinoffs such as the sole film outing for all four Goons in *Down Among the Z Men* (Maclean Rogers, October 1952), the Dick Emery vehicle *Ooh... You Are Awful* (Cliff Owen, December 1972), Harry Enfield's cult success *Kevin and Perry Go Large* (Ed Bye, April 2000), or the various films emerging from Sacha Baron Cohen's characters in *Da Ali G Show* (C4/HBO, 3 series, 18 episodes, 2000–2004).⁵ Nor, for the same reasons, will there be treatment of film vehicles for television stand-up comedians, hence inter alia the absence of the films that tried (and failed) to make movie stars of Morecambe and Wise, again examined elsewhere (Archer, 2017, pp. 41–44), nor Cannon and Ball's Will Hay remake *The Boys in Blue* (Val Guest, 1982), nor comedy presenters Ant and Dec's *Alien Autopsy* (Jonny Campbell, 2006).⁶

Alongside this generic proscription there remains an opening epithet in need of attention. The notion of what constitutes 'British cinema' has been much debated, ever since Raymond Durnat began his pioneering study of post-war cinema *A Mirror for England* (sic) by stating that, in choosing films for discussion, 'our criterion has had to be rather arbitrary and subjective: is it about Britain, about British attitudes, or, if not, does it feel British?' (1970, p. 5). While a firmer prescription will here be applied, with an avowed focus on films textually/aesthetically derived from British-based sitcom content, and that contextually/industrially

present British film-defining contribution levels to both cast-and-crew and production finances—hence no discussion of the Irish-made *Mrs. Brown's Boys D'Movie* (Ben Kellett, 2014)—Durgnat's more nebulous definition cannot be totally dismissed. Discussed hereafter are 50-plus films that, in setting, attitude, and outlook, are shown to be—to look, to sound, and importantly to *feel*—quintessentially 'British', not least in the sense of humour on display.

Humour is perhaps the most indeterminate component of the 'conceptual space' treated here, considered so personal in nature that, as Simon Critchley notes, 'when it comes to what amuses us, we are all authorities, experts in the field' (2002, p. 2). Nonetheless, humour can also be treated as culturally and historically specific, as 'rooted in social processes' (Billig, 2005, p. 32), and thus, in the context of situation comedies, a conception of British humour can profitably be approached via (broad) comparison and contrast with American modes and models. Admittedly a sweeping generalisation, the American sitcom has long remained primarily gag-centred and slapstick in nature; the British version, swiftly growing away from music-hall influences, has foregrounded not just its titular situation but especially character. These (mostly male) individuals have tended to be unsuccessful, unaware of how others see them, unable fully to communicate their desires, stuck in troublesome family and/or workplace relationships, and whose pretensions to move up Britain's rigid social ladder are considered laughable (cf. Basil Fawlty and *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 2 series, 12 episodes, 1975–1979)). By contrast, the American sitcom character has predominantly been witty, intelligent, articulate, able to reflect comically on their predicaments, and with friends and family a strong support structure (cf. Chandler Bing and *Friends* (NBC, 10 series, 236 episodes, 1994–2004)). As Brett Mills cogently summarises, 'while the American sitcom often invites us to laugh *with* its characters, Britcom instead offers pleasure in us laughing *at* them. This may say more about British and American assumptions about people and society than any amount of complex social and cultural analysis' (2005, p. 42). It does not, though, confine such assumptions to (disposable) home consumption. While this study's focus will predominantly reside on domestic reception of these 'cheap and cheerful' film products, it will be acknowledged that the British sitcom spinoff has, to varying degrees, always enjoyed an export potential. Until its later versions, the genre may have had negligible impact on the contrasted US market, but it was regularly successful in Europe and the Commonwealth, especially Australasia, where the source sitcoms were already well known.

1.3 NEVER MIND THE QUALITY, FEEL THE WIDTH: THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS

The British sitcom spinoff genre has its champions. For fanzine writer Matthew Coniam, ‘A frame of mind informs all of these pictures, rendering them as discrete a unit as the films of German Expressionism or the French New Wave, the only difference being that these are lowbrow movies for mass audiences, not part of any artistic or cultural movement’ (2003, p. 5). Though no claim will be made here for personal ‘artistic or cultural’ statement in the manner of Robert Wiene or Jean-Luc Godard, one could argue, if only provocatively, that the viewing of British sitcom spinoff films, especially in their 1970s ‘heyday’, can on occasion resemble the experience of avant-garde cinema, with their dreary spaces, unsubtle lighting, and narrative meanderings: not quite Robert Bresson *On the Buses*, but a body of work similarly shorn of classical cinema’s compositional grammar and stylistic ‘polish’, drawing the viewer’s attention, if not to the films themselves and their ontology, then to the socio-economic context in which those films were made and seen.

It is more cogent, perhaps, to pick up on Coniam’s ‘lowbrow’ indicator and consider the sitcom spinoff a (very) British exemplar of exploitation cinema, a term which, as Pam Cook notes, connotes ‘an economic imperative—very low budgets; tight production schedules; ... minimal production values; sensational selling campaigns; and widespread saturation bookings at specific markets, ... all in the interests of making a quick profit’ (2005, p. 56). The ‘bargain basement’ films studied here are (sometimes) A-list earners for British studios but (almost always) made with B-movie timetables—and aesthetics, the source of much critical ire. Cook adds that exploitation films ‘seem to revel in their own trashiness and aura of immediate disposability’ (ibid.) and I would contend that there is at times, in the British sitcom spinoff, a quasi-awe-inspiring audacity (and hence perverse source of pleasure) in a work’s total disregard for its television source, cinematic integrity, or basic verisimilitude. For example, the spinoff of *Rising Damp* (1980) insouciantly relocated landlord Rupert Rigsby’s situation-defining lodging house from the North of England to an entirely different building in Notting Hill. In *Man About the House* (1974), con-niving estate agent Morris Pluthero hails a taxi for Thames Television, Euston Road, having just emerged from that very building with its distinctive tower. In the follow-up *George and Mildred* (1980), layabout husband George Roper’s choice of anniversary restaurant is patently a residential

property with a few lights slung around the front door and windows (Fig. 1.1). Heritage cinema this ain't.

This blasé attitude to situation is perhaps equalled by characterisation, with familiar pleasure derived from the sitcom spinoff's retention both of recurring motifs or catchphrases—'you silly moo', 'stupid boy', 'I hate you, Butler'—and the pervasive presence of stereotypes that, playing on enduring (if problematic) cultural clichés such as the nagging wife and camp older male, are easily distinguished and had/have a proven popularity. That said, where the spinoff deviates from many exploitation films is in its personnel, not 'inexperienced' and evincing 'bad' acting (Cook, 2005, pp. 56–57), but a highly skilled and experienced cast (such as *George and Mildred*'s Brian Murphy and Yootha Joyce), perhaps engaging in what they considered hack work between rep or RSC bookings, but bringing finely timed ensemble playing, even if honed in a different medium, to the big screen.



Fig. 1.1 *George and Mildred*—Cheap as Chips

The targeted selling campaign Cook references is distinctly relevant, given that a prime motive for the existence of these films was the chance producers saw to ‘exploit’ a ready-made audience. For instance, the trade pre-publicity booklet for the Sid James vehicle *Bless This House* (1973) ran with the headline ‘Pre-sold to Millions—Yes Millions’, and reprinted recent regional television viewing figures: ‘Over 15,000,000 people in one week alone watched *Bless This House*—Millions will want to see the BIG SCREEN version—cash in on the SUMMER RELEASE!’ In its marketing, family was stressed alongside finances: ‘like the television show it is geared for all-family entertainment and comes at a time when the industry has been criticised by many members of the public for “flooding” the cinema with “X” Certificate films’ (*Bless This House* press book). Good clean family entertainment, then?

Perhaps not. The terminology of the exploitation film also implies a production objective to ‘exploit’ the basic desires of its audience to view more explicitly salacious depictions of human behaviour than available in other media, especially in the carefully monitored home-projected television schedules. This is again the case with the sitcom spinoff film. Regarding sexual content, the sensationalist marketing where scantily clad females dominated the publicity materials for myriad 1970s spinoffs in truth promised more than the films delivered. But the exploitation of common desires ran much wider than bedroom frolics, rendering the genre, while fully acknowledging its exaggerations and simplifications, a fruitful resource for exploring contemporary social history. As part of television networks’ Light Entertainment departments, the UK sitcom has always been primarily conceived as ‘escapism’, a generator of non-intellectual life-affirming humour. Nonetheless, as John Ellis notes, the sitcom also constitutes a potent example of television’s capacity for exercising issues and anxieties both big and small, with comic characters able to raise questions or express opinions that can be openly shared and discussed, all of which ‘enables its viewers to work through the major public and private concerns of their society’ (2000, p. 74). From its earliest incursions, by trying to ‘tap into the ways in which their audiences live their lives’ (Mills, 2005, p. 44), British sitcoms have traced social shifts, in particular providing a barometer of changes in the nation’s class system and social attitudes, and academic attention has emphasised the format’s more profound and less innocent hegemonic function. For instance, as a cultural practice Medhurst and Tuck propose that the often-proletarian context and canned laughter of the ‘prime-time’ televised sitcom has provided

a rare collective experience for a now-fragmented working-class audience (1996, pp. 111–116). If so, the sitcom spinoff film has arguably allowed the physical reconstitution of this virtual community, since meeting within a cinema auditorium re-connected this audience with shared outlooks and confirmed their commonality with genuine rather than canned laughter.

However, any collective's definition is also reinforced by those that do not belong within it, and the sitcom spinoff film, like its source sitcom, operates textually as a hegemonic guardian, especially through its reiterated deployment of those easy stereotypes that not only fail to contest, but serve to confirm and legitimate dominant ideological discourse. This works to subordinate those social groups, mainly on grounds of race, gender, and sexuality, who are the butt of a 'shared humour', relegating them to marginalised positions both within the text and without it, as the textual response reverberates back into wider society (Woollacott, 1986; Bowes, 1990). More recent criticism has developed this concept: as Mills contends, the sitcom, playing to 'stubbornly local' senses of humour and drawing on specific (if shifting) social norms, 'becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself' (2005, p. 9). All of this holds especially for the British sitcom spinoff film which, while a single extension, can also be seen as a cultural concentration with whole series' worth of 'worked through' signifiers packed into 90 minutes maximum. Add in the less rigorous censorship of cinema releases, and the spinoff film thus intensifies the crudity of language, the sexual content, and the promulgation of stereotyped characters and attitudes, thus providing a ready index for the values then expected of the cinema-going public.

There is, of course, a danger of ahistoricism when evaluating such values from a current critical position, and an added inflection of complexity when dealing with comic material and its deliberate exaggerations. Conscious of this danger, the films studied here will be firmly placed in the socio-cultural context of their times, with their popularity (or otherwise) evidenced from their critical and (when available) box-office reception.⁷ Nonetheless, the book adopts a double 'then and now' perspective since, reading from the present, it also aims to show how such spinoffs function effectively as what Arthur Marwick terms the 'unwitting testimony' that film can offer as an historical resource, with the medium often revealing less from any 'witting' or 'deliberate message' than from the 'unintentional evidence' encoded in the values of their time of production and exhibition (1989, p. 216).

1.4 AS TIME GOES BY: GENRE CYCLES AND STUDY STRUCTURE

This dual perspective of genre study and social history is reflected at a structural level in this study since *The British Sitcom Spinoff Film*, though informed by analysis of leading production companies and common thematic concerns, follows a broadly chronological progression while teasing out the overarching development of a generic ‘life cycle’. Theories of genre development often promote a three-part process, codified by Thomas Schatz as ‘experimental’, before the genre has a discernible self-identity; ‘classical’, when its conventions are stable and most coherent; and ‘mannerist’, when its original purpose has been outlived and its conventions are openly cited or even subverted (1981, pp. 36–41). Richard Dyer, labelling film genres as successively ‘primitive’, ‘mature’, and ‘decadent’, offers an equivalent if more biologically inflected trajectory (1992, p. 61). While aware of the further dangers inherent in any rigid delineation of development—excluding films that realise a precocious self-identity or remain unstable when the genre has cohered—the paradigm retains a broad relevance to Britain’s sitcom spinoff films and therefore will be employed here, with the study divided into three chronological sections, each labelled with Dyer’s epithets.

This framework will bring films into dialogue with one another where relevant while, within chapters, the book offers a four-part investigation of its qualifying filmography, first summarising the source sitcom, then for each film spinoff explaining the manoeuvrings of their production histories, thirdly surveying their commercial and critical reception, and finally analysing the film ‘texts’ themselves. It must be acknowledged that there are empirical issues here with the middle contextual sections. A film’s critical reception can be gleaned from available reviews in trade journals, national newspapers, and specialist film journals, but detailing the commercial aspect of British cinema history is notoriously more difficult due to the dearth of primary sources. There is no UK equivalent of Hollywood studio archives; Britain’s trade press had no consistent or precise record of production costs or national box-office returns until the 1980s; discrete archival records are distinctly patchy (Chapman, 2022, p. 3). Thus, *faute de mieux*, for most spinoff films examined prior to the genre’s late 1990s revival, recourse is made to (often generalised) financial information gathered from the annual ‘Box Office Winners’ or ‘Hits of the Year’ polls published in the various incarnations of Britain’s primary trade

publication, *Kinematograph Weekly*, later *CinemaTV Today*, then *Screen International*,⁸ and/or from similarly indicative secondary sources, both academic and general (e.g. Swern & Childs, 1995).⁹ The final element, textual analysis, constitutes the main body of each film treatment and includes brief plot summaries since their narrative extension of the source text's premise is important to aesthetic evaluation, and some works can prove hard to access. Mostly, though, the film analysis looks to situate generic conventions and narrative ideology, plus acting and visual styles, into the context of British society's concurrent social and cultural preoccupations. (In the manner of a 'trigger warning', it should be noted that, as part of this examination, the study will contextualise but perforce reference examples of sexually explicit content and cite discriminatory language when pertinent to the textual analysis of these films). Across its temporal divisions, each chapter headlines a film deemed its section's key contributor: these receive a fuller case-study exploring why they constitute an innovative and/or influential contributor to the genre.

This chronological structure for examining the spinoff film of necessity runs parallel with the development of the source sitcom genre. The volume progresses as follows. After this introduction explaining the study's methodologies and parameters, Part One explores the late 1930s to early 1960s, a period when the UK sitcom, as in America, emerged out of radio comedy. With weekly national broadcasts necessitating far greater fresh content than music-hall touring where a comedy star's routine could last a season, radio programmers gradually developed story-generating characters and situations positioned on a spectrum between sketch comedy and situation dramas such as soap opera (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 215). Beginning with Arthur Askey in *Band Waggon* (1938–1939), the BBC's first expressly designed radio variety show, Chap. 2 shows the burgeoning genre's first translations to film, and how, with works such as *Life with the Lyons* (BBC then ITV, 1950–1960) and *The Army Game* (ITV, 1957–1961), a tripartite system of exchange emerged as sitcoms also moved to the small screen with the spread of television ownership across the 1950s.

Part Two explores the late 1960s to 1980, by far the most productive period for the sitcom spinoff genre. By the 1960s, the sitcom had become Britain's primary form of small-screen comedy, outstripping both traditional sketch-based entertainment such as Morecambe and Wise's *Two of a Kind* (ITV, 6 series, 68 episodes, 1961–1968) and *The Morecambe and Wise Show* (BBC, 9 series, 71 episodes, 1968–1977), and topical satirical shows such as *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC, 2 series, 37 episodes,

1962–1963). While America’s breezy team-scripted ‘Hi Honey, I’m Home’ sitcom model regularly focused on married but childless couples as in *The Dick Van Dyck Show* (NBC, 5 series, 158 episodes, 1961–1966), Britain honed in on cynical and frustrated men, as in what is commonly considered Britain’s first significant sitcom (and a transfer from radio), *Hancock’s Half Hour* later *Hancock* (BBC, 1956–1961). Here, exemplifying high-quality authored sitcom writing from Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, was a dour naturalism conducive to the monochrome medium now appearing in most homes and crucial to attaining working-class audience identification. The show would set a pattern that continued across the 1960s and 1970s—and into the sitcom spinoff film—with similarly morose but hugely popular characters. Prime here were Harold and Albert Steptoe aka *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962–1974), another Galton and Simpson creation and a sitcom whose success cemented the genre in the schedules, plus Alf Garnett in *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1966–1975), a similar cultural touchstone reflecting provocatively on attitudes in a rapidly changing Britain (Goddard, 1991, pp. 75–89), and a show which launched the decade’s British spinoff film strategies. This Hancock-led temperamental template—later iterations include not just Basil Fawlty but Rupert Rigsby in *Rising Damp* (ITV, 1974–1979) and David Brent in *The Office* (BBC, 2001–2002)—generally received critical praise to match healthy viewing figures (and such sitcoms have been regularly revived for reruns). Running parallel to this ‘quality strand’, a more populist set of sitcoms including *On the Buses*, *Are You Being Served?*, *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972–1976), and *George and Mildred* (ITV, 1976–1979) proved even more successful if less lauded (plus ideologically less conducive to reruns), and the differing characteristics of both strands have led to the 1970s being considered, if not critically then commercially, the ‘Golden Age’ for British sitcoms.

This section examines how, with the 1960s American investment in British film drying up and UK cinema admissions dropping below four million a week, the success of these television sitcoms—many drawing regular audiences of close to ten million homes—presented a ready market for the British film industry to exploit. Chapter 3 provides an industrial reading, focusing on the two indigenous bodies that most productively mined this seam, Associated London Films and *On the Buses’* Hammer Films. A period similarly prolific for spinoff films as for sitcoms, Chap. 4 adopts a thematic and topological approach, demonstrating how the genre’s multiple products provided the necessary ‘dialectic of repetition and difference’ (Neale, 1990, p. 48) within the established comedy

situations of work institutions and domestic lifestyles—together with their regular holiday excursions.

Part Three covers the period from the mid-1980s to the present day (2023). Again, twin strands can be detected in the sitcom genre. While there remained ‘old school’ popular successes, notably *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 7 series, 54 episodes + 10 specials, 1981–2003) and the perennial *Last of the Summer Wine* (BBC, 31 series, 295 episodes, 1973–2010), the sitcom lost its cultural prestige after its 1970s heyday, especially when compared to the vogueish ‘alternative comedy’ scene which, though spawning *The Young Ones*, largely saw a return to prominence for stand-up routines and sketch shows. However, in the 1990s the British sitcom saw a revival of fortunes, with works such as *One Foot in the Grave* (BBC, 6 series, 35 episodes + 7 specials, 1990–2000) and *Absolutely Fabulous* again becoming key cultural landmarks. The format, though, was evolving, dispensing with the three-camera set-up, studio laughter, and theatrical acting styles for further realism and the self-conscious use of concurrent television genres, for example docu-dramas in *The Office*, and (eventually) bringing greater diversity to a traditionally white male form, with outliers *The Fosters* (ITV, 2 series, 27 episodes, 1976–1977) and *Desmond’s* (C4, 6 series, 71 episodes, 1988–1994) latterly followed by works such as *Chewing Gum* (E4, 2 series, 12 episodes, 2015–2017) and *Man Like Mobeen* (BBC, 4 series, 17 episodes, 2017–present).

This section examines how, in its later iterations, the British sitcom spinoff film can also be seen as entering a more openly self-reflexive, even parodic phase. Building on source texts that, at times, extend the traditional remit of both situation and character, the genre is shown both to explore depths of darker content and to enjoy unprecedented highs of international commercial success. Chapter 5 details the slow revival of the big-screen genre from the mid-1980s, beginning with a run of emergent films treating apocalyptic themes with postmodern knowingness, but finding global domination with the residual, indeed silent movie tropes spun from Rowan Atkinson’s *Mr. Bean* (ITV, 1990–1995). Chapter 6 examines the recent resurgence in the British sitcom spinoff film, grouping the films into three (at times overlapping) groupings, school-based (as with *The Inbetweeners*), legacy (as with *Absolutely Fabulous*), and ‘mockumentary’ spinoffs (as with *The Office*). While contemporary in setting, language and meta-fictionality, these films are shown to be often residual not just in their revival of defunct source texts but also at times, unfortunately, in their thematics and reactionary ideology.