



Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era

Janet Staiger

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Archie Bunker. Jed. Laverne and Shirley. Cliff Huxtable. Throughout the entire history of American prime-time television only four sitcoms have been true blockbusters, with Nielsen ratings far above the second- and third-rated programs. Weekly, millions of Americans of every age were making a special effort to turn on the set to see what Archie, Jed, Laverne, and Cliff were doing that week. The wild popularity of these shows--*All in the Family*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Laverne & Shirley* (and its partner *Happy Days*), and *The Cosby Show*--left commentators bewildered by the tastes and preferences of the American public. How do we account for the huge appeal of these sitcoms, and how does it figure into the history of network prime-time television?

Janet Staiger answers these questions by detailing the myriad factors that go into the construction of mass audiences. Treating the four shows as case studies, she deftly balances factual explanations (for instance, the impact of VCRs and cable on network domination of TV) with more interpretative ones (for example, the transformation of *The Beverly Hillbillies* from a popular show detested by the critics, to a blockbuster after its elevation as the critics' darling), and juxtaposes industry-based reasons (for example, the ways in which TV shows derive success from placement in the weekly programming schedule) with stylistic explanations (how, for instance, certain shows create pleasure from a repetition and variation of a formula).

Staiger concludes that because of changes in the industry, these shows were a phenomenon that may never be repeated. And while the western or the night-time soap has at times captured public attention, **Blockbuster TV** maintains that the sitcom has been THE genre to attract people to the tube, and that without understanding the sitcom, we can't properly understand the role of television in our culture.

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