**Video Script**

**Lecture 26 – The Era of Relevancy**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Over the course of our last few lectures, we’ve been trying to measure the distance from 1960 to 1969 in terms of media and culture – how did American culture change, how did television in particular respond to those changes.

Over the course of the *next* few lectures, we’re going to try to measure the distance from 1970 to 1979 in similar ways, looking at cultural shifts and changes in both film and television.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

I want to use advertising as our path into the 1970s. That’s because the so-called Era of Relevancy, which refers to a specific style of 1970s television programming, arose in part because of new thinking about how to market consumer goods.

**Coke Commercials**

We’re going to watch three Coke commercials. This first one is from the 1950s **[PLAY CLIP.]**

Pretty typical, given what we learned about 1950s broadcasting, right? The idealized white middle-class American family, gathered around the Thanksgiving turkey, making Coke a key part of their holiday dinner and hospitality…just like the Pilgrims did? Sure.

This second commercial is from the early 1960s. **[PLAY CLIP.]** I mean, yes, let’s pause for a moment and consider that rot-your-teeth, chock-full-of-sugar Coke is marketing itself as a diet beverage. Yes, when you’re tempted by something so indulgent as half a grapefruit, reach for an ice-cold Coke instead!

Let’s also pause to appreciate that the best description they could come up with for the taste is that it’s “pure food flavors,” a phrase so vague as to become menacing. What’s it this? It’s *food.* But what food? Yes, exactly.

What this commercial demonstrates is the marketing of a beverage directly to the stay-at-home mother/homemaker and emphasizing that her job includes both beauty (she needs to stay thin) and constant work (she needs energy to get through the day), but that she’s still very much contained by the home. Coke is still advertising to the same middle-class family, in the same 1950s arrangement, just through the mother figure.

**The Real Thing**

Now, let’s watch one of the most famous Coke commercials—and one of the most well-known American commercials, period—which is from 1971. **[PLAY CLIP.]**

**Take a moment**

Okay, now that you’ve seen how Coke commercials evolved across two decades of television, I’d like you to pause for a second and think. How are the 1950s/1960s Coke commercials different than the 1971 commercial? Who is the latter commercial aimed at? And if you think it’s aimed at a different group from the first two, why do you think there was a shift? Give yourself a minute or two to jot down some ideas, and then come on back.

**Don Draper**

Without any spoilers, there’s a reason why the television show *Mad Men*, a show about advertising that takes place in the same time span we’re talking about, **[ANIMATION]** begins here, around 1960, and **[ANIMATION]** and ends here, around 1970. *And* it uses the “Real Thing” Coke ad as a plot point in its finale to reflect on the the distance between those two points.

**Coke ad still**

**[ANIMATION]** What the advertising and media industries have *finally* digested by 1971 is that *young people are a distinct and valuable market.*  And they’re a lot more likely to resemble these hippies on the mountain, than mom in her living room sadly counting her calories. They have different values. You need to speak to them differently if you want to sell them your products.

And, while this is neither here nor there, if you’re bored at home might I suggest my newest parlor game **[ANIMATION]** Coke commercial or *Midsommar*? Guaranteed to provide whole *minutes* of fun!

**Era of Relevancy**

So, the 1971 Coke ad is significant because it marks a moment when a giant brand recognizes the way the 1960s counterculture has permeated young people’s worldview, and it tries to appeal to that world view with a hippy-dippy singalong full of happy multiculturalism.

But as the 1970s move on, the national mood changes. The country weathers Watergate (1972 to 1974) and the subsequent resignation of President Nixon. Crime is high, wages are low, cities are falling apart due to a lack of infrastructure and funding. Young people aren’t quite so hippy nor dippy as they once were.

**[ANIMATION]** Advertisers in this era are increasingly embracing Coke’s idea that you can’t target *everyone* with one ad, nor is it desirable to do so.

**[ANIMATION]** This is the era when they increasingly begin to target their appeals to the 18-34 demographic. Why? Because they have money, and they’re less set in their buying ways than a woman who’s been purchasing the same brand of floor wax since she heard it advertised on *The Goldbergs* in 1946.

**[ANIMATION]** Market research shows that this demographic isn’t just young; they tend to be politically-oriented and more liberal than older generations. That’s liberal in terms of politics, but also in terms of social conventions—they’re not likely to want to move to the suburbs or get married right out of high school or wear a suit and fedora to the office.

**[ANIMATION]** And what shows do networks program to attract this prized, 18-34 demographic?

**[ANIMATION]** Shows that are *relevant* to their lives, beliefs, and the current social, political, and economic climate. That’s where you get the term “era of relevancy” from.

So, after the 1971 season, a bunch of those dopey shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* are canceled—an event that’s sometimes called “the rural purge”—which frees up airtime for new programs that appeal this younger demographic. Coupled with broadcast standards that have relaxed a little bit, these new “era of relevancy” shows feel much hipper, grittier, more cynical, and more in touch with the world.

**Norman Lear**

When we talk about era of relevancy programming, there’s no one who looms larger than a showrunner named Norman Lear. Lear grew up in a Jewish family in Connecticut—his parents lightly inspire Archie and Edith Bunker from *All in the Family*, a show we’ll talk about in just a few minutes. But anyway, Lear is a WWII veteran who goes into public relations after the war, but what he really wants to be is a comedy writer. He and a cousin team up and they sell sketches and write on television shows throughout the 1950s, and he moves on to develop his own shows in the 1960s.

Lear really hits his stride in the 1970s, when he’s inspired by a British show named *Steptoe and Son*. He reimagines this show to be about a Black family, and it becomes *Sanford and Son*. From there, he goes on to produce *The Jeffersons*, the 1970s version of *One Day At a Time* and its recent reboot*.* He also produced your screenings for this week: *Good Times,* which we’ll talk more about in a moment, and *Maude*, a show starring future Golden Girl Bea Arthur, who played a domineering, left-wing, brassy lady who was living with her fourth husband.

And finally, there’s *All in the Family*.

**Archie Bunker**

*All in the Family* is about a working-class white family, the Bunkers, who live in Queens, NY. **[ANIMATION]** The patriarch of the family, Archie, is overtly a bigot. To the degree that *All in the Family* dramatizes the distance between older and younger generations in the 1970s, Archie is meant to stand in for that older cohort of conservative, white adults who are fearful and resentful of all of this social change. The Bunkers have a daughter, Gloria, who’s in her 20s. Gloria and her partner—whom Archie calls “Meathead” throughout the series, stand in for the younger generation. They belong to that counterculture-inflected, more politically liberal group who that 1971 Coke ad was hoping to target.

The clip I’ve asked you to watch for this lecture demonstrates exactly this clash between generations and their different political orientations. You’re of course free to watch the whole episode if you want, but you only need to pay attention to the timecodes marked in the module.

**Archie (mosaic)**

The series is ostensibly a family sit-com, but it’s really the story of this older grouch, with all of his backwards racist and sexist ideas, vs. the changing world. Archie is caustic and sarcastic—and often very funny.

A famous scene pictured here on the bottom occurs between Sammy Davis Jr., a celebrity singer and actor who plays himself, and Archie, who is at that point moonlighting as a cab driver. So, Sammy Davis Jr. leaves his briefcase in Archie’s cab and has to come pick it up at his house, where he overhears some of Archie’s racist diatribes. He requests a picture with Archie, and, when it’s taken, kisses him right on the cheek. Archie’s clear discomfort and Sammy Davis Jr.’s triumph over Archie’s bigotry garnered the longest laugh in the history of the show.

**Polysemy**

I like to talk about Archie Bunker not because I love his character so much, but because he’s a great way to understand the concept of polysemy. Polysemy is **[ANIMATION]** the capacity of a symbol or sign to carry more than one meaning.

If we think way back to the beginning of the semester, we talked about having a cultural studies perspective on media history—how cultural studies scholars look for the ways power works in everyday life, including media and media audiences. Cultural studies gives a lot of credit to audiences for being able to take what the media industries give them and make their own meanings from it. Audiences have some power to interpret media the way that they want to—and polysemy means audiences might make different meanings from the same media object.

So, let’s bring all in the family into the conversation. *All in the Family* *wanted* to teach people about bigotry. You can see that in the Sammy Davis Jr. episode, where Archie’s made a fool of. So did Carol O’Connor, the actor who played Archie, who was a liberal guy. But as the show climbed the charts to number one, research showed that nearly 40% of the audience thought that Archie Bunker was the hero. They were laughing with Archie, not at him. They identified with his frustration and his prejudices and loved when he dug in his heels and refused to evolve. Archie bunker is a *polysemic* character—to some people, he’s a parody of old-fashioned ideas about the world. To others, he’s a proud voice for their beliefs. Archie means very different things to different audiences, and that is the concept of polysemy.

And **[ANIMATION]** polysemy isn’t just a phenomenon of the past. We’re surrounded by symbols that people interpret differently. See if you can think of some others.

**Good Times**

The other Norman Lear show from the era of relevancy I’ll touch on in this lecture is *Good Times*. This is a show about a Black family, the Evans family, and it’s the first all-Black cast on television since the highly stereotypical *Amos ‘n’ Andy Show*, which aired decades earlier. *Good Times* brings some sorely needed diversity to network television of the 1970s.

Further, the Evanses are a working-class family living in a housing project in Chicago, and they are constantly struggling to make ends meet. In terms of economics, they’re a far cry from the almost universally middle-class families that had populated 50s and 60s shows. Episodes were not shy about addressing the sometimes harsh realities of the Evans’s lives, **[ANIMATION]** like unemployment, the frustration of being a working poor person, racism, the threat of eviction and strategies like rent parties to avoid it, and neighborhood crime like muggings.

**Evans & Monte**

What makes *Good Times* groundbreaking is that there are also Black people working *behind* the scenes, which makes a difference when you’re thinking about how relevant a television show is to real people’s everyday lives. The show was produced by Norman Lear, and he often gets most of the credit for it, but it was the brainchild of Mike Evans and Eric Monte, who are also writers during its early seasons. Monte was also a screenwriter of Black cinema classics like *Cooley High.*

If any of this sounds like something you’d like to learn more about, check out upper-division RTF classes with Dr. Adrien Sebro. He’s an expert in this topic!

**Rolle**

So, the matriarch of the Evans family was played by Esther Rolle, an actress who was outspoken offscreen for better representation of Black people and Black families on television. As *Good Times* progressed, it strayed from its original values and she grew increasingly critical about its direction.

Among your readings for today is an interview that Rolle gives to *Ebony* magazine during the show’s second or third season where she lambasts the producers’ decision to focus the show on **[ANIMATION]** J.J., played by Jimmy Walker. J.J. started the show as a goofball but also an artist—he wanted to be a painter—but as the show went on he became this flat, mindless, lazy, catchphrase machine. Rolle says: “He doesn’t work, he can’t read and write. He doesn’t think. The show didn’t start out to be that,” and that “Negative images” of Black people “have been quietly slipped into the show” using this character. Rolle doesn’t deny that he’s funny, but argues that *Good Times* once stood for more fully human Black characters, not just cartoons.

Rolle eventually left the show over these objections, and they write her character off in this really unflattering way: she abandons her children after her husband dies, something that doesn’t make sense after you’ve watched several seasons of tenacious love for her family. Even so, she eventually came back in the show’s final seasons because she was given more creative control and she tried to right the ship.

Esther Rolle’s objection to *Good Times* is illustrative of the dual—and sometimes *dueling*—purposes of these era of relevancy shows. Did *Good Times* finally get a story about a Black family on the air? Yes, thank god. Was this important for Black viewers in the audience? Undoubtedly. But on the other hand, did the show creep away from its original goals to satisfy the white viewers they were trying to reach, who were happy with seeing J.J. play a buffoon? Yes. That’s also true. Remember: the era of relevancy is as much about ad dollars as it is about progress.

**Chico & The Man**

Norman Lear shows aren’t the only ones associated with the era of relevancy, and I want to briefly touch on two other shows before we call it a day. The first is *Chico and the Man*, which is one of the first shows on a major network to recognize, reference, and center Latinx life in the United States.

The show is the first to be set in a Mexican-American neighborhood in East Los Angeles—a vanishingly rare occurrence throughout the era of relevancy, and in fact, this is *still* too rare on U.S. television. Sort of like *All in the Family*, the show revolves around the culture clash between this cantankerous old white guy who owns a garage (you may recognize him as Grandpa Joe from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*) and Chico, this young Chicano guy who works for him.

**Theme Song**

The show has this beautiful theme song written and performed by Jose Feliciano, and I’d like us to take a look at the opening credits. **[PLAY CLIP.]** So, as you can see, the opening credits don’t feature the stars of the show—they show a slice of life in East L.A. and they’re full of visual signifiers of Mexican-American culture. And early episodes of the show are clear about this; the pilot actually kind of acknowledges the Chicano rights movement, though this is written out later—it’s not an overtly political show, by any means.

Now, is this show perfect? No. Freddie Prinze, for example, is actually a half-Puerto Rican actor playing a Chicano character—a casting that flattens both of those unique identities. But Latinx people have been so rarely acknowledged by US television, it’s important to recognize the milestone.

And if *this* interests you, I urge you to check out the Latino Media Arts & Studies program, which is run by Dr. Beltran, who has done a bunch of research on this very show. The L-MAS program has *fabulous* free programming throughout the semester—seriously, all of my favorite talks were sponsored by this group—and I highly recommend you check them out.

**Mary Tyler Moore**

And finally, I want to talk briefly about *The Mary Tyler Moore* show. Here, the relevant issue is women’s liberation—although it’s a very TV-friendly version of that story. What does that mean? Well, the show is focused on a white, beautiful, white-collar woman…though she is also in her 30s, unmarried, dedicated to her career, and trying to make her way on her own.

In the very early 1960s, Moore was a famous TV wife and mom on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. To see this actress shed that identity and embrace a role as an older, childless, unpartnered career woman is kind of a powerful symbol for audience for how much both television and culture had changed by the 70s. Behind the scenes, Moore is powerful as well. She is the co-owner of MTM enterprises, the show’s production company, which goes on to produce some megahits of the 1970s and 1980s.

**Mary Tyler Moore 2**

**[ANIMATION]** *The Mary Tyler Moore* show represents a narrative shift from the domestic space to the work space, and from the nuclear family to the work family. It’s not that previous shows hadn’t depicted workplaces, but for the characters of *The Mary Tyler Moore* show, their work relationships are shown as meaningful and emotional. This is something we see all the time now, so it might not feel that groundbreaking—*The Office* is perhaps the easiest example I can think of now—but in the 1970s, this was new.

**[ANIMATION]** What I love about this show is that the main partnership of the show isn’t a romantic one—it’s the friendship between Mary and her best friend, Rhoda (who gets her own spin-off eventually, and is one of my favorite characters in all of television history). Rhoda and Mary live in the same apartment building, they both struggle with dating, and they’re who the other comes home to at the end of the day. Their friendship helps pave the way for shows like *Insecure*, *Broad City*, *Playing House* (which is such a good show that no one watched but I would be remiss in my duties as an educator and a human if I did not mention it).

If we’re thinking about these shows in terms of relevancy—about how they reflect the world in more down-to-earth, less idealized ways—*The Mary Tyler Moore* show acknowledges that women can and do choose other paths besides motherhood, and that they can build rich emotional family lives without traditional families.

**Parting Questions**

So, I’ve got just a few parting thoughts and questions for you. Remember a few lectures ago, when we were talking about the dual market model of television? In short, it’s that television needs to attract audiences in order to sell them.

**[ANIMATION]** In the 1970s, younger, left-leaning people with money become the key audiences that television networks want to attract and sell, because their eyeballs are the most valuable. The shows they produce to attract those eyeballs are grittier, more political, and more diverse than anything we’d yet seen on TV. They also begin to address issues like class, race, gender, and politics in new ways.

I know that looking at a show like *Good Times* purely as an advertising scheme feels cynical, but it’s not all one thing or another. The show served a financial purpose for the network, but audiences got something out of it too—whether that was pure entertainment, or finally seeing a family that looked like theirs on the screen. But at the same time, you can’t ever completely divorce a show that’s produced by a for-profit network from the profit-driven reasons behind it.

So, just a few questions for you to consider, particularly as you watch this week’s screenings.

**[ANIMATION]** Were these shows progressive? Is it enough to represent something like feminism through Mary Tyler Moore, this beautiful thin white woman who never says the word feminism? Does that move the needle?

**[ANIMATION]** Why did these shows appeal to young people? Do you think this is a strategy that still works? Is this how you would grab the 18-34 demographic today? Is this even still a relevant market? Are there shows today that you think are marketed to valuable audiences based on their relevance to social and political issues?

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, can social progress and advertising ever truly co-exist? Does the ultimate goal of profit dilute or distort a show’s social message? Is this issue relevant if you apply it not just to entertainment, but to platforms and the big data they produce, like Twitter or TikTok or Instagram?

There are obviously no right or wrong answers to these questions, just issues to consider that are as relevant to the media of today as they were in the era of relevancy.