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REDESIGNING DISCOURSE: FEMINISM, THE SITCOM, AND *DESIGNING WOMEN*

JEREMY G. BUTLER

When *Designing Women* premiered on a Monday evening in the fall of 1986, CBS ran an advertisement in TV *Guide* that featured a woman's foot in a high-heeled shoe kicking a football (TV *Guide* A83).¹ The sole caption read, "Now, Monday night's a whole new ball game on CBS." For viewers who didn't catch the allusion to *ABC's Monday Night Football*, there is another hint a few pages later in an ad that depicts *Designing Women's* four principal cast members. Short captions appear above each woman, including:

Mary Jo: "Tell all your friends . . ."

SUZANNE: "We're the team to watch on Monday night" (A86).

CBS's programming ploy was quite evident. It appeared to concede to ABC the male, 18-to-35 (and older) demographic group that *Monday Night Football* had long controlled. Instead, CBS began to pursue disenfranchised women viewers.² In addition to *Designing Women*, CBS's "whole new ball game" in the fall of 1986 featured (1) a sitcom about two divorced women who cohabit to support each other emotionally and financially (*Kate and Allie*), (2) a police drama centered on the two strongest women ever to appear in that genre (*Cagney and Lacey*), and (3) a sitcom about an independent woman photog-

rapher who assumes custody of her teen-aged sister (My *Sister Sam*).³

The largely female line-up did not go unnoticed by those who purchase network advertising time. Arnold Chase, senior vice president of the J. Walter Thompson ad agency, characterized the schedule as "female dominated to the point of sexism" (qtd. in Sanoff and Weisman 78). (His comments on the long-running, three-hour-per-week *Monday Night Football* were not recorded, but presumably he did not complain about ABC's schedule being *male* dominated to the point of sexism.)

Thus, it appears from its position within network television's flow that *Designing Women* was destined to be a women's situation comedy. It was a program that was created by a woman and for the most part produced, scripted, cast with, and promoted to-though seldom directed by-women. None of this guaranteed, however, that *Designing Women* would be particularly feminist in narrative or theme. (A feminist perspective is, of course, what the advertising executive meant when he suggested that "sexism" was inherent in CBS's schedule.) After all, unless we subscribe to biological determinism, the gender of producers and scriptwriters does not determine a program's sexual politics. A woman produced and wrote the detective show *Riptide*, for instance, without discernible feminist effect.⁴ In the present case, the (supposed) intentions of network programmers and a woman producer did not guarantee that *Designing Women* would in any fashion subvert the conventions of the situation comedy, a genre

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often assumed to be locked into a father-knows-best world where mother vacuums in her pearls when she isn't puttering around the kitchen wearing an apron containing enough starch to feed her entire sitcom neighborhood.⁵

My interest here is to examine the narrative texts and aural-visual style of *Designing Women*, as well as some of the extra-narrative media texts pertaining to it. My concern is to position the program within the sitcom genre, by comparing and contrasting the members of the Sugarbaker design firm with women from past and present sitcoms. Equally important is how *Designing Women* handles television's polysemic nature. Among the many meanings provided by the program, does it, as the ad exec feared, privilege meanings that belong to the feminist discourse of the 1980s and 1990s? To confront this question means that we must also examine approaches to discourse and television that have recently developed, working our way from the specific example of *Designing Women* to the general functioning of discourse in TV narrative.

Redesigning the Female Body

According to the popular press, the late 1980s saw the rise of a new "golden age of female comedy" (O'Reilly) and the "feminization of television" (Waters and Huck).⁶ "With the likes of *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Designing Women*, TV [was] finally getting the female experience right," according to *TV Guide* (O'Reilly 18-21). In theory, we were witnessing a new ascendancy of feminist discourse within the situation comedy genre. And no less a feminist icon than Betty Friedan (in an interview in *Playboy!*) placed her imprimatur on these three shows as well (54).

The linking of *Designing Women* with *Roseanne*, in particular, suggests that a comparison of Roseanne Arnold with the

Designing Women cast may be fruitful. I begin, therefore, with some thoughts on Arnold, who has been championed within the feminist discourse since an article by Susan Dworkin appeared in *Ms.* in 1987.

In "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess," Kathleen Rowe contends that Roseanne Arnold typifies the "unruly woman"—a figure with a long history in art and literature . . . and perhaps even in television situation comedy. For Rowe, Roseanne *embodies*, literally, "the unruly qualities of excess and *looseness*" (410). Her excessive weight, her publicly reported sexual activities, her tattoos, her displays of these tattoos on taboo body parts, her "unpatriotic" rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner": all of these acts breach conventional "standards and practices." She has made a spectacle of herself, it is disapprovingly said by the protectors of patriarchal discourse.

But this "spectacle making" is just what Rowe finds most interesting. She reasons, "Through body and speech, the unruly woman violates the unspoken feminine sanction against 'making a spectacle' of herself. I see the unruly woman as prototype of woman as subject-transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire" (410). The unruly woman is not satisfied with woman's conventional role as *object* of masculine desire and spectatorship. Rather, the spectacle she creates is one that serves her own desires and needs. Like the femme fatale or "spider woman" of the film noir, this expression of desire makes the unruly woman dangerous and invites retribution from patriarchy (see Kaplan).

In Suzanne Sugarbaker/Delta Burke, *Designing Women* had its own unruly woman—although she was expunged from the program after its fifth season. Her publicly reported battles with the show's producers and the controversy about her weight, as well as her reported abuse as a child, suggest immediate parallels to Arnold's

representation on the television screen and in the popular press.⁷ Moreover, Burke has often been at the center of the public perception of the program.

One of the first *Designing Women*-related articles to appear in a mass-circulation magazine was a feature on Burke printed in *TV Guide* (Kiester). The headline clearly indicates just how “unruly” she was represented as being: “It’s hard not to notice Delta Burke. At any given time the *Designing Women* star could be found Decked Out in a Silver Go-Go Skirt, Toting a Pistol or Trashing Motherhood” (bold-face, from the original, indicates the article’s title). Edwin Kiester, the *TV Guide* author, selects two principal elements from Burke’s still-nascent star image: her beauty pageant titles (including Miss Florida 1974 and Miss Orlando Action Princess [?]) and her brazen outspokenness. He writes that their “conversation veer[ed] off in unexpected directions” (cf. Gracie Allen below) and that Burke detailed several lurid experiences of hers. “Then,” continues Kiester, “there are a few’ words condemning motherhood, followed by a few more bad-mouthing exercise” (51).

Kiester clearly presents Burke as a taboo-breaker. She’s said to eschew both marriage and childbirth and is quoted asking, “ ‘Why do they think you must be married and a mother? I don’t mind being alone; I’m very self-sufficient’ ” (56). Burke expresses one of the primary crimes against patriarchy: a disinterest in men. And she is not willing to sacrifice her time and effort exercising in order to create the thin body idealized by patriarchal discourse.*

Five years later, after Burke was fired from *Designing Women*, *People Weekly* presented only two alternatives for “why they dumped Delta”: “Was it her weight or her wicked ways?” Burke has been presented as being excessive in both, much like Roseanne Arnold, but it was her weight that attracted the most media at-

tention. In fact, the scrutiny was so intense that the producers elected to devote an entire episode of *Designing Women* to the issue of women’s weight. In “They Shoot Fat Women, Don’t They?” Suzanne attends a high school reunion where cruel jokes are made about her weight gain (e.g., she is referred to as the new poster girl for “Save the Whales”) and she is given a derisive award for being the “most changed” since high school.⁹

This episode is less about most women who are overweight, however, than it is about “beauty queens” such as Burke and her character, Suzanne, who formerly adhered to patriarchy’s ideal female body image (defined as a voyeuristic spectacle for men) and then “lost control” of themselves and gained weight. It is as if Burke betrayed the trust that patriarchy placed in her by making her Miss Florida 1974. For this betrayal, she must be punished.

But what type of “control” was lost? Did Suzanne/Burke lose control of herself, or did she *escape* from the control of patriarchy’s ideology of the thin? As Rowe comments, “For women, excessive fatness carries associations with excessive willfulness and excessive speech” (410). Suzanne’s/Burke’s weight became a sign, virtually an index, of her unmanageable character.

Burke’s character Suzanne can hardly be considered a feminist, but as the show progressed and her weight increased, she became an icon of the unruly woman. Once she was thought to be “willful,” as Rowe discusses regarding Arnold—that is, once Burke was represented as having a *will* of her own—she stopped signifying “to-be-looked-at-ness,” to use Laura Mulvey’s ungainly term. She had shed the masquerade of femininity that women must preserve if they wish to remain visible *and powerful* in patriarchal culture.

The power of femininity or “womanliness” has been debated within feminist

film study. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, an excess of femininity is a type of masquerade associated with the femme fatale, a figure who incarnates evil. Doane quotes Michele Montrelay: “ ‘It is this evil which scandalises whenever woman plays out her sex in order to evade the word and the law. Each time she subverts a law or a word which relies on the predominantly masculine structure of the look’ ” (1982, 82).¹⁰

Burke’s weight gain gradually eroded her excessively feminine, beauty queen masquerade. With its erosion she also lost her ability to use sexuality for her own purposes, as her character Suzanne frequently did (marrying older men for money; cf. the golddigger stereotype).

Within patriarchal culture, corpulent women are portrayed as sexless, as desireless and undesirable (see the reprehensible “no fat chicks” bumper sticker), as “mammy” figures without sexual impulses. The mammy and “Aunt Jemima” stereotypes splice together racist and sexist discourses that function to contain and delimit African-American women.¹¹ The mammy’s visibility in popular culture depends upon her “knowing her place”—that place being a selfless one of nurturing children (her own and her master’s) and the adults who own her, literally or figuratively. Frequently, the mammy also speaks the discourse of the white power structure, as in *Imitation of Life* (1934), in which she urges her white-appearing daughter to accept second-class citizenship and stop “passing” for white in school.

The mammy also speaks the patriarchal discourse when she sublimates her own sexual or romantic desires into those of the woman she serves—primping Scarlett for her meetings with Rhett rather than searching for a man of her own. Indeed, the mammy’s large, shapeless figure would be seen as threatening to the hegemony of patriarchy were it presented as

assertive or aggressive, as taking rather than giving emotion. She is big but not dangerous. She is the antithesis of the unruly woman.

Unfortunately, the mammy character type is not limited to African Americans. Several aspects of the mammy have been transposed to mothering characters of other races—such as Aunt Bee in *The Andy Griffith Show*, the white woman who cares for Opie and Andy Taylor. Significantly, Aunt Bee is not the actual mother of Opie and Andy. Like the Aunt Jemima figure, she has been called upon to nurture people who are not her own children, and she does so mostly without regard for her own desires. In sitcoms, as in melodramas, the woman’s role is founded upon her sacrifices, and the first among those is the sacrifice of desire.

Roseanne Arnold—although a mammy candidate simply by virtue of her body type—has been able to twist and, to a large extent, subvert the mammy character type by refusing to equate slimness with desire. As she was quoted in a *People Weekly* article titled, significantly, “Roseanne Unchained”:

It’s all this veiled s- of “Are you *sure* he f-s you?” They [women in Los Angeles] totally erase my sexuality because they think fat erases sexuality. I lost 100 lbs., and I suppose I did look better and attracted more male attention. But my sexual appetite wasn’t any stronger. Only thing I ever thought about was food and belts. I was really into the look, but I was also very hungry. The truth is, I have always had men whether I was 200 or 100 lbs. Maybe I had more when I was skinnier, but there ain’t enough hours in the day anyhow (Jerome 98).

The ellipses, retained from the original, indicate Roseanne’s dangerousness, but also show how her threat to patriarchy

may be coopted. In this case, it just takes a few hyphens. Even though Roseanne has altered the mammy stereotype, she still remains within it. Her success is due, to a large extent, to her status as the premiere television mother of the late 1980s and 1990s. Roseanne Conner, Arnold's character, may be abrasive and sharp-tongued, but her affection for her sister, husband, and children is unassailable. Because Burke has been portrayed in the press and in her television roles as completely lacking in maternal skills, she cannot assume the mammy role that Arnold has, and thus she cannot rely upon this alternative source of significance for women within patriarchy.

The crucial point here is that, unlike Arnold, Burke is a former femme fatale. The power that she wielded as a beauty queen has evaporated. What remains is the dangerous willfulness of the femme fatale without her spectacular potency. In the 1990-91 power struggle between Burke and *Designing Women's* producers—which was played out in the media texts of *People Weekly*, tabloid magazines, *TV Guide*, and *The Barbara Walters Special*, among others—she was bound to fail.¹² Her failure was represented in these texts as due either to her loss of control or her errant behavior—her weight or her “wicked ways,” as *People Weekly* encapsulated it. It was not presented as a conflict among equals or as “creative differences.”

When Burt Reynolds ran into trouble with one of the same producers, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, during the run of another sitcom, *Evening Shade*, the dissension was presented quite differently and was explicitly contrasted with the Burke episode: “Reynolds, *who paid his dues* behind the cameras by directing four motion pictures, observes, ‘I don’t know what Delta Burke’s problems with Linda were (on *Designing Women*), but I tell you mine are about *respect*’ ” (Beck and Smith El, my emphases). Reynolds is presented as someone who has earned the

right to be an authoring subject. He is the producer’s peer, and their quarrel is over who will control production of the show. In distinct contrast, the Burke incident was portrayed as concerning who or what would control the excesses of Delta Burke, the unruly woman.

Redesigning Discourse through Language

The program’s title, “designing women,” is an obvious pun (cf. Vincente Minnelli’s *Designing Woman*, featuring Lauren Bacall as a fashion designer). The first, literal meaning is that the characters are women who design things; in this case, they are interior decorators. The second, connotative meaning, drawn from conventional gender discourse, is that a “designing woman” is one *with* designs—designs that are presumably evil and presumably victimize an unsuspecting man. A designing woman is tantamount to a scheming, conniving, plotting woman. Designing women, as can be seen in *Dynasty* or *Gilda* or *Dangerous Liaisons*, are preeminently powerful and a constant danger to men. They author their own plans and are thus *subjects* rather than *objects* of narratives or in the spectacular process.

Since *Designing Women* is no prime-time serial or film noir or 18th-century tale of court intrigue, the women in it—with the exception of Suzanne—do not appear to be seductresses or vamps in the conventional sense, preying upon the men in their lives. The vamp iconography is missing. Nonetheless, Julia, Suzanne, Charlene, and Mary Jo (the four original “designing women”), as well as the supporting character Bernice, do belong to an unruly sisterhood of TV women who have disrupted the discourse of patriarchy, who have dared to become subjects in a medium and a culture that thrives on the objectification of women. One potential source of this disruption is the program’s dialogue, its language.

Patricia Mellencamp has argued that Gracie Allen in *The George Bums and Gracie*

Allen Show (note the equal billing) managed language in ways that permitted her a virtually anarchic freedom. Mellencamp maintains, "Despite being burdened by all the clichés applied to women-illogical, crazy, nonsensical, possessing their own, peculiar bio-logic and patronized accordingly-in certain ways she [Gracie] seemed to be out of (or beyond) men's control" (321). The necessary qualification that Mellencamp makes, however, is that male control is reinstated by the end of each episode. George Burns, who enjoys a meta-textual control over the program (he may talk directly to the TV viewer while the other characters may not; he even watches the program on TV while it transpires), reins Gracie **back under** patriarchal control by each week's conclusion: "Inevitably, like the male leads in most situation comedies, he got the final and controlling look or laugh" (324). Up until that concluding point, however, Gracie's discourse goes its own merry way, aggressively "derailing the laws and syntax of language and logic" (320).

Dialogue, it must be emphasized, is very important to the humor in any sitcom. Most, other than *Z Love Lucy*, have little physical humor. Since language is the fundamental building block of any discourse, its disruption, as in *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, creates the potential for undermining the dominant discourse. *Designing Women* possesses some small capacity for this form of subversion. The women's speech is not "polite" or in "good taste"-the rules of etiquette and limits of taste being defined, of course, by the dominant discourse. The women of *Designing Women* talk about topics deemed taboo or insignificant by patriarchy: menstruation, menopause, single parenting by women, sexual harassment of women, freely available day care, the reification of women's sexuality, and so on.

Unlike Gracie's speech, however, Julia, Suzanne, Charlene, and Mary Jo's does

not challenge the rudimentary structure of patriarchal discourse. The following comment by Jean Baudrillard, which Mellencamp invokes while discussing Gracie Allen, hardly seems to fit *Designing Women's* humor: "The witticism, which is a transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act on the basis of another code as such; it works through the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code. It volatilizes the category of the code, and that of the message" (qtd. in Mellencamp 321).

The dialogue of *Designing Women* transgresses some of patriarchy's taboos, but most of the time it does so without *deconstructing* its discursive code. It still speaks in the language of patriarchy. This is not women's television as counter-television, to invoke Claire Johnston's discussion of feminist cinema.

The "deconstruction of the dominant discursive code" is left, in *Designing Women*, to Bernice Clifton (Alice Ghostley), a supporting character who was introduced in the second season. Bernice, like Gracie, forms language to her own needs. In the "And Now, Here's Bernice" episode, she is hosting a talk show on public-access cable. Julia, Charlene, and Anthony agree to appear to discuss interior design, but Bernice is determined to talk about prostitution.

BERNICE: Now, Julia, tell me. You're really kind of the madam of Sugarbaker house. When you first get a new client, what really titillates and excites you?

JULIA: I would hardly use the word "titillates."

BERNICE: Well, that's not a nasty word, is it? I think it's okay. Just don't shorten it. Now, I understand that Anthony's role is to solicit

business for all of you. Julia, just what do you expect from your girls when you send them out into the field?

JULIA: First, Mrs. Clifton, we do not refer to them as “girls.” These are women. And I would expect that they would get to know the needs of their customers.

BERNICE: I bet! Charlene, now let’s just cut through the decorating scam. How many treats do you turn in a week?

CHARLENE: Treats?

ANTHONY: I think she means “tricks.”

BERNICE: That’s right. How many?

In this scene, Julia struggles to bring Bernice’s language within the bounds of decorum and the discourse of middle-class liberalism that Julia exemplifies. Specifically, Julia disapproves of Bernice’s use of the words “titillates” and “girls.”

On a denotative level, these terms are not wholly inaccurate in their description of interior decorating, but on a connotative level they are, obviously, misplaced or **displaced** by Bernice. This second level of signification, that connotative level of ideology or what Roland Barthes calls “myth,” has been torn loose from its moorings by Bernice’s subversion of meaning. Like Gracie, Bernice authors her own discourse, vents her own desires, and frequently embarrasses the other characters with her transgressions of the dominant code.

Redesigning Discourse through Narrative

The notions of discourse and a “discursive hierarchy,” as Paul Attallah has

termed it, are crucial to understanding the situation comedy, as well as most other television genres. But “discourse” is often a carelessly used word and before proceeding further I must define it a bit more precisely than I have so far. John Fiske notes,

Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates and which works ideologically to naturalize those meanings into common sense (14).

In the case of ***Designing Women*** we will see how a particular section of society (men holding positions of power in society, politics, business, and so on) works to make certain meanings (e.g., assertive women are strident and overbearing) seem natural, the taken-for-granted. The wielding of this hegemonic, ideological power operates, of course, to maintain that section’s power bases throughout the social formation—although not without contradiction and contestation.

In his discussion of the situation comedy, Attallah adopts a notion of discourse very similar to Fiske’s:

Situation comedy can be dealt with and defined from within genre theory in terms of the discourses it sets into play. I would further contend that specific instances of situation comedy can be specified by the precise weight given each of the discourses in play and that generic cycles are largely explicable in terms of the weight given specific discourses in specific socioeconomic and institutional circumstances (Attallah 239).

Various discourses conflict with one another in the context of a specific situation

comedy. In *Leave It to Beaver*, Attallah explains, "The children gain experience but always inflect it through their own discourses such that it remains childish" (239). For Attallah, the discourses of the boys are ordered-according to "childish" priorities-into a discursive hierarchy. Those of the adults are similarly ordered but according to adult priorities.

I would extend Attallah's concept to suggest that a TV program develops a meta-discourse that contains and weights specific discursive hierarchies within it. Further, the hierarchy of conflicting discourses that comprises the meta-discourse is weighted according to ideological priorities that obtain within the host culture.

Expanding on Attallah's *Leave It to Beaver* example, I would suggest that the program inevitably favors the discourses of the adults. In other words, ideological pressures position the adults' discourses at the top of the program's hierarchy. Though much of *Leave It to Beaver's* narrative pleasure is obviously derived from the children's disruption of the adult discourses, the denouement inevitably represses that disruption and validates the restoration of the adult discursive hierarchy-much as George Burns does to Gracie Allen's disruptive speech at the end of their program, and Julia and the others do to Bernice during *Designing Women*.

Thus far I have discussed *Designing Women's* discourse solely in terms of the dialogue and the lack of its fundamental disruption on this level. Equally significant to the dialogue in the playing out of discourses is the narrative structure, and it is on this level that most claims have been made for *Designing Women's* feminist orientation. It is presumed by many that the program tells stories that advocate feminist ideas, a feminist discourse. After all, there have been many episodes about issues that have historically concerned the contemporary women's movement: pornography (Julia attacked a vendor of sex-

ually explicit magazines for men), violence against women (Mary Jo was assaulted by a robber and took self-defense classes), women's control of their bodies (Suzanne confronted the prejudice against overweight women), and so on.

If we define sexism as any discursive (which subsumes the linguistic and the aesthetic), economic, political, or social practice that subordinates, victimizes, or exploits women, and feminist discourse as a system of representation that confronts these practices, then the program certainly contains elements of feminist discourse. But an understanding of discourse in narrative must include the manner in which these elements are presented. And in many situation comedies, this is where discursive fissures appear. If we look more closely at the narratives and their style of presentation, we find that a range of meanings, a polysemy, becomes apparent. As discourses such as the patriarchal and the feminist rub abrasively against one another in the program's discursive hierarchy, its meta-discourse can become destabilized, leading to a disruption of the dominant discourse. This is what often occurs to the presumably dominant feminist discourse in *Designing Women*.

One of the defining events for feminism of the early 1990s was the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court justice and the charges Anita Hill brought against him of sexual harassment. The issues it raised concerning sexual politics are confronted in a *Designing Women* episode entitled "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita."¹³ At the core of this episode is Mary Jo. She often serves as the program's "everywoman," or what David Marc might call a "moral interlocutor," as in Jed Clampett (*The Beverly Hillbillies*). "In him [Jed], [producer Paul] Henning establishes a vortex of identification. Jed's unshakable moral logic and solid horse sense are constantly contrasted with the various alternatives embodied in the identities of the other



Mary Jo's T-shirt provides a feminist critique of Judge Clarence Thomas.

characters" (46). When Julia attacks patriarchy and political conservatives and Suzanne defends them, Mary Jo mediates the two positions, understanding and selecting the best of both worlds and providing a "vortex of identification" for the viewer. But in this episode, Mary Jo sheds her role as intermediary. She is appalled at the treatment of Hill and advocates the censure (and denial of confirmation) of Thomas. She announces her allegiance to feminism:

If you ask most women about individual feminist issues, the majority of them are for them. They just don't want to call themselves "feminists" because George Bush and Phyllis Schlafly want to make people believe that feminists are all these big-mouthed, bleeding-heart, man-hating women who don't shave their legs. Well, I shave my legs, and I'm a single parent, a working mother, and if believing in equal pay and mandated child care makes me a feminist then I am damn proud to be one.

Enthusiastic applause on the soundtrack validates Mary Jo's choice as the correct one.

When Mary Jo first appears in this episode and removes her coat, she reveals a T-shirt that announces, "He did it." Moments later, Allison arrives and is immediately set up as Mary Jo's narrative antagonist (and the show's least sympathetic character; she lasted only one season). Allison wears a T-shirt reading, "She lied." Clearly, Mary Jo is meant to be speaking the feminist discourse and Allison that of patriarchy. And initially there seems to be little doubt which of these two are at the top of the discursive hierarchy that Attallah sees in situation comedy. Mary Jo's speech receives the applause, not Allison's. The laughtrack thus clearly signals this episode's preferred reading. This clarity is muddled, however, by the episode's secondary plot, in which Mary Jo and Julia perform as the Bette Davis and Joan Crawford characters, respectively, in a community theater production of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*



Allison's T-shirt provides a patriarchal critique of Anita Hill.

Significantly, the film version of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) holds a privileged position within gay culture. Davis and Crawford are major camp icons, and the film may be read, from that perspective, as actresses parodying their decaying former images. The film and its use within gay culture also open again the question of masquerade. As Pamela Robertson has argued with regard to Mae West and her impersonators, "She paradoxically reappropriates the image of the woman from male female impersonators so that the object of her joke is not the woman, but the idea that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image: she reveals that feminine identity is always a masquerade or impersonation" (63). For Robertson, West's impersonation of male impersonators of herself carries the potential for a feminist critique of patriarchal notions of gender, identity, and masquerade, but need it always be so? Could not the parodic masquerade be used to ridicule feminism?

In *Designing Women*, Mary Jo impersonates the *Baby Jane* Bette Davis imperson-

ating the "authentic" Bette Davis—the images folding back upon one another in typical camp fashion. In full *Baby Jane* makeup, Mary Jo attends a birthday party for her narrative antagonist, Allison, that occurs after Thomas's appointment has been confirmed and Hill has been dismissed. Mary Jo's eyes are black sockets, her lips garishly red, and her hair maniacally frizzed. A television reporter arrives to interview Allison about Thomas's confirmation, and this precipitates both the narrative climax and the ultimate collision of feminist and patriarchal discourses.

Allison provokes Mary Jo by crowing, on camera, "We won! And if you [feminists] don't like it you can just go have yourself a big ol' brassiere bonfire. And in conclusion, nyah nyah nyah!" Mary Jo responds by elbowing Allison out of the way and shouting directly at the *Designing Women* camera, as if it were the television news team's camera: "All we want is to be treated with equality and respect." With makeup as stylized as a Kabuki performer's, she launches into an unruly rant:



Impersonating Bette Davis, Mary Jo becomes the “strident,” unruly woman.

I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be strident and overbearing, but “nice” just doesn’t cut it anymore. Like a lot of women out there tonight, I’m mad! . . . And I don’t know about the rest of you women out there, but I don’t give a damn anymore if people think I’m a feminist or a fruitcake! What I’m going to do is get into my car and drive to the centermost point of the United States of America and climb the tallest tower and yell, “Hey, don’t get me wrong, we love you, but who the hell do you men think you are?!”

Affecting one final Bette Davis pose, she arches backward, her elbow on her hip, brandishing her cigarette. She has become the unruly woman, or, in this context, the unruly feminist-which, from the patriarchal perspective, is a redundant term. We need to examine, however, the specifics of her unruliness and how they are played out in the narrative.

Allison’s feminist “brassiere bonfire” taunt is drawn directly from the patriar-

chal discourse about the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The revolt against constrictive undergarments and the decision not to shave one’s legs (as Mary Jo alludes to earlier) were part of women’s battle for control over their own bodies. They were attempts to destroy, or at least modify, the masquerade of womanliness. It’s not surprising, therefore, that patriarchal discourse attempts to belittle these changes in women’s appearance through language such as Allison’s.

What is surprising is Mary Jo’s rebuttal to this patriarchal assault and, equally important, that rebuttal’s *audial/visual style*. First, her use of the term “strident” is overloaded with meanings. Early in the discursive combat between patriarchy and feminism, “strident” came to be patriarchy’s favored term for denigrating assertive, aggressive women. Mary Jo, the representative of feminism, invokes the term “strident” here (“I don’t mean to be strident”) in order to dismiss it, but her speech and her *Baby Jane* makeup contradict her, for they are signaled as strident and excessive. The text itself marks it so.

sion's polysemic nature must be maintained, or else the ratings will suffer. Like Gracie and Lucy before them and like their contemporary Roseanne-Bernice, Mary Jo, Julia, and Suzanne are unruly women in an unkempt medium that incorporates oppositional values such as feminism in a messy amalgam of meanings.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Ken Feil, Gary Copeland, and Diane Waldman for their help in the preparation of this article.

Notes

1 *Designing Women* premiered on September 29, 1986, at 8:30 p.m. and was canceled in the spring of 1993.

2 As *Variety* predicted, "It [*Designing Women*] could net the non-sports types, programmed as it is opposite *Monday Night Football*, and has complementary company in *Newhart* as a lead-in and *Cagney and Lacey* after, but its future looks uncertain."

3 The full CBS Monday-night schedule, in order of appearance, was *Kate and Allie*, *My Sister Sam*, *Newhart*, *Designing Women*, and *Cagney and Lacey*. For a discussion of the ambivalent feminism of *Cagney and Lacey*, see White and D'Acci.

4 Babs Greyhosky produced *Riptide*, as well as *The Father Dowling Mysteries*, *J. J. Starbuck*, and *The Rouster*.

5 Contrary to this conventional wisdom about the sitcom, dysfunctional families and disruptive women are not entirely new to the genre. As we look more closely at 1950s and 1960s programs such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, we begin to discover, as Nina Leibman has, that "it would be difficult to classify these programs as 'comedies,' so replete are they with anxiety, despair and complication" (25).

6 In addition, *U.S. News & World Report* groups *Designing Women* with *The Golden Girls* in an article declaring, "Network television in 1986 is a woman's world—both on and in front of the camera" (Sanoff and Weisman 78).

7 There has been a direct reference to *Designing Women* by Roseanne Arnold's character on *Roseanne*. In one episode, Roseanne Conner is

tell her a bedtime story. Roseanne responds with a story about "four princesses":

ROSEANNE: They ["four princesses"] just sat around all the time talking and talking and yammering and yammering. And they killed every single man who ever came over there except for one who they kept as a pet. And then one time these two princesses left and then these other two came on but they really stunk.

DARLENE: Mom, that's *Designing Women*.

ROSEANNE: Oh, you figured it out.

The two departing "princesses" are Delta Burke and Jean Smart, who were replaced by Jan Hooks and Julia Duffey at the start of the 1991-92 season.

8 The validation of thinness does not necessarily have to be a patriarchal one. When thinness is grafted with athleticism and strength, it can become a part of the feminist empowerment of women. The patriarchal representation of thinness, one in which evident musculature is denigrated, is what leads to eating disorders and women's self-victimization. See the different connotations of thinness associated with women athletes and women fashion models.

9 The title alludes to the film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (from a novel by Horace McCoy). The title also creates a rather ironic reference to Jane Fonda, the star of that film and a woman who has recently gone public with stories of her own eating disorders.

10 This concept originates in psychoanalysis. See Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade," which was first published in 1929. The "masquerade" has been further discussed within film studies in Doane (1988-89) and Heath.

11 Bogle distinguishes between the mammy and the Aunt Jemima, suggesting that the former "is usually big, fat, and cantankerous," while the latter is more subservient and sweet tempered (9). Despite differences in disposition, however, both serve similar roles within patriarchy: caring for children and adults alike.

12 Burke appeared on *The Barbara Walters Special* on 14 November 1990 and discussed her grievances with Walters.

13 The intertwining issue of race is largely elided in this episode, although the one major black character, Anthony, does comment on it. Nonetheless, the central narrative conflict is built upon Thomas versus Hill, man versus woman, patriarchy versus feminism.

14 Cf. "Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an *illusion cut to the measure of desire*" (Mulvey 17; my emphasis).

Bernice says to Anthony, "Don't leave me. Those women [Mary Jo and Julia] are crazy!" And Mary Jo herself, looking defeated, admits to Julia, "Well, I guess I blew it. Mary Jo Shively goes berserk. Film at 11."

This segment illustrates how a television narrative can serve two, or more, discursive masters and construct an arena for conflicting conceptual systems to do battle. *Designing Women* lays claims to privileging the feminist discourse, but we see here how a feminist's unruliness may be directly criticized by the feminist herself ("Mary Jo Shively goes berserk"), so that her unruliness becomes detrimental to that discourse. On the one hand, it allows men in positions of power (such as those on the panel considering Thomas's nomination) and the common viewer who accepts patriarchy's hegemony a position from which to read the program: "Mary Jo's argument doesn't make sense; she's crazy, strident, overbearing, a fruitcake." On the other hand, viewers who bring a feminist discourse to this text can read her speech as a justifiable rant against patriarchal injustice. The point is, as Stuart Hall and David Morley and others have argued, television requires the presentation of a range of meanings, a variety of decoding positions, so that viewers may negotiate a reading that suits their ideology.

Conclusion

Designing Women activates television's ambivalence toward women. The characters are outspoken about issues that are important to women, but, despite the trepidations of Madison Avenue executives, *Designing Women* is not female-dominated to the point of sexism. These women are not fully subjects of their own discourse. *Designing Women* has not entirely redesigned the sitcom genre to the measure of women's desire (if I may paraphrase Mulvey).¹⁴ Errant meanings, complications, contradictions arise. Televi-

sion's polysemic nature must be maintained, or else the ratings will suffer. Like Gracie and Lucy before them-and like their contemporary Roseanne-Bernice, Mary Jo, Julia, and Suzanne are unruly women in an unkempt medium that incorporates oppositional values such as feminism in a messy amalgam of meanings.

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⁴ Babs Greyhosky produced *Riptide*, as well as *The Father Dowling Mysteries*, *J. J. Starbuck*, and *The Rouser*.

⁵ Contrary to this conventional wisdom about the sitcom, dysfunctional families and disruptive women are not entirely new to the genre. As we look more closely at 1950s and 1960s programs such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, we begin to discover, as Nina Leibman has, that "it would be difficult to classify these programs as 'comedies,' so replete are they with anxiety, despair and complication" (25).

⁶ In addition, *U.S. News & World Report* groups *Designing Women* with *The Golden Girls* in an article declaring, "Network television in 1986 is a woman's world-both on and in front of the camera" (Sanoff and Weisman 78).

⁷ There has been a direct reference to *Designing Women* by Roseanne Arnold's character on *Roseanne*. In one episode, Roseanne Conner is

asked, sarcastically, by her teenaged daughter Darlene to tell her a bedtime story. Roseanne responds with a story about "four princesses":

ROSEANNE: They ["four princesses"] just sat around all the time talking and talking and yammering and yammering. And they killed every single man who ever came over there except for one who they kept as a pet. And then one time these two princesses left and then these other two came on but they really stunk.

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