WandaVision through the Sitcoms:
A Study of the Production and American Culture in the Series' Narrative Construction

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ABSTRACT

Marvel series *WandaVision* has been acclaimed for its outstanding rendition of classical sitcoms. It has been considered a homage to this genre. More accurately, the references to certain sitcoms have been deemed Wanda Maximoff's trauma response to the loss of her partner, Vision. The present paper takes a step further by exploring the contribution of sitcoms to the series' storytelling. In order to contextualize the parallelisms of *WandaVision* to some classical sitcoms, it will be helpful to provide an outline of the characteristics of the genre and specific features that matched the preoccupations of American society through the decades. Subsequently, each episode of the show will be analyzed, paying attention to diegetic and non-diegetic elements, the plot, personnel, world-building, cinematography, and *mise en scène*. The different choices in each case recall the ideals behind particular sitcoms while accounting for the evolution of the genre and portraying the changes in the American culture. All these allusions and echoes are key for conveying Wanda's personal story.

Keywords: WandaVision, sitcom, MCU, television, family, American values.

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1. WELCOME TO WESTVIEW: AN INTRODUCTION TO *WANDAVISION*

WandaVision (2021) was the first show of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). As such, it drew a lot of attention from critics and fans alike. Most of them agreed on its successful recreation of renowned situational comedies. The internet thrived with comparisons between the series and some classical sitcoms (see Salem 2021; Sarkisian 2021; Walker-Werth 2021; Wang 2021). Users attributed these parallelisms to a well-deserved homage and Wanda's relationship with them. Nevertheless, it seems that none of these comparisons accounted for how the allusions shape *WandaVision* beyond simple references.

As can be retrieved from interviews with the creators and participants in the production of *WandaVision,* the sitcom aesthetic is fully intentional. Executive Producer Kevin Feige claims that he became fascinated with the idea of playing with that genre to subvert both what Marvel does and what those shows were (Feige 2021). The rest of the

team, including the cast, worked to imitate the sitcom ambiance, as Matt Shakman, the director of the show, explains:

> We recreated everything from vintage lenses, production and costume design, to the actors getting together with me and studying what those old shows looked like. … We worked with a dialect coach … on how they spoke in different eras, and how they walked, talked and moved. (Shakman 2021, n.p.)

Bearing in mind the background of the main characters, the use of sitcom conventions in the show turns out to be disrupting—as well as ingenious and appropriate. Wanda Maximoff (played by Elizabeth Olsen) is a superhuman with psychic special abilities who joined the Avengers after having lost her twin brother Pietro in a fight. Their parents were killed in the war when they were kids. As an Avenger, she uses her powers to ensure the peace and protect humans, but she sometimes fails and feels terribly guilty about it. Wanda starts a romantic relationship with Vision, but she is then forced to kill him in order to avoid Thanos's great threat. Thus, Wanda's life is marked by loss and trauma.

Vision (played by Paul Bethany) is a male synthezoid configured by some Avengers so that he could join their team and fight against their enemies. He is extremely powerful and able to process enormous amounts of data, but he initially lacks human reasoning and sentiments. Vision finally develops feelings for Wanda, but he is killed right when they are building their future together. All in all, this superhero is characterized by both his naiveté and great power.

The recreation of old sitcoms does not seem to match the usual storylines of these two characters, but it was actually crucial to complement *WandaVision*'s plot. To compensate for the death of her husband Vision, superhero Wanda Maximoff has created a fake normal life in Westview, an American suburban town, in which Vision is still alive. The place is set in a different decade in each episode, but time does not pass by for its inhabitants. That is, Wanda and Vision arrive as a newlywed couple in the 50s; then, they make their best to integrate into a 60s neighborhood; by the time Westview represents a 70s town, she gets pregnant and gives birth to twins, and so on and so forth, until reaching the present. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Westview is Maximoff's creation. It is inside the so-called Hex, isolated from the outside world, all thanks to her abilities to warp reality. Wanda controls everything from the scenarios to the actions of Westview's inhabitants. Through some flashbacks, we learn that she found solace in sitcoms in traumatic moments of her life: Wanda and her family used to watch them together, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* being one of her favorites; when she was tortured by the Nazi organization Hydra, she evaded with shows such as *The Brady Bunch;* and after the death of her brother Pietro, Wanda comforted herself watching TV, including the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle.* In fact, she watched the latter with Vision, and that was one of the first moments when they had a meaningful connection. Therefore, she looks for the same kind of comfort she felt on those occasions when devising her oasis. Wanda seeks to live happily

ignoring her past, namely her involvement in the war against supervillain Thanos, which caused global chaos and Vision's death—as shown previously in the MCU. Meanwhile, the Sentient World Observation and Response Department (S.W.O.R.D.) works outside the Hex to dismantle Wanda's alteration. One of its agents, Monica Rambeau, enters Westview and becomes one of its neighbors.

Wanda's personal connection to some sitcoms explains why *WandaVision* is shaped after them. Nevertheless, how this genre—in terms of content and form—contributes to the plot is still to be explored. It could be argued that the narrative construction of Wanda's changing feelings and needs is reflected in the evolution of sitcoms, just as these shows mirrored and guided American society when they were released. Thus, the aim of the present article is not to merely point at parallelisms present in *WandaVision,* but to analyze how these are used to construct the narrative.

To this end, the first section will provide an overview of the history of American sitcoms through the years, focusing on the most prominent themes that governed each decade and especially looking at those shows from which *WandaVision* draws inspiration. Building on this theoretical framework, episodes 1 to 7 of *WandaVision*—those that have sitcom conventions, except the fourth one—will be examined by paying attention to the plot, the personnel, the world-building, the cinematography, and the mise-en-scène. In these installments, everything from general aesthetics to actors' modes of acting, including costumes, scenarios, music, and so forth, evokes different eras of television. Due to space restrictions, only those aspects that seem to significantly contribute to the narration of Wanda's story will be explored.

2. WE INTERRUPT THIS PROGRAM: FILM THEORETICAL APPARATUS

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of *WandaVision,* the article will operate with basic tools from Film Studies. Both diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the show will be observed. Regarding the cinematography, emphasis will be placed on the use of lenses, special effects, and camerawork, which includes camera placement—distance, angle, and height—and movement. As for the *mise en scène*, the examination of characters and settings will be pertinent. In particular, O'Sullivan's contributions to the study of serial narrative will be adopted. This scholar proposed a series of concepts that cut across the traditional terms of narrative analysis —time, space, plot, character, and perspective. Among Sullivan's elements, personnel and world-building will be relevant for the present article. According to this scholar, these terms "primarily address the *varieties of scope* that serials can create as their installments accumulate, changes that shape the world the serial is describing, [and] the agents in that world" [italics in the original] (O'Sullivan 2019, 52). When using "personnel"—in contrast to simply "characters"—, O'Sullivan aims at addressing a broader category concerned with the organization and distribution of characters across a series. The study of the deployment of characters

through the installments might reveal certain patterns. For instance, the number of characters in a specific episode might have narrative consequences (O'Sullivan 2019, 58). Regarding the study of scenery, O'Sullivan's ideas about "world-building" will be useful to understand how serial narratives expand the diegetic universe. From this viewpoint, the addition and exploration of new locations in a series create storytelling options (O'Sullivan 2019, 57). Bearing in mind how the arrangement of characters and locations contributes to the narrative will be key to understanding Wanda's changing world.

3. PREVIOUSLY ON… A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN SITCOMS

Most episodes of *WandaVision* comply with the generic conventions of American sitcoms and feature specific attributes of programs of each decade. Consequently, an overview of the genre and its progression will be relevant to understand the Marvel series. Generally speaking, sitcoms are characterized by their portrayal of stability through humor "rooted in the mundane nature of the everyday" (Wells-Lassagne 2015, 74). Each installment "is a brief overturning of the established order of [the sitcom's] universe before returning, unblemished, to the precise spot from which it began" (Austerlitz 2014, 4). Sitcoms have an overarching "narrative problematic" that lasts across the serial. Each episode has "a specific conflict based on the series' problematic [which] is resolved during the course of the episode, while the sustaining problematic remains" (Butler 2020, chap. 1). It is important to note that characters tend to forget or disregard past events within the show, which purposely creates little sense of continuity and allows viewers to watch episodes at will (Mittell 2015, 296).

The sitcom universe is hardly ever expanded—it is mostly limited to the domestic sphere—and the small cast of characters exhibits little development. In other words, world-building and personnel do not usually present much variation. Their 30-minute episodes usually include a teaser or cold opening, the main titles, two acts, a commercial break, and the end credits (Butler 2020, Ch. 1). That is, both in content and form, sitcoms are highly iterative. As for their cinematography, shows can be either single-camera or multi-camera, and this—together with budgetary and technical restraints—determines the mise-en-scène and even the story. Multicam shows have "theatrical" aesthetics and usually contain two plots in each episode, while single-camera ones tend to be more "cinematic" and may include a higher number of narrative threads (Butler 2020, Ch. 1). The characteristics of each type of production can be summarized as follows:

MULTICAM	SINGLE-CAMERA
Mise-en-scène	
Small ensemble of characters	Variable number of characters
Interior settings (on a sound stage)	Interior and exterior settings (location shooting)
Cinematography	
Eye-level camera height (very few high- or low-angles)	Eye-level, plus high- and low-angles
Reliance on medium-shot framing (fewer close-ups and no extreme long shots)	Variable framing: extreme long shot to super close-up
No subjective shots	Subjective shots
Zoom shots to "move" closer (rather than dollying)	Zooms and camera movement (including handheld)

Table 1 Multicamera and single-camera production conventions (adapted from Butler 2020, Ch. 1).

While American sitcoms have approximately adhered to these conventions through the years, shows have presented specific characteristics as a result of the historical period in which they were produced. Initially, all series had a 4:3 aspect ratio and laugh tracks and were multicam productions. Early sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966) were embedded in the postwar desire for peacefulness and stability. The former follows a middle-class housewife who wants to be a part of the show business. The latter portrays the daily life of a comedy show writer both at work and at home with his nuclear family and neighbors. These shows were not a reflection of life but, rather, a representation of what Americans should aspire for in the postwar era: the American Dream embodied in the happy normative family that inhabited white picket fence suburban areas (Austerlitz 2014, 8).

This saccharine trend continued through the 1960s, although some sitcoms "called into question the very notion of normality" (Buonomo 2012, 61). Programs such as *Bewitched* (1964–1972) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970) added a supernatural component to suburban life. While family values remained unchanged, a witch and a genie, respectively, used their powers to solve domestic issues. This may have symbolized the evolving position of women in American society (Buonomo 2012, 62; Arnold, Tilton, and Berke 2019, 16). Nevertheless, other critics remark on the significance of characters as powerful as Samantha and Jeannie staying at home and devoting their supernatural abilities to house chores. This could be interpreted as these sitcoms' compliance with the dominant gender discourse of the time, which suggested that women's fulfillment lay in housewifery (see Humphreys 2014, 105–21).

The 1970s witnessed the coexistence of a great number of socially aware series with others that ignored the political agenda. The former were a response to the increasing amount of sociopolitical movements that spread in the US seeking equal rights for people of all races, gender, sexuality, and class (Foss 2008, 45). Hence, the protagonist of *The Mary Tyler More Show* (1970–1977), a strong and single working woman, embodies progressive views on gender expectations and female agency. Conversely, some sitcoms had an escapist approach. For instance, *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) —another depiction of a suburban family— is usually criticized for "its obliviousness to public life" and because it "masks, domesticates and sugarcoats anxieties about contemporary American life" (Jones 2019, 2).

After the wave of controversial themes of the preceding decade, the 1980s sitcoms showcased a return to traditional family values in line with Reagan's conservative agenda, ignoring political and social concerns (Foss 2008, 46). These shows usually portrayed nuclear families and their everyday anecdotes. They seemed to conform to the myth of the suburban stable family, while also showcasing their disagreements and disorganization, thus being seemingly more lenient with imperfect households (Feasy 2012, 41). Moral lessons related to domestic life were common, usually in the form of tender conversations between parents and children, like the ones that closed many episodes of *Full House* (1987–1995) (Leppert 2019, "Introduction"). Additionally, the image of the ideal working mother was boosted: a career woman capable of dealing with her job while being a flawless homemaker, as epitomized by the "supermoms" of *Family Ties* (1982–1989) and *Growing Pains* (1985–1992) (Feasey 2012, 40; Leppert 2019, "Introduction"). Conversely, these sitcoms left behind those father figures who held the authority in the house of earlier shows: classical "infallible" fathers were replaced by clueless counterparts (Reimers 2003, 114–15).

The 1990s were marked by the predominance of the so-called "yuppie sitcoms," which featured urban characters, usually racially diverse, of all sexual orientations and/or childless couples, thus aligning with the Clinton administration's endorsement of anti-discrimination attitudes. Shows about nuclear families lost popularity and became scarce. The few ones that centered on families revolved around single parents, mostly mothers (Foss 2008, 46–47). Instead of the idealized households previously portrayed, the struggles, bitterness, and frustrations of family members were addressed. Therefore, the 90s family sitcoms could be deemed the antithesis of their predecessors (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2).

In the sitcoms of the 2000s, subversion reached new heights. Many series featured unfiltered dysfunctional families, e.g., *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006) (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2). In this show, a high-IQ kid gets constantly into trouble with his brothers, which causes their parents' exasperation. *Malcolm in the Middle* also presents a shift in the portrayal of parents: they were no longer flawless. Mothers gained authority even if they

tended to be chaotic and sometimes overwhelmed, whereas fathers showed more re-spect—if not fear—for their partners and seemed to be losing control of the household (Glenn 2012; Reimers 2003, 117). Innovations in the cinematography, such as the single-camera style, the fall of the fourth wall, and the absence of laugh tracks (Butler 2020, chap. 2) underscored their brash plots and characters (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2). Furthermore, the use of a single camera meant revolutionary possibilities for the sitcom genre in terms of cinematography and mise-en-scène, such as the inclusion of more exterior settings —even if recurring interiors still produced familiarity among the viewers (Butler 2020, Ch. 2).

During the 2010s, the mockumentary format gained popularity. It included fake in-terviews with the characters, adopting the formal features of documentaries, and "was used for ironic and humoristic purposes" (Butler 2020, Ch. 2). This formula is linked with the "comedy of discomfort," which is based in "the protagonist laughing at the pain they have caused at others" (Moore quoted in Nardi 2017, n.p.). The openness transmitted through direct address in shows such as *Modern Family* (2009–2020) was useful to tackle social issues that appealed to contemporary viewers, like mental health and anxieties about parenthood. In the case of *Modern Family,* the single-camera style allows a more dynamic use of space and cinematographic resources. For instance, a recurrent device is the cutaway gag, i.e., a replay that serves to illustrate characters' comments about their past and that has comedic intentions (Mittell 2015, 187).

4. ON TONIGHT'S EPISODE: ANALYSIS

The episodes that occur in Westview seem to be part of a sitcom: they present unim-portant domestic incidents of a small and recurring cast. Using Butler's terminology, the general narrative problematic of Wanda's sitcom is her constant effort to fit in the ideali-zation of the American family together with her husband Vision. The specific conflicts of each installment present minor obstacles that they encounter when striving to live up to this stereotype: from trying to get a promotion to gaining the neighbors' sympathy. The episodes' length, title sequence, break for commercials,[1] and closing credits reinforce the sitcom-like structure. Specifically, each installment presents the characteristics of pro-grams of a different decade. The show has nine episodes, but only six mirror the sitcom aesthetics, following the plot's demands. Each of these six episodes corresponds to a dif-ferent decade, from the 1950s to the 2010s (only skipping the 1990s, as will be addressed

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[1] The commercials do not advertise real products. Instead, the names of the made-up brands hint at Wanda's past, e.g., Stark Industries (that fabricated the bomb that killed her parents), Hydra (the Nazi organization that experimented on her), Lagos (the city in which she was not able to save some civilians in a previous MCU movie), and so on. In the same way that the commercial breaks suspend the fantasy of sitcoms, Wanda's painful past threatens to intrude on her tailor-made new life.

later). Other authors have conducted thorough examinations of the mode of production (see Higueras-Ruiz 2023 for a complete overview) or the themes (see Walker-Werth 2021) of the show. The following analysis aims at exploring how the latter are complemented by the former, with special attention to the reflection of American values.

Episode 1 is set in the 1950s and pays homage to iconic sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. The plot—Vision tries to get a promotion with the help of his charming wife Wanda—evocates the picture-perfect life of these series, which matches Wanda's desires. Just as the US was recovering from the Second World War when those shows were broadcast, Maximoff is still grieving for the aftermath of the war that caused global mayhem and in which she lost Vision, as well as some friends. She craves for familial harmony, and the 1950s sitcoms seem the perfect scenario to achieve it. At some point, Agnes, a nosy neighbor, teaches Wanda how to be a faultless home-maker. While the emphasis on the good behavior of wives was part of the political agenda in early sitcoms, here it mirrors Wanda's anxieties about creating a perfect life for Vision, in which she must fulfill her role for them to preserve their happiness.

The cinematography of this installment is also a journey back in time. It is filmed in black and white, with a 4:3 aspect ratio and a multi-camera technique. Medium-shot frames predominate, mostly with eye-level camera height. Special lenses were used as well, "to replicate or reference this early film look," as explained by Jess Hall, the cine-matographer of *WandaVision* (2021, n.p.). The action is complemented by some cheerful background music, exaggerated sound effects, and live public laughter—an important part of the production of this episode, as discussed in the documentary *Marvel Studios Assembled: The Making of WandaVision* (Baruh 2021). The mise-en-scène is exactly what could be expected from a multicam sitcom: a small ensemble of characters in a reduced number of interior settings—Vision's workplace and the family house. That is, both per-sonnel and world-building are limited at first. Not only do these choices replicate a 50s sitcom, but they also cause an impression of artificiality. Even the laugh track seems to be imposing some manufactured happiness. Early shows represented such an idealized life that it turned out forced; similarly, these circumstances strike as unnatural for Wanda and Vision—who are known by viewers as modern-day superheroes. Moreover, just like the creators of the first sitcoms were exploring the medium with modest techniques and resources, Wanda is putting to use her powers in uncharted territories, and this is re-flected in the old-fashioned and limited cinematography and mise-en-scène.

In episode 2, which takes place in the 1960s, Wanda's and Vision's special abilities become central. Nonetheless, instead of using them to save the world as is customary, they use them to solve domestic issues. This was the pattern of shows such as *Be-witched*—whose opening credits are emulated in this installment—and *I Dream of Jean-nie*. Similarly, after the comical attempts to appear normal before Vision's boss in the first episode, Maximoff has come to terms with her powers. She realizes that complete

normality is not possible for her and her husband, and so she embraces the portrayals of supernatural yet proper American families of the aforementioned 1960s sitcoms. In the same way that Samantha and Jeannie—their female protagonists—made their best to hide their powers while using them to help the breadwinner of the family in everyday incidents, Wanda secretly uses her extraordinary skills to both overcome mundane anecdotes and, on a large scale, maintain the illusion of Westview.

Wanda's decision to limit the use of her power to house chores not only hints at her desire to maintain a low profile but aligns her with the powerful witches and genies of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* as homemakers. Characters such as Samantha chose to be typical housewives, even claiming: "All I want is a normal life of a normal wife" (quoted in Humphreys 2014, 112), a sentence that could have been uttered by Wanda herself. Maximoff seems tired of the superhero quests of her past, and so she looks for the unruffled regularity of housewifery. Nonetheless, she is simultaneously exploiting her abilities to their maximum potential. Wanda's reality-warping skills are thriving, as manifested in the expansion of personnel and world-building. Episode 2 features more characters with different power dynamics between them and who occupy new spaces within the neighborhood. As years went by, television perfected its techniques and increased its budget, and this extended the scope of the shows. Likewise, Wanda is honing her powers, so she is capable of amplifying the mirage further.

The cinematography of the second episode continues to echo early sitcoms, so the manufactured impression remains. This installment is filmed with a 4:3 aspect ratio, black and white format, multicamera style, and so forth. The special effects that represent Wanda's powers—mostly jump cuts and wires that move objects, as shown in *The Making of WandaVision* (Baruh 2021)—are glaringly obvious in episodes 1 and 2, thus reinforcing the artificiality. Besides, they are reminiscent of those used to recreate Samantha's and Jeannie's supernatural abilities in their respective shows.

Remarkably, the fantasy is suspended when the outside world enters Westview. At different points during the episode, S.W.O.R.D. interferes with Wanda's life: firstly, the organization sends a drone inside the Hex, and then tries to contact her through the radio. In those moments, color is added, and instead of several cameras, only one is used. The close-ups and subjective shots of these scenes contrast with the predominant medium shot framing, just as camera movement (including low- and canted-angle zoom-ins) substitutes the static shots that characterize the rest of the episode—and early sitcoms, for that matter. Hence, color and camerawork highlight the disruption of Westview's illusory life. In Paul Bethany's words, one can notice the difference when the sitcom style is not there anymore, when an angle or camera movement should not be there, and that is a great storytelling tool (in Baruh 2021, n.p.). Near the end of this installment, Wanda becomes pregnant, and just as a new stage of the family life begins, a new era of television is portrayed: the arrival of technicolor (probably another reference

to *Bewitched,* whose first two seasons aired in black and white, switching to color in the third one). All in all, either through transgressions of sitcom conventions or the reflection of technical advances, cinematography mirrors alterations in Wanda's attempt for stability and the consequent changes in the narrative.

The references of episode 3 to *The Brady Bunch* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* are univocal. The opening credits imitate the effects of these sitcoms and set the tone for what is to come: Wanda and Vision's preparation for parenthood. Other similarities with these 70s programs are the use of technicolor, canned laughter, the 4:3 aspect ratio, and the likeness of Wanda's house to the Bradys', among others. It seems remarkable that such different series converge in this new stage of Wanda's life. *The Brady Bunch* was naïve and escapist, while *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was considered groundbreaking. It is plausible to think that Maximoff aims at recreating a family life like the one in *The Brady Bunch,* oblivious to the world's concerns, and seeks to distance herself as much as possible from her tragic past and the chaos after the war against Thanos. At the same time, some events challenge her wishes, e.g., S.W.O.R.D agent Monica Rambeau arrival in Westview. Agent Rambeau enters the Hex in order to put an end to the alteration that keeps a whole village hostage. When she crosses the border that separates Westville from the real world, Monica becomes Geraldine, another stereotypical suburban neighbor. She acts as such during her first scenes, for instance, talking about her success at work. Being a black woman, she epitomizes the progressive views of *The Mary Tyler More Show* and other sitcoms in the 1970s. Later on, Monica/Geraldine exhibits even more agency when mentioning the death of Pietro Maximoff since she acts of her own free will instead of under Wanda's mental control. Monica's stepping out of her role aligns with the premise of sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which advocated for the empowerment of the individual. Wanda is infuriated by this disruption, as she sees this meddling as a threat to her manufactured new life. Hence, "outside world" affairs affect Wanda's refuge, just as sociopolitical issues permeated some sitcoms of the decade.

Breaking with the pattern of previous installments, episode 4 does not follow the structure of a sitcom. This is so because it focuses on the concurrent events outside the Hex, specifically S.W.O.R.D.'s investigation. What is more, this episode presents the cinematographic conventions of contemporary movies of the MCU so as to portray the "real world." For instance, it was shot in a 2:40 ratio and with the same lenses that were used for filming the movies that chronologically precede the story taking place in *WandaVision* (Hall 2021). Other notable characteristics are the single-camera style, the elaborated camera movement, the changing frames, the variable lighting, and the increasing personnel and world-building—especially through the addition of exterior locations, among others. All of these features are reminiscent of the effort to mimic real life in MCU movies. The episode ends inside Westview again, namely with the confrontation between Monica and Wanda—which was omitted in the third episode. After attacking the intruder,

Maximoff expels her from the Hex. The final moments show Wanda, Vision, and their newborn twins in front of the TV, which hints at the return to their "normal," undisturbed life.

After the disruptions—both Monica/Geraldine's intrusion and the actual interruption of the showcasing of Wanda's sitcom-like life—Maximoff seeks to cordon off her family life from traumatic issues. The 1980s sitcoms did precisely that. Episode 5's opening credits are an amalgam of the title sequences of *Growing Pains, Family Ties,* and *Full House*. The setting recalls the households of these shows, too. This is the last installment in which special lenses are used to create a retro impression (Hall 2021). The laugh tracks and multicam style (with the aforementioned implications in cinematography and mise-en-scène) continue in this episode; only the aspect ratio changes to 16:9, a novelty with regard to previous sitcom-like installments. The most remarkable difference is the alternation of scenes inside and outside the Hex—the latter filmed in the same fashion as the fourth episode. Although the 16:9 aspect ratio did not gain popularity until the mid-1990s, the choice of using it here seems to reflect the show's approaching modernity while accommodating to technical needs, given that the changes between Westview's scenes and S.W.O.R.D's could be too abrupt had the 4:3 ratio been maintained.

The fifth episode follows Wanda and Vision's new routine now that there are two new members in the family. Their twins (who were born in episode 3), start displaying special abilities, too. They are capable of aging themselves up and they become adorable troublemakers in the span of a few scenes. Quick aging without any explanation other than the convenience of the plot was common in sitcoms. For example, five-year-old Chrissy suddenly became seven years old in *Growing Pains.* Some shows, including *Full House,* featured kids that grew up as seasons unfolded (Cerone 1995). Wanda's world seems to be drawing on this artistic license to accommodate the family's new situation. When the twins become a bit older, they adopt a puppy that dies shortly after, which lends itself to an ethical lesson in the form of a heart-to-heart talk with their mother. Both the adoption and the passing of the pet are common storylines in sitcoms (e.g., in *Full House*). This sitcom trope allows Wanda to ponder about the morality of her own deeds, i.e., tampering with reality, bringing the dead to life, and controlling innocent people to maintain Westview's farce.

As for the roles of the cast, they depart from their romanticized versions of previous installments. Like the "supermoms" who dealt with both work and domestic life in the 1980s sitcoms, Wanda must preserve Westview's illusion, a tiresome full-time job, while adapting to her recent motherhood. Some glitches in the fantasy—namely Agnes stepping out of character and asking whether she should repeat the scene—might indicate that Wanda is failing at balancing both facets of her life. Likewise, Vision seems to struggle. Early sitcoms normally presented faultless heads of the family. Accordingly, Vision had been perfectly performing the role Maximoff had assigned him. However, he starts

suspecting, so his performance of a flawless husband is affected. In fact, the couple ends up fighting. Vision confronts his wife about her manipulation of the people in the neighborhood and his lack of knowledge about what is happening or his own past. Wanda denies her implication in any of it at first, claiming that she did not start the anomaly, and then justifies it by saying she is doing it for them. This fracture in their domestic joy also impacts the non-diegetic elements. The closing credits appear before the quarrel begins as if no misunderstanding should be displayed, but the fight continues as the words roll over the screen, thus breaking both the fantasy of a blissful marriage and that of a sitcom scenario.

The new dramatic and dysfunctional situations emulate those family dynamics featured in some 1990s sitcoms, even if there seem to be no direct references to particular shows of that time in *WandaVision.* A possible explanation for skipping this decade could be the lack of idealized models from which Wanda's world could draw inspiration. Given that most shows of the end of the century did not portray typical nuclear families and even emphasized the possibility of single motherhood, it seems that Wanda might want to avoid this path entirely—especially after having argued with her husband. In fact, Wanda and Vision seem totally oblivious to the argument in the following episode, as if it had never occurred, which conforms to a typical behavior pattern of many sitcom characters. In the sixth installment, Westview moves on directly to the twenty-first aesthetics.

As the problems escalate, the scripts of the 2000s seem to fit better the chaos in Wanda's household. Episode 6 presents several similarities with *Malcolm in the Middle* —the epitome of messy yet normative TV families—including the opening sequence, the plot, the tone, and some cinematographic choices. In *WandaVision,* a new character joins the cast: Pietro Maximoff. He is Wanda's brother and, as far as she was aware, he died years ago (as showcased in a previous MCU movie). The unexpected arrival of Pietro brings not only sarcasm into the show but also instability to the family and Wanda's emotional state. He acts as an agitator while the twins discover the full potential of their superpowers, just like Malcolm finds out he has a high IQ, and he and his brothers are constantly misbehaving in *Malcolm in the Middle*.

Wanda's and Vision's roles evoke the flawed parents of the sitcoms of the turn of the century. In a conversation with her brother, Wanda acknowledges her morally dubious creation of Westview, thus exposing her faults. When she expands the Hex after feeling attacked by S.W.O.R.D. by the end of this episode, she demonstrates the extent of her powers, which replicates at a larger scale mothers' increasing control in the households. Meanwhile, Vision starts fearing Wanda's actions, just as other fathers did in the 2000s sitcoms, e.g., the one in *Malcolm in the Middle*. In short, their marriage is no longer perfect.

The cinematographic choices of this episode, which mimic those of *Malcolm in the Middle,* complement the increasingly chaotic situation in Westview. Accordingly, this

installment is shot with a single camera, which has several implications in the cinematography and mise-en-scène (see Table 1). The camera movement and frames are more dynamic, even including a handheld sequence in which one of the twins addresses the viewers, breaking the fourth wall in the same way that Malcolm does in his show. During that scene, he seems to hold the reins, momentarily replacing his mother. Furthermore, the single-cam style implies that more exterior settings can be used. All this matches Wanda's loss of control of the anomaly and its inhabitants, especially her husband. The single-cam technique allowed sitcoms to follow different characters into different spaces, and so Vision takes advantage of this liberty for exploring the neighborhood and finally discovering the farce Wanda has created. Additionally, the absence of laugh tracks goes hand in hand with the brasher themes of this installment, i.e., Wanda's moral dilemma and the frictions in the couple.

In order to showcase the conflicts in the marriage, episode 7 exploits the mockumentary format that prevailed in the 2010s sitcoms, such as *Modern Family*—which is the source of inspiration for part of the title sequence and the interior of the house. The fall of the fourth wall enables an unfiltered depiction of the characters. Wanda is suffering because her family life is no longer perfect. This is one of Claire's—one of the mothers in *Modern Family*—recurrent worries. Vision adopts an outspoken attitude regarding his doubts and concerns thanks to the direct address. Even if Wanda's and Vision's anxieties stem from bigger issues (namely, the threat of the outside world and the need for explanations about Westview, respectively), they resemble the parents of *Modern Family,* who confess to the camera their distress when facing domestic obstacles. The comedy of discomfort becomes central in this episode. To this end, some comedic devices typical of the 2010s are used, such as sarcasm and flashback replays that target the characters' own behaviors and thoughts, for instance, when Wanda bitterly recalls her fight against S.W.O.R.D in episode 6.

The mockumentary format is rarely acknowledged in most sitcoms. At first, characters in *WandaVision* act accordingly, but later in the installment, they draw attention to the conventions of this pseudo-documentary style. Wanda addresses the director, asking for their identity, and Vision stands up and leaves his fake interview. This raises questions about who is actually directing the show—i.e., who is controlling the anomaly—and leads to the end of the mirage. The sitcom conventions start being dismantled at the same time as Wanda's illusion vanishes. Remarkably, modern cinematographic techniques are used in the sitcom-like sequences because the TV era they represent is almost contemporary, which allows an organic blending of the characters and storylines outside and inside the Hex. By the end of the episode, the sitcom form disappears. S.W.O.R.D.'s attempts to enter Westview succeed and Wanda must face an unexpected new enemy, so her fantasy based on harmony is completely wrecked. Consequently, the sitcom genre no longer makes sense.

5. THE END: CONCLUSIONS

The presence of sitcoms in *WandaVision* goes far beyond an homage or a coping mechanism for Wanda's traumatic past. Sitcoms are a resource to structure Wanda's development. Their prompt, i.e., the eternal return to the initial order, is what drives Maximoff to choose them as models for her new life. However, her desire for steadiness is endlessly threatened. The evolution of the sitcom genre matching the worries of American society through the years allows the portrayal of this conflict. Just as situational comedies initially featured propagandistic marriages and ended up revolving around faulty characters, Wanda and Vision's relationship becomes less idealized and more realistic. Accordingly, the tone of the programs changed over time. Similarly, *WandaVision* is lighthearted in the first episodes, angsty when the marriage faces disagreements, and finally turns bitter when the issues become more serious. All the parallelisms to the sitcom genre and to specific series are underscored by the use of their characteristic cinematic elements, which, in turn, proves to be an account of the technical progress of television.

Furthermore, innovation in both cinematography—from black and white to color, from multi-camera to single-camera style, laugh tracks (or their absence) and mise-en-scène, a greater number of characters and settings, which leads to an increasingly complex personnel and world-building—serves to reflect Wanda's growing powers. Every time her idyllic life is endangered, she has to exploit her abilities to find a new form of stability, and ironically this makes her world everchanging and unstable. The obstacles of the first episodes were salvable, like in any sitcom. As these escalate, the sitcom format is no longer suitable. In a nutshell, sitcoms are the framework for representing both the desired tranquility and the unavoidable alterations in *WandaVision.* The balance of episodic and serial storytelling enables the contradiction between sameness and evolution.

For all the aforementioned reasons and in the words of Elizabeth Olsen, "this is a story that can only be told in the medium of television" (Bruh 2021, n.p.).This idea that *WandaVision* offers an experience that cannot be achieved through a movie has been repeatedly underlined by the participants of the project, including Kevin Feige (in Webster, Leaver, and Sandry 2022), the public, and the critics (Walker-Werth 2021). This is true on various levels. As explored in this article, the evolution of television itself is reflected in the modes of production of each episode. Furthermore, the episodic and serial storytelling inherent to serials is key for the narrative. And, finally, the show draws on the public's sentimental connection to television. Wanda resorts to sitcoms to create a space where she can feel safe and cope with her trauma, and this is something to which the viewers can relate. On the one hand, sitcoms are great exponents of American society not only because of the themes they address, but also because the genre was born in the United States, where situation comedies are produced by the dozen every year and have a great reception among the public. Sitcoms are presented as epitomes of Americanness

even to Americans. Wanda, who has felt like an outsider ever since she lost her family, even among the Avengers, craves for her integration at all levels, including in her new country. On the other hand, it is common to look for a diversion in TV content. Incidentally, *WandaVision* is in itself a great example of evasion through fiction. The show was released during the COVID crisis, at a time when people were actually dealing with the loss of loved ones and the unexpected break with normalcy. Many people turned to entertainment to seek some relief, and even if unplanned, the core idea of *WandaVision* —the stability of family life— matched the longings of many of them. Scholars such as Webster, Leaver, and Sandy (2022) have explored the impact of the show in the content vacuum of the pandemic, and how its transmedia format and its close-to-home themes appealed to the viewers and favored their engagement.

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