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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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Published by Rutgers University Press

Pugh, Tison.

The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom.

Rutgers University Press, 2018.

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Queer Innocence and Kitsch Nostalgia in *The Brady Bunch*



Producer Sherwood Schwartz credited the origins of *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74) to a 1965 newspaper article documenting that “more than 29 percent of all marriages included a child or children from a previous marriage,” as he also noted television’s refusal to address such a widespread family issue: “at that time the ‘D’ word [divorce] wasn’t an option on television.”¹ Family sitcoms of the 1960s were awash with widows and widowers raising children alone,² and in a watershed moment in television history, America’s first blended family came to the screen: widower Mike Brady (Robert Reed) married Carol Tyler Martin (Florence Henderson), thereby forming the eponymous Brady Bunch with their many children: Mike’s sons Greg (Barry Williams), Peter (Christopher Knight), and Bobby (Mike Lookinland), and Carol’s daughters Marcia (Maureen McCormick), Jan (Eve Plumb), and Cindy (Susan Olsen). *The Brady Bunch* enjoys one of the odder yet more enduring histories of American television, for it achieved only modest success during its five-year run. Following its cancellation, however, fans immediately clamored for more, and it was frequently reborn over the subsequent thirty years in rebooted television shows and feature films.

To a large degree the lasting appeal of *The Brady Bunch* arises from its impossible and ultimately queer innocence, which resisted the changing cultural mores of the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Innocence stands as one of society’s most amorphous values, for it defines so little

other than a lack (of knowledge, of experience), and all that can result from childhood innocence is its inevitable loss. As James Kincaid memorably opines, “Innocence is a lot like the air in your tires: there’s not a lot you can do with it but lose it.”³ A cultural value that must fall to its inherent contradictions, the fantasy of youthful innocence acts as an unsettling, queering force disruptive to the sense of All-American normality that the series sought to uphold, particularly in its depiction of the ever-chipper Brady children. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick muses that queerness denotes “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically,” and such meshes expand beyond individuals to televisual narratives that appear flummoxed by how to treat issues of children’s sexuality.⁴ By the very definition of the genre, family sitcoms must depict children, yet depicting children inevitably raises thorny questions about the symbolic and cultural significance of these narrative constructions.

Queer theory intersects with children’s narratives in their joint focus on the social meaning of the Child. As Lee Edelman argues, the figure of the Child, a powerful signifier of cultural innocence, demarcates normative behaviors and pleasures for adults: “The Child,” he posits, “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity.”⁵ Within the entertainment industry, producers must often bend their artistic visions to those both of prevailing cultural standards and of network censors, so this figure of “the Child” powerfully influences what types of narratives can be aired on television. Given the shifting tides of sexuality and feminism during the 1970s, *The Brady Bunch*’s purported innocence, couched in its genre as a family sitcom with child-friendly story lines, clashed with issues of sexuality and their depiction throughout its 117 episodes. In this manner the program highlights the queer foundation of the cultural fantasy of children’s sexual innocence, for this vision of the asexual child continually founders against children’s interest in eroticism, their physical development during their teen years, and adults’ negotiations of the taboo topic of children’s sexuality. *The Brady Bunch* made an impossible promise of sexual innocence to its viewers, for issues of sexuality inevitably crept into its plotlines and production and thus subverted the innocence that the show purportedly endorses. In its later incarnations as rebooted television programs, television movies, and feature films, *The Brady Bunch*’s exaggerated innocence, so out of step with the 1970s zeitgeist, encouraged a kitschy nostalgia for an America that never was yet that holds lasting appeal, which explains both the repeated attempts to return this family to the screen and the ways in which adult sexualities undercut these endeavors. With a surface innocence and a queer symptomology, *The Brady Bunch* illustrates the unlikelihood of stripping sexuality even from television’s most scrupulously wholesome domestic sitcoms.

Queer Innocence in the 1970s

The grueling Vietnam War, President Nixon's resignation, oil embargos, and economic stagflation—the 1970s are remembered as a time of social and economic dissatisfaction throughout the United States, when the last whiffs of 1950s optimism evaporated and the countercultural promise of the 1960s withered. A lack of faith in government further contributed to the era's dispirited sensibility, which Peter Carroll ascribes to “the failure of government to assure economic stability, to provide social justice, to fulfill a sense of national purpose.”⁶ Dan Berger casts the period as a “deeply ambivalent and contentious moment” in the nation's history, with the radical spirit of the 1960s, as evident in the women's, civil rights, and gay rights movements, facing entrenched opposition.⁷ Still, the spirit of sexual liberation unleashed during the 1960s continued, with Morton Hunt concluding that erotic liberalism—“the spontaneous and guilt-free enjoyment of a wide range of nonpathological sexual acts with a guiding belief in the emotional significance of those acts”—had become “the emergent ideal upon which the great majority of young Americans . . . are patterning their beliefs in their behavior.”⁸ In sum, erotic exuberance coupled with communal malaise characterized the 1970s, an odd coupling of pleasure and discontent that found its way into America's family sitcoms. For example, reframing the bobby-soxed and poodle-skirted vision of the American 1950s with drag races, stag parties, and rock-and-roll, *Happy Days* (1974–84) pays homage to the lost innocence of the Eisenhower era while concomitantly acknowledging the shifting perceptions of sexuality endemic to the 1970s. In one such instance, Mr. Cunningham (Tom Bosley) invites his son, Richie (Ron Howard), to discuss sexuality frankly with him: “Sex is actually what a son should discuss with his father. I mean, you don't want to learn about it on some street corner,” he patiently explains, in an episode concerning Richie's dashed hopes of losing his virginity (“All the Way”). Mr. Cunningham calmly accepts Richie's adolescent mistakes, including drunkenness, with a reassuring pat of “It's all part of growing up” (“Richie's Cup Runneth Over”).

In contrast to *Happy Days*' more candid treatment of teen sexuality, a theme treated as well in such 1970s family sitcoms as *The Partridge Family* (1970–74), *Good Times* (1974–79), and *One Day at a Time* (1975–84), a determined innocence characterizes *The Brady Bunch*'s pilot episode: Carol and Mike marry and depart for their honeymoon, but soon after checking into their hotel, they find themselves guilt-wracked for earlier chastising their children. The newlyweds throw robes over their nightwear and rush to gather Carol's daughters and Mike's sons for an impromptu family vacation, one celebrating the union both of the parents and of their children. On returning to the hotel, Carol happily proclaims to the desk clerk, “If there's one thing better than a honeymoon for two, it's a honeymoon for eight” (“The Honeymoon”).⁹ Alice, the

housekeeper (Ann B. Davis), then alights on the hotel's doorway, bringing with her the family pets, Fluffy and Tiger. The honeymoon for two blossoms into a celebration of and for the newly constituted family of stepparents and step-siblings. With its overwriting of the typical erotic dynamics of honeymoons, the pilot episode sends a clear message about *The Brady Bunch's* content: this family-centered sitcom will focus on the Bradys' wholesome experiences and shield young viewers from candid discussions or depictions of sexuality.¹⁰

Carol and Mike's decision to privilege a family reunion over marital eroticism attempts to erase sexuality from *The Brady Bunch*, and the lion's share of its episodes contributes to the prevailing vision of it as wholly innocent fare. The series addresses such universal topics as Marcia's trepidation over her first day of high school ("Today, I Am a Freshman"), Peter's fear of confronting a bully ("A Fistful of Reasons"), and children's delight in practical jokes, which they often take too far ("Fright Night"). Story lines such as a family vacation to the Grand Canyon ("Grand Canyon or Bust"), Bobby and Cindy's attempt to set a new world record for teeter-tottering ("The Teeter-Totter Caper"), and the Bradys' backyard staging of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" ("Snow White and the Seven Bradys") offer little opportunity to contemplate the meaning of childhood sexuality. In line with much family sitcom narratology, the program often concludes with pat morals, which Mike benevolently imparts. "It's your belief in yourself that counts, you know. You are what you think you are," he explains about self-confidence ("Juliet Is the Sun"), and he similarly advises about the necessity of maintaining one's integrity: "You really should never promise anything until you're sure you can deliver" ("Getting Davy Jones"). The Brady children appreciate the lessons that their parents share, as evident in the repeated catchphrase "I never thought of it that way," which Peter declares when Mike and Carol convince him that he will disappoint his cast mates if he quits the school play ("Everyone Can't Be George Washington"), as does Bobby when Mike and Carol teach him about the importance of enforcing rules ("Law and Disorder"), as does Greg when Mike queries his son on the ethics of switching football playbooks ("Quarterback Sneak"). As Ann B. Davis declared of the program's wholesome story lines in light of the changing times, "My feeling is that the show came out just about the time that television began to get so sexy."¹¹

Further along these chrononormative lines of sitcom narratology and gender, Carol represents the tenacious grip of the 1950s model of sitcom motherhood—the "goodwife" figure theorized by Diana Meehan.¹² Sitcoms of the 1970s increasingly depicted women as the independent heads of their households, introducing a stronger feminist perspective to network fare. As David Marc observes of this transition, "Pure paternal verticalism, as found in pre-seventies sitcoms, has been replaced by a more lateral view of moral authority, in which women are commonly the moral equals or superiors of

men, and in which children can occasionally reverse the generational flow of moral wisdom.”¹³ Like their predecessors from the previous decade, several single mothers of 1970s family sitcoms were widows, including Shirley Partridge (Shirley Jones) of *The Partridge Family* and Alice Hyatt (Linda Lavin) of *Alice* (1976–85), but in a dramatic shift, 1970s sitcoms also introduced divorced women to television. Katherine Lehman documents that Mary Richards of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) was intended to be a divorcée until “the network warned producers that ‘the public would never accept a divorced heroine,’” and the character was recast as never married.¹⁴ *Maude* (1972–78) features a three-time divorcée in its lead role, and Bea Arthur’s iconic portrayal of this firebrand feminist—“anything but tranquilizing,” as the theme song proclaims—depicted a new vision of American womanhood.¹⁵ *One Day at a Time* depicts divorced mother Ann Romano (Bonnie Franklin) embracing feminist ideals, as she reclaims her maiden name and asserts she will “have to be both mother and father” to her daughters (“Ann’s Decision”). Recognizing the challenges these women face, their story lines limn feminism as a source of strength during trying domestic times. In contrast to these program’s embrace of new paradigms of motherhood, *The Brady Bunch* depicts Mike as a widower, but the circumstances surrounding Carol’s previous marriage are left unexplained, without mention of the possibility of divorce. According to Sherwood Schwartz, “I opted for him being a widower. And I opted to leave Mrs. Brady’s past open. That might provide me an opportunity for future stories.”¹⁶

Even on its initial airing, *The Brady Bunch* appeared out of synch with the zeitgeist owing to its insistent focus on innocence. In an April 1968 meeting with network affiliates, Elton Rule, president of ABC, promised to lure the youth market with daring new programming: “The younger minds are being courted as never before. We know why we appeal to them—because we have the ability to be more unconventional than our competitors. And we are going to become even more unconventional as we become more meaningful.”¹⁷ Rule’s promise of unconventionality came to fruition with such programs as *The Mod Squad* (1968–73), *Room 222* (1969–74), and *The Young Rebels* (1970–71)—youth-oriented entertainment that tackled controversial themes and captured the social turmoil of the era. Beyond the immediate realm of television, demand for narratives challenging conventional lifestyles extended to the cinematic world, with films addressing such nonconformist themes as motorcycle subcultures (*The Wild Angels*, 1966; *Easy Rider*, 1969), drugs (*The Trip*, 1967; *Psych-Out*, 1968; *Wild in the Streets*, 1968), teen sexuality (*Last Summer*, 1969; *The Last Picture Show*, 1971), and youth protest movements (*The Strawberry Statement*, 1970). One of the more tumultuous periods of the twentieth century, the 1960s and early 1970s celebrated resistance to and subversion of the staid codes of previous eras, but *The Brady Bunch* primarily

acknowledges the turbulent tides of American culture through its depiction of a stepfamily rather than through story lines confronting the era's social unrest.

Against this backdrop in which television and film sought to portray the rebellious spirit of the times, *The Brady Bunch* treads lightly, if at all, into contemporary social issues, which further testifies to its overarching innocence—as well as to the ways that such innocence cannot fully hold. The conflicts of the 1960s, including the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests, register in the show only in whispered allusions. In its racial politics the Bradys' suburban world appears gently integrated, with African Americans playing token, usually nonspeaking, roles as the children's schoolmates and friends. The Bradys often act as genial cultural tourists, such as when they attend a Hopi rain dance (“Grand Canyon or Bust”) or a Hawaiian luau (“The Tiki Caves”). While such tokenism shepherds minority characters to the show's sidelines, some transgress significant boundaries: an African American girl is counted among Peter's admirers, whom Mike calls his “harem,” thus hinting at the possibility of his son's interracial dating (“The Personality Kid”). Also, a nonspeaking black girl is depicted as a member of the exclusive Boosters Club at Marcia's high school (“Today, I Am a Freshman”). When Bobby and Cindy find themselves lost in the Grand Canyon and encounter Jimmy, a Native American boy, Bobby asks, “What's the matter? Don't you like us palefaces?”; Jimmy replies tersely, “Cut out the paleface stuff,” with his rebuttal acknowledging and resisting the prejudice he faces as a nonwhite American (“The Brady Braves”). In these brief scenes, *The Brady Bunch* illustrates that, however much its writers and producers attempted to overlook the relevance of the civil rights movement to their white, suburban family, one cannot remain wholly isolated from the culture at large.

In a similar vein neither Greg nor his parents express concern that he could be drafted to fight in the Vietnam War, despite many American families' very real fear for their adolescent sons about this issue. Instead of resisting governmental authority that might conscript their sons to death overseas, the Bradys contribute their efforts on behalf of a local park that the city is threatening to close. Carol proudly declares to Mike, “The Women's Club is going to show them that you *can* fight city hall,” and Bobby and Cindy petition their neighbors for support. A surly man dismisses their juvenile rabble-rousing—“You radicals sure start young”—but Cindy does not even understand the intended insult. “What's a radical?” she wonders, to which Bobby gamely replies, “I guess it's somebody who likes to play in parks” (“Double Parked”). With this resignification of the word *radical*—the Black Panthers, SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), and the Weathermen as park-playing kids—*The Brady Bunch* covers all social discord under a patina of children's innocence. When Marcia sighs, “Parents just don't understand our generation” (“Going, Going . . . Steady”), she voices a common adolescent lament about the

generation gap, but the irony is that those in the 1960s and 1970s likely to have expressed this sentiment were exploring hippie lifestyles, experimenting with drugs, and embracing the counterculture. These are hardly the problems that the Bradys face: Greg succumbs to peer pressure and smokes a single cigarette (“Where There’s Smoke”)—but never drops acid.

As these examples of race relations and generational protests exemplify, although the Bradys resemble a family from 1950s television in their happy suburban bubble, this bubble cannot be wholly recreated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Similarly, the program’s overarching innocence cannot erase sexuality, and brief exchanges in various episodes expose the ways in which erotic themes seep through the fissures of otherwise innocent story lines and expose the queer foundations of the family sitcom. The question of whether Mike has taught his sons basic lessons on human reproduction reveals sexuality to be a conflicted topic for the program. In the episode “A Clubhouse Is Not a Home,” Mike suggests that the boys should help their new sisters and that their sisters will assist them in return. Bobby grumpily states, “I don’t want any girl scratching my back,” but Greg interjects, “Just wait a few years, shrimp.” With this hint of sexuality entering the conversation, Mike interrupts—“OK, that’s enough”—both to return the boys to the task at hand and to suppress any discussion of why Bobby is likely to reappraise the appeal of back-scratching in his future. This scene indicates that Mike has not yet sat down with his boys for a father-and-son discussion of the “birds and bees” variety, but a subsequent episode suggests that Mike has in fact discussed sexuality with them. This plotline revolves around which doctor will care for the new family—the boys’ male doctor or the girls’ female doctor—and Mike attempts to quell the boys’ protest by telling them, “There’s no difference between a man doctor and a woman doctor.” Greg then exclaims: “But dad! You’re the one who told us about the birds and the bees” (“Is There a Doctor in the House?”). Greg’s words are contradicted later in the series when, sensing that Mike is going to discuss sexuality with him, he reminds his father, “We already had that talk.” Greg suggests that he will get Bobby—skipping over Peter, who has apparently learned these lessons as well—but Mike responds, “Let’s not rush things,” indicating that his youngest son need not yet be taught this information (“The Undergraduate”). These contrasting lines from separate episodes represent little more than a slight continuity error in the series’ overarching story line, yet they simultaneously reveal sexuality to be a challenging issue for its writers owing to the thorny issue of how to depict the Brady boys’ sexual knowledge—especially that of Bobby, the youngest. From these scenes, it is never clear whether Mike has taught Bobby the facts of life, so they collectively demarcate sexuality as a site of ambivalence.

As “The Honeymoon” episode demonstrates, the presence of children often regulates adult sexuality by foreclosing the privacy necessary to enjoy an

erotic encounter, and, to this end, many of the gently amorous scenes between Carol and Mike take place without any children present. At the same time, children's regulatory effect on adult sexuality can be manipulated to create unexpected erotic possibilities. In the closing scene of "Alice's September Song," Alice's plans for a romantic picnic with her boyfriend (and butcher), Sam, are dashed when he invites the Brady children to join them. Carol sympathizes with Alice that her date has metamorphosed into a family affair, and Alice agrees that the picnic will not be very romantic. Mike interjects, "On the contrary, it's very romantic—for us," as he picks Carol up, apparently to whisk her away to the bedroom while the children will be safely out of the house. Numerous scenes depict Carol and Mike engaging in light romantic play, such as when she grades his kiss and assigns it a "C" but offers him the opportunity to improve on his initial performance; she raises her assessment to a "B" and then declares, "Now that's an 'A,'" as Mike's efforts increase in intensity ("The Power of the Press"). An irony arises in that, whereas the Brady children do not witness their parents' frisky behavior, the program's child viewers do. On the surface this appears counter to the ways in which a family-friendly program should construct its story lines to guard young audiences from knowledge of adult sexuality, for in these instances the phantom construction of the Child receives greater protective care than child viewers themselves, which exposes the preposterous illusion of the Child as a regulating factor for the narrative content of domestic sitcoms.

The 1970s are remembered as a time of sexual experimentation and excess—key parties, *ménages-a-trois*, and Hefneresque hedonism—and although the Bradys do not participate in such orgiastic pastimes, neither are the series' plotlines entirely divorced from the sexual culture around them. *The Brady Bunch* depicts Greg's dating life in several episodes, and most of these moments feature such innocent scenes as him and his date watching a drive-in movie—with the most aggressive ploy in his arsenal of seductions being to drape his arm over her shoulder. When Peter asks Greg which film is playing for their double date, Greg rakishly answers, "Who cares?," indicating that he plans not on watching the film but on necking with his girlfriend. At the drive-in, however, it would appear that Greg should care which film is playing, for he spends more time watching it than engaging in any sexual play with her ("Peter and the Wolf"). In a later episode, Peter becomes convinced that his brother has snuck two girls into his attic bedroom—"Greg's got two girls up there? What an operator!" ("Getting Greg's Goat")—with the implicit suggestion that his brother aspires to the sexual conquests of a swinger. In a surprising scene with Bobby and Cindy, Alice discovers that the youngsters plan to attend a nude swimming party, which she forbids: "You are not going to swim in an X-rated swimming pool without your parents' permission" ("Goodbye, Alice, Hello"). This brief interaction generates more questions than it answers—which of the

Bradys' neighbors hosts swimsuit-optional parties for local children? Is there any reason to suppose that Carol and Mike might give their children the permission that Alice denies them?—but it is surely an incongruous moment in the series' run, in which the sexual counterculture appears to have infiltrated their neighborhood. Such moments also call to mind the fact that “innocent” children's entertainments are created by adults, some of whom enjoy the transgression of sneaking sexual scenes past the censors' eyes. In this regard producer Lloyd Schwartz recalls that, when shooting the opening sequence of “And Now a Word from Our Sponsor,” the director of the scene's background action incorporated a low-level sex crime among the extras walking across a grocery-store parking lot: “In the background of a *Brady Bunch* episode, John [Lenox] subversively staged a scene of a prostitute picking up a client.”¹⁸ In the episode's final cut, one can see these characters, if not their transaction, as they walk away from the grocery store, which leaves a lingering trace of sexual transgression in a plot addressing the ethical quandary of whether the Bradys should endorse a particular brand of laundry detergent.

The 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City heralded the advent of the modern gay rights movement, yet the repercussions of this landmark event were not likely to be felt in a family sitcom such as *The Brady Bunch*. Still, queer representations in various of the era's domestic sitcoms encouraged viewers to consider the possibility of identities and desires beyond the heteronormative. The monstrous and supernatural families of *The Addams Family* (1964–66), *The Munsters* (1964–66), *Bewitched* (1964–72), and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70) today read as allegories of gay lives lived in the shadows, thereby expanding the vision of the American family to include the Other, even if these Others are exaggerated into cartoonish excess. *The Munsters* reverses the standards of attractiveness with its running gag that, in a house populated by Frankenstein-monster Herman Munster (Fred Gwynne), his vampire wife Lily (Yvonne De Carlo), their werewolf son, and Lily's vampire grandfather, the family's ugly duckling is comely human niece Marilyn. Lily says of Marilyn, “It's just one of those unfortunate things that happens. Poor dear,” with these lines hinting at a queer allegory, in which one's sexual orientation results from the vagaries of birth and genetics, and some people are simply “born that way.” Like the Munsters worrying over Marilyn, Morticia (Carolyn Jones) and Gomez (John Astin) of *The Addams Family* fret over the possibility that their son, Pugsley, could engage in such wholesome activities as the Boy Scouts, thus questioning the meaning of normality in the wider culture (“Morticia and the Psychiatrist”). With its plot of advertising executive Darrin Stephens hiding the secret of his supernatural wife, Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery), *Bewitched* invites queer readings, especially given the many gay actors playing key parts: Agnes Moorehead as Endora, Dick Sargent as Darrin, and Paul Lynde as Uncle Arthur.¹⁹ Similar to *Bewitched* in its plot of double

lives, astronaut Major Anthony Nelson (Larry Hagman) hides his genie, Jeannie (Barbara Eden), from the world, so *I Dream of Jeannie* can also be read as a queer allegory, even as Eden's sex appeal and skimpy costumes—although without her navel visible—increase its heteroerotic allure.

Given these conditions in which homosexuality could only be broached allegorically in family sitcoms based on outlandish premises, it is not particularly surprising, within the quasi-realist fictions of *The Brady Bunch*, that Mike expresses his mild homophobia by telling Carol, “If my boys wanted to play in anybody’s dollhouse, I’d take them to a psychiatrist” (“A Clubhouse Is Not a Home”). Mike’s statement, with its offhand bigotry against deviations from normative gender roles, simply reflects contemporary beliefs about homosexuality, for the American Psychiatric Association did not declassify it as a mental illness until 1973. Still, the program does not erase homosexuality entirely, with some minor roles featuring flamboyant males coded as gay. The episode “Father of the Year” portrays the suggestively named Lance Pierce—an appellation indicative of phallic penetration—as an ascot-wearing television reporter with affected speech patterns who overdramatically bemoans the challenges of filming the Bradys. “Why me? Why do these things always happen to me?” he laments when Mike enters through the back door and disrupts his preparations for the interview. In “Mike’s Horror-Scope,” Carol worries that Mike might be seduced by cosmetics diva Beebe Gallini, whose effete secretary, Dwayne, minces about, often draped with or draping pink swaths of cloth. Writer Bruce Howard appears to have encoded a queer reference in a minor character’s name: Gregory Gaylord. This outré photographer, who takes a Brady family portrait, mincingly declares: “Imagine! Gregory Gaylord forgetting his color plate” (“The Not-So-Rose-Colored Glasses”). These men, despite their brief appearances, disrupt the presentation of the Bradys’ suburban lifestyle as an oasis from the counterculture. The line between innocence and ignorance is often slight, but within the Bradys’ world, the children’s innocence of homosexuality is complicated by the difficulty in maintaining their ignorance of it, for they cannot be quarantined from these gay men, even if they are relegated to the story’s margins.

Whereas gay men are kept to the periphery of the Bradys’ home life, the plot of “The Drummer Boy” ponders the pressures of gender conformity, ultimately endorsing laxer codes of masculinity. In this episode, Peter both plays football and sings in his school’s glee club, but when his teammates discover his musical interests, they tease him with such disparaging and effeminizing terms as “songbird” and “canary.” “We’ve got a canary on our team,” one taunts, and another snipes, “Peter can be a pom-pom girl.” Guest star Deacon Jones, a professional football player for the Los Angeles Rams, enlightens Peter’s teammates from their archaic views when he informs them that he enjoys singing with his teammates; impressed by their idol, the boys reconsider their biases.

Along with Rosey Grier, Merlin Olsen, and Lamar Lundy, Jones was lionized as a member of the “Fearsome Foursome” for his gridiron achievements, with these men expanding their influence beyond the realm of sports to collectively challenge hegemonic concepts of masculinity throughout the 1970s. Grier openly discussed his hobbies of needlepoint and macramé, even penning *Rosey Grier’s Needlepoint for Men* (1973), while Olsen later served as the spokesman for FTD Florists, appearing in numerous commercials as a gentle romantic lead. With Jones advocating greater flexibility in cultural codes of masculinity, “The Drummer Boy” challenges patriarchal voices insisting on gender conformity, and it can also be viewed as a queer allegory, in which Peter learns that he can safely “come out of the closet” about his pleasure in singing.

Although 1970s sitcoms rarely address homosexuality, with “The Drummer Boy” *The Brady Bunch* initiated a trend of treating queer story lines through sports, a theme developed in other programs when a protagonist learns that a longtime friend, formerly a professional athlete, is gay. In *All in the Family* (1971–79), bigoted Archie Bunker wisecracks, “A guy who wears glasses is a four eyes; a guy who is a fag is a queer,” yet he is later stunned when his friend Steve, a former professional football player, comes out to him (“Judging Books by Covers”). *Soap* (1977–81) introduced television’s first recurring gay character in Billy Crystal’s role as Jodie Dallas, who is dating a closeted football player. In *Alice*, Alice divulges to her coworker Flo (Polly Holliday) that their new acquaintance, former professional footballer Jack Newhouse, is gay. Flo rejects the possibility that Newhouse could be gay until, in a masterful performance, Holliday depicts her character’s gradual acceptance of the truth: “Alice, Jack Newhouse is a football player, honey. He’s big and strong. Any woman’d die to take that hunk of candy home. Why, he spends half his life surrounded by big, virile men in locker rooms, in the showers, being tackled by other football players, jumping up and down and hugging each other . . . patting each other’s butts . . .” As she speaks, the camera gradually zooms in; she slows her speech and her gum chewing, as she then exclaims, “That don’t beat all! Jack Newhouse’s gay” (“Alice Gets a Pass”). The episode also features Alice’s hesitation to allow her son, Tommy (Philip McKeon), to accompany Newhouse on a fishing trip, lest the man either molest or effeminize him—but she soon realizes her prejudice and allows the trip to proceed. As to be expected, *The Brady Bunch’s* treatment of this queer theme is more muted than later 1970s fare, yet it questions the meaning of athletic masculinity as necessarily heteronormative in surprisingly similar terms.

Congruent with the program’s hesitance over sexuality, issues of gender nonconformity spark deep anxieties in several episodes, revealing it, too, to be an issue of narrative ambivalence. Thus, as much as “The Drummer Boy” undermines gender’s stranglehold on children, *The Brady Bunch* also portrays the humiliation that boys face when they transgress gender codes, particularly

those concerning clothing and drag. “The Liberation of Marcia Brady” tackles the battle of the sexes in its plot, with Marcia joining Greg’s Frontier Scouts troop to prove that she can succeed in outdoor activities that are ostensibly gendered male. Her brothers, mortified by her participation in their masculine milieu, attempt to mock her efforts by coercing Peter to enlist in her Sunflower Girl troop. Peter’s assumption of successful masculinity, which is also questioned in such episodes as “The Drummer Boy” and “The Personality Kid,” serves as a recurring theme in the series, and his faltering performance of adolescent masculinity experiences even greater duress when he must wear a Sunflower Girl outfit while traveling the neighborhood to sell cookies. Humiliated by his drag, Peter invites further ridicule due to the effete ambition assumed to motivate every member of the troop: to be named Blossom of the Month for selling the most cookies. At a neighbor’s doorstep, he glumly recites his sales pitch, “I am a little Sunflower / Sunny, brave, and true / From tiny bud to blossom / I do good deeds for you,” but he then quits the Sunflower Girls, with the social taboo against transgressing gender codes proving too strong for him to subvert. As Mimi Marinucci observes of this scene, “Peter’s experience suggests that the feminine domain is the available default for anyone, male or female, who is unable to conquer the challenge of masculinity.”²⁰

In complementary contrast to Peter and his feminized drag, Marcia dons male clothing in this episode, with these story lines illustrating the typical prejudices accompanying gender transgressions: whereas boys who put on drag cede the cultural prerogatives of masculinity, girls who dress as boys often cannot access them fully. To the dismay of her brothers, Marcia initially triumphs in her scouting efforts, even as Greg sabotages her attempt to join the Frontier Scouts by leaving small markings on the trail she must hike. When Mike worries that she has been away from camp for too long, Marcia calms him: “Dad, you don’t call Frontier Scouts ‘sweetheart.’ But I’m OK.” Marcia’s transvestism registers her successful crossing of gendered boundaries, yet she quits the Frontier Scouts in the episode’s conclusion, explaining to Carol, Mike, and Greg: “I just wanted to prove to myself I could do it even though I’m a girl.” She then adds to Carol: “Oh, has the new fashion magazine come in yet?” This episode is ultimately conservative in its outlook, as Marcia breaches gendered codes only to reinstate herself in the domestic sphere, as it also highlights the queer anxiety induced by individuals who transgress normative presumptions of gender, with Greg, Peter, and Bobby, in a state of veritable panic, struggling to ensure that their stepsister returns to the realm of the traditionally feminine. Still, the conservatism of this lesson is partially undone in its depiction of gender’s performativity, for it stages the tenuous connection between clothing and biological sex that nonetheless carries so much cultural weight. Marcia again drags when, in her plan to recruit pop singer / television star Davy Jones of *The Monkees* (1966–68) to sing at a school dance, she disguises herself as a bellboy. This scene culminates as she

blows a kiss of gratitude to Greg, thus imparting the queer joke that, although her drag is not terribly convincing, these bellboys are lovers (“Getting Davy Jones”). Alice drags as pilgrim John Carver in Greg’s school movie (“The Underground Movie”), and she tells the Brady children that she starred as Julius Caesar in her high school play at an all-girls school (“Juliet Is the Sun”). In sum, clothes may make the man in the Bradys’ world, but they also allow queer chinks in the social assumption of an unwavering correlation between dress and gender. Even for these innocent children presumably unaware of the 1970s culture surrounding them, ensconced in the generic bubble of a family sitcom, the outside world of shifting gender and sexual realms inevitably intrudes.

Framing Images of Queer Innocence

Beyond the ways in which issues of sexuality creep into *The Brady Bunch*’s family-friendly story lines, the program also portrays the child actors as objects of desire, thereby further dismantling its innocent facade. As numerous commentators have noted, cameras frame actors’ attractiveness through close-ups, pans, and other such strategies, particularly for the purpose of idealizing female beauty. In her groundbreaking study of cinematic scopophilia, Laura Mulvey exposes its sexist bent: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”²¹ Helen Haste agrees, arguing that “women are objectified through the role they play in presentation; or as objects of men’s (the voyeur’s) gaze.”²² Their analysis applies to the camera techniques of *The Brady Bunch*, particularly because, as producer Lloyd Schwartz explains, the program required many close-ups: “*The Brady Bunch* was filmed as a one-camera show, which means it was shot movie style. Most of the comedies today are shot on tape or film in front of live audiences, but our shows had many small scenes and had lots of close-ups. If you study the episodes, you’ll notice many more close-ups of the kids in the first years of filming. The reason? The kids weren’t accomplished actors and we could always work with them in close-ups until they got the line ‘right.’”²³ To frame children in close-ups does not necessitate that their characters be construed as objects of desire, yet when story lines focus on their physical attractiveness, such eroticized images cannot be entirely discounted. As Helen Wheatley avers, television frequently piques scopophilic viewings under conditions that she terms “accidental erotic spectacle,” an apt phrasing for the potential to frame child actors in such a manner.²⁴

In this regard Maureen McCormick models the desirability of a young teen’s body in her performances as Marcia. Her character is frequently shot preening in front of a mirror, such as when she plays with her facial features

because, as she explains, she is “just trying to see how I look with Faye Dunaway’s nose” (“Eenie Meenie Mommy Daddy”; see also the episode “Juliet Is the Sun” and fig. 2.1). Characters frequently comment on her popularity with boys, such as when Greg states at the dinner table, “You have to have a computer to keep up with her boyfriends” (“The Not-So-Ugly Duckling”). More than merely complimenting her attractiveness, various characters pay attention to her developing body and breasts. When Cindy and Marcia discuss their clothes and mutual need for closet space, Cindy tells her sister, “Mommy says you fill out, not up” (“A Clubhouse Is Not a Home”). In another scene, Marcia hopes to inherit some of Carol’s sweaters as hand-me-downs, to which her mother replies, “After you’ve filled out a bit” (“Every Boy Does It Once”). Marcia often asserts her maturity over her younger siblings, such as when she declares to Peter and Bobby, “I no longer play kids’ games”; Jan, however, reminds her of her relative youth by obliquely pointing out that her breasts have not yet developed: “You’re only thirteen. You’re not old enough yet to have a posture” (“Going, Going . . . Steady”). With characters commenting on Marcia’s beauty and maturing body, she is established as an object of desire for the show’s audience, regardless of the age-appropriateness of the connection between viewer and viewed.



FIGURE 2.1 In a pink room holding a pink hairbrush, Marcia models in front of the mirror, contemplating her beauty while inviting viewers to appreciate it as well. Her mother, Carol, enters the scene and, with furrowed features, appears worried about her daughter’s potential narcissism (“Juliet Is the Sun”).

Mulvey and Haste are correct to note that cameras more often frame female rather than male attractiveness, yet Greg, too, is constructed as an object of desire in *The Brady Bunch*, particularly in the series' later episodes that present him as an aspiring singer/songwriter. Talent scout Tammy Cutler sets Greg on a sure path to stardom in the persona of teen heartthrob Johnny Bravo, and during his audition she unexpectedly calls out, "Do your thing, girls," as a shrieking mob swarms him and rips his shirt open ("Adios, Johnny Bravo"). (Further heightening the episode's sexual tension, Claudia Jennings, who achieved fame as *Playboy's* 1970 Playmate of the Year, undertook the role of Tammy Cutler—an unlikely casting decision for a family-friendly program.) Of course, one could rightly point out that, even within the staging of a sitcom, this scene is doubly staged, for Greg's desirability is undermined when he learns that the producers chose him not for his singing talent but simply because he fit the garish, and undoubtedly expensive, costume that was to define Johnny Bravo's persona for public adulation. Still, while Greg's singing talent is unnecessary for the part of Johnny Bravo, his physical attractiveness builds on previous episodes stressing his appeal, such as his shirtless surfing scenes in the Hawaii episodes. Indeed, counterbalancing Marcia's preening in front of the mirror, numerous story lines depict Greg lifting weights to enhance his masculine physique ("Eenie Meenie Mommy Daddy," "The Dropout," and "Greg's Triangle"). After successfully hefting some barbells, he self-approvingly declares to his brothers, "It takes real muscles to do that," testifying to his continued attention to his body and its desirability ("The Possible Dream").

Even young Cindy, who mugs with a face of apparently perpetual innocence, is framed in a manner to accentuate her irresistibility. As James Kincaid argues in his analysis of eroticized depictions of children and childhood, cute kids pique adult dreams: "This adorable child is both the center of and the best excuse for our wish-fulfillment fantasies about our own being, our memories, our longings, our losses, and our arousal. According to this tradition, the child is not simply radiant but disarmingly cunning, unexpected—in a word cute."²⁵ Along these lines, plots of *The Brady Bunch* stage how older men find Cindy irresistible. When Carol loses her voice and fears she cannot sing in her church's Christmas service, Cindy pleads with the man playing Santa Claus at their local department store, "I want my mommy to get her voice back." "Santa" attempts to redirect her wishes to toys but eventually succumbs to her desires and promises to fulfill her request. Mike then confronts "Santa," who defends himself: "That little kid is hard to resist. When she looks at you with those big baby blues, you just want to give her everything" ("The Voice of Christmas"). In a similar scene emphasizing Cindy's irresistibility, Carol takes the girls to redeem the trading stamps they won in a family competition, but the store has closed. The exhausted clerk, after initially refusing their pleas, opens the door when Cindy begs, "Oh, please, Mister," as the camera focuses on her in a

close-up (“54-40 and Fight”; see fig. 2.2). Cindy’s cuteness melts these men’s hearts, and while it would surely exaggerate the tenor of these sequences to label them as pedophilic, they stage Cindy’s desirability through her physical appearance—the adorable pigtail curls tied with blue ribbon, the pouty lips and button nose, the distraught, widened, blue eyes—that cannot be resisted.

Further troubling the show’s purported innocence beyond its story lines, many viewers expected the siblings closest to each other in age—Marcia and Greg, Jan and Peter, Cindy and Bobby—to be narratively, and possibly romantically, paired. Hal Erickson describes “the latent kinkiness of the show’s premise—a widow with three daughters marries a man with three sons, all of whom live under the same roof as brothers and sisters even though the proximities in the kids’ ages could very well lead to relationships of a more delicate sort.”²⁶ Thus, whereas Mike chides Greg, “Those aren’t girls! Those are your sisters!” (“The Undergraduate”), and Greg reminds Peter, “Cindy doesn’t date her own brothers!” (“Cindy Brady, Lady”), familial prohibitions against step-incest cannot halt the child actors’ erotic interests in one another, nor can such desires be entirely erased from the series. In the program’s pilot, Carol’s mother says of Bobby and Cindy, “Don’t they look cute together?” (“The Honeymoon”), thus encouraging viewers to see the young characters



FIGURE 2.2 This close-up of Cindy implies that no man—no matter his age, no matter her youth—can resist her cuteness (“54-40 and Fight”).

as paired. The Brady kids frequently enter one another's bedrooms and their shared bathroom without knocking on the door, such as when Bobby walks in and takes a candid photo of Jan and Cindy ("Click"). In another episode, Marcia upbraids Bobby—"You're supposed to knock before you come in" ("Dough Re Mi")—and Greg enters Marcia's room while she undresses ("To Move or Not to Move"). Such scenes repeatedly stage the impossible image of children's innocence, for their interruptions of one another's privacy reflect the directors' and writers' preordained determination that the children will not discover one another undressed, while the dialogue reiterates this possibility.

The likelihood that two Brady children might find each other sexually attractive is most fully, if elliptically, explored in "Two Petes in a Pod," in which Peter becomes friends with Arthur Owens, a classmate and virtual twin. The boys trick Peter's family about their respective identities, and Arthur quickly develops a crush on Jan. Christopher Knight plays both roles, so in the scenes depicting Arthur's attraction to Jan, viewers understand that his desires do not transgress familial codes against step-incest. The image is nonetheless jarring, as Knight stages his hunger for his apparent stepsister, looking longingly at her (fig. 2.3). The episode also tacitly raises the question of why Peter would not find his stepsibling sexually attractive, just as his apparent twin does.



FIGURE 2.3 Christopher Knight (Peter) ogles Eve Plumb (Jan). In this scene Knight plays Arthur Owens, not Peter Brady, but the image invites viewers to contemplate sexual attraction between stepsiblings ("Two Petes in a Pod").

In looking for desires simmering beneath the show's surface, viewers simply discovered the behind-the-scenes hormonal excitement that the producers attempted to quell. Lloyd Schwartz recalls his efforts to dampen attractions between cast members—"Along with my script, I carried a metaphorical bucket of water to try to cool down libidos"²⁷—for he realized that any attraction between cast members should not be caught on camera. He also mentions that "The Room of the Top" episode was shot during the "height of the sexual tension between Barry and Maureen. When Barry sat down on the bed and started to talk to his TV sister, it became romantic, even steamy."²⁸ In the resulting scene the chemistry between the two is dampened yet still flickers, especially in moments when Greg/Barry Williams briefly casts down his eyes, as if stifling the attraction he feels for Marcia/Maureen McCormick. In "My Sister, Benedict Arnold," sexual tension appears to flare between the two when Marcia dates Warren Mulaney, Greg's nemesis, who beat him for a position on the first-string basketball team. Greg warns Marcia, "You better not go out with Warren Mulaney again," as he then takes revenge by dating Kathy Lawrence, who edged out Marcia for a position on the cheerleading squad. Their prohibitions against each other's dating life, while couched in terms of sibling rivalry, also take on the air of former lovers jealous of being supplanted by new romantic interests.

In their many interviews following the show's run, cast members have freely confessed their past attractions for one another, which further imbues *The Brady Bunch* with a patina of submerged adolescent eroticism. Susan Olsen discusses how Maureen McCormick "married" her to Mike Lookinland during the filming of a camping sequence, mentioning that she "considered this to be our honeymoon." Of this episode's climactic tent-collapsing scene, Barry Williams states, "I think that's the first time I actually tackled Marcia, and it started something in me." As part of his post-*Brady* shtick cagily designed to prolong his time in the limelight, Williams has repeatedly trumpeted his attraction to his onscreen mother. "God, she's hot," he assesses lustily of Florence Henderson while reminiscing over the shooting of a scene featuring her ("A-Camping We Will Go" Commentary Track). In his autobiography *Growing Up Brady: I Was a Teenage Greg*, Williams recounts a date with Henderson and quotes her recollections of the event: "We went from liking each other to having a crush on each other and you were *always* on the make with me. I had to worry about that. You were really cute, and I was tempted a few times. I think we're lucky Carol never slept with Greg, but . . . uh . . . it coulda been, coulda been."²⁹ In her autobiography, however, Henderson sterilizes their relationship from any sexual residue: "What is very true is that Barry did have a serious crush on me, which I understood and helped him get past. Let us just say that if he had entertained a roll in the hay with me, I would never have done that."³⁰ Part of *The Brady Bunch*'s legacy entails continued interest in the

sex lives of its stars, and these titillating tidbits invite new viewings of the program, those more deeply attuned to the difficulty of masking adolescent desire in a resolutely innocent family sitcom.

After the series concluded, its stars found themselves typecast in their family-friendly roles, and some sought challenging, provocative parts that would distance them from *The Brady Bunch*'s wholesomeness. Eve Plumb starred in *Dawn: Picture of a Teenage Runaway* (1976), in which the title character escapes her troubled home life only to turn to prostitution. Robert Reed guest-starred on *Medical Center* (1969–76) in a 1975 episode entitled “The Fourth Sex,” playing the role of Pat Caddison, a doctor seeking a sex-change surgery.³¹ Following his death in 1992, Reed's obituary revealed that he had contracted HIV, which his doctor cited as a contributing factor to his death from colon cancer.³² With Reed posthumously outed as gay, his performance as Mike Brady casts *The Brady Bunch* in a new light, as it assumes the allegorical coloring of a 1970s family with a closeted father. Commenting on Reed's homosexuality, Sherwood Schwartz stated, “During the entire run of the series and subsequent TV movies, Lloyd and I always guarded his ‘secret.’”³³ Of course they did: admitting Reed's homosexuality during the program's run in the early 1970s, or even during its rebootings in the 1980s and 1990s, would have created a major scandal, threatening the franchise's future and its financial profits. Now that today's viewers see a gay man playing the father of one of America's most scrupulously innocent television households, it exposes the lie of familial heteronormativity throughout the 1970s. Jan need not have run away from home for life as a prostitute, and Mike need not have been homosexual, for the actors' subsequent roles and revelations to highlight further the impossible innocence of the Bradys' world.

In the end the queer innocence of *The Brady Bunch* reveals the paradox of the promise of children's asexuality. Family-friendly sitcoms may cloak or otherwise marginalize story lines addressing sexuality, but sexuality, so central a part of the human experience, cannot be so readily constrained. And while the vast majority of *The Brady Bunch* maintains its illusion of innocence, the episode “Miss Popularity” rewrites the antieroticism that “The Honeymoon” established as the program's foundational premise. In this story, Carol and Mike plan their second honeymoon—during which their children are to remain at home—but Carol still laments, “It sure is going to be strange without the kids.” Because they have repeatedly cancelled their vacation plans owing to unexpected scheduling conflicts, Alice brings Carol and Mike a “Do Not Disturb” sign to hang on their bedroom door. Carol frets, “What will the children think?” But Alice deadpans in reply, “Who do you think made the sign?” When did the Brady kids learn of their parents' pleasures behind closed doors? *The Brady Bunch* never answers this question, yet somehow these innocent children learned of human sexuality, thereby demonstrating

the innocuousness and symptomology of sexual knowledge that the show tried so strenuously to hide from its surfaces, as well as the impossibility of stripping eroticism from a 1970s culture steeped in sexual liberation.

Kitsch Nostalgia and the Queer Afterlives of *The Brady Bunch*

In a snarky epitaph for *The Brady Bunch*, Robert Pegg mocks its ethos: “The show was the last of a vanishing breed of domestic sitcoms about the family life of unnaturally wholesome middle-class white people.”³⁴ While easy to flip-pantly dismiss, these “unnaturally wholesome middle-class white people” have nonetheless proved enduringly popular since their 1974 cancellation, and *The Brady Bunch*’s unique contribution to American television is connected to its sustained legacy following its demise, which is virtually unparalleled. Quite simply, as easy as it may be to deride *The Brady Bunch* for its syrupy domesticity and the fantasy it creates of American suburban life, many young viewers delighted in its pleasures and refused to repudiate them as they aged, primarily children born in the 1960s who watched it during its initial run and children born in the 1970s who watched it as an after-school treat during its successful syndication both on local television channels and nationally on TBS. Self-proclaimed “Bradyologist” Lisa Sutton describes how she became attached to the Brady phenomenon: “Clearly it’s from watching *The Brady Bunch* over and over again. It has the perfect balance of generic plotline and unchallenging sweetness with moments of arcane humor that everyone can relate to, no matter how trite or corny. It was a part of a time and place where things were truly kinder and gentler. It was our last gasp of innocence.”³⁵ Countless viewers share Sutton’s appreciation for *The Brady Bunch*’s innocence, for, following its 1974 cancellation, numerous reincarnations welcomed the family back to the American public: in addition to *The Brady Kids* (1972–73), an animated program running concurrently with the series, the Brady characters returned in such reboots as *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour* (1976); *The Brady Brides* (1981), a short-lived sitcom; *A Very Brady Christmas* (1988), a television movie; and *The Bradys* (1990), a dramedy. In the 1990s two theatrically released satirical films starring Shelley Long and Gary Cole as Carol and Mike Brady followed—*The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995) and *A Very Brady Sequel* (1996)—with *The Brady Bunch in the White House* (2002) returning the sitcom family to television.³⁶ It seems as if from the moment of the show’s cancellation nostalgia demanded its immediate return, despite the fact that most of these revivals flopped in the ratings or at the box office—with the notable exceptions of *A Very Brady Christmas* and *The Brady Bunch Movie*. Following its cancellation, *The Brady Bunch* has resonated throughout popular culture, and this nostalgia reveals a deeper meaning of the original show’s relationship to its

audience—one that is tied to its conservative yet queer vision of the innocent American family and the intransigent allure of domestic sitcoms.

Nostalgia wields its inexorable pull as individuals recoat their yesteryears with patinas of affection and loss, not simply remembering events of their youth but imbuing them with a warm, hazy glow, as well as regret for their passing. As Søren Kierkegaard muses: “To live in recollection is the most perfect life imaginable; recollection is more richly satisfying than all actuality, and it has a security that no actuality possesses. A recollected life has already passed into eternity and has no temporal interest anymore.”³⁷ The past becomes a longed-for paradise, one with its disappointments erased from view. With a dash of cynicism, Ralph Harper proposes that “nostalgia is neither illusion nor repetition; it is a return to something we have never had. And yet the very force of it is just that in it the lost is recognized, is familiar. Through nostalgia we know not only what we hold most dear, but the quality of experiencing that we deny ourselves habitually.”³⁸ Nostalgia, then, does not simply entail a remembrance of things past but a celebration of a fantasy of that past. Furthermore, in sugar-coating one’s history, nostalgia threatens to dull one’s critical sensibilities, as Charles Maier suggests through his memorable analogy: “Nostalgia is to memory as kitsch is to art.”³⁹ Few art forms are as easily mocked as kitsch, which has long been denigrated as art’s antithesis, as in Clement Greenberg’s classic formulation: “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. . . . Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious.”⁴⁰ Although some critics might desire the erasure of kitsch, deriding this cultural form has not muted its continued appeal, and nostalgia’s kitschy edge invites an ironic sensibility to infiltrate one’s relationship to the past, in the awareness that, although one’s childhood entertainments lacked sophistication and depth, they maintain their power to please in the present as a result of the retrospective allure of their insistent simplicity.⁴¹

While not as rarefied as Proust’s madeines in *In Search of Lost Time*, television serves a central role for adults remembering their lost childhoods, and producers, writers, and marketers understand nostalgia’s power for selling new versions of old narratives. Concerning television’s ambivalent temporal positioning vis-à-vis past, present, and future, Jonathan Gray suggests: “On one hand, [television] programs can show us new ways to be, think, look, and feel . . . that move us away from more ingrained identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. . . . On the other hand, fan texts . . . can encourage us to hole up in our past.”⁴² This dynamic is particularly relevant for family sitcoms that viewers voraciously consumed during their childhood and then return to for nostalgic pleasures during their adulthood. For many *Brady Bunch* viewers, a kitschy sense of nostalgia is doubly refracted because

many perceive the program's impossibly innocent foundations, outmoded even during its airing in the early 1970s, while also recognizing their childhood enjoyment of its guileless narratives. A given individual's viewing history shifts through time and with the flow of a given program's dissemination, as of course it must, yet the pleasures of kitsch nostalgia for *The Brady Bunch* involve insisting on one's present enjoyment of televisual narratives that one cannot help but see, with the passing of years, as serving up a vision of America endearingly and ridiculously passé in its outlook.

Cognizant of the profound nostalgia their sitcom generated among its viewers, and also of the concomitant desire to experience its pleasures anew, in the 1980s Sherwood and Lloyd Schwartz built their script for *A Very Brady Christmas* to deliver to audiences the same formula as the series, unchanged despite the passing of years. *A Very Brady Christmas* promises an excess of nostalgia, with the simple adverb *very* hinting at a kitschy revamping of the recipe enjoyed during the early 1970s. Turning the family's name into an adjective—the title announces through its semantic play both a depiction of the Brady family's Christmas and the experience of “Bradyhood” during the yuletide season—Schwartz and Schwartz amplify the cultural meaning of yesterday through their appeal to kitsch nostalgia.

The plot of *A Very Brady Christmas* is simple to the point of simplistic: Carol and Mike, after a mix-up in which they each plan a holiday vacation without consulting the other, decide to use their travel funds to bring Greg, Marcia, Peter, Jan, Bobby, and Cindy home for Christmas. Within this framework each Brady child propels a subplot related to a minor crisis in his or her life, with these subplots registering as well that the children are now adults facing adult challenges. Greg disagrees with his wife, Nora, over whether they should spend the holidays with his family or with hers; Marcia's husband, Wally, has lost his job; Peter feels emasculated because his girlfriend, Valerie, is also his boss; Jan and her husband, Phillip, are experiencing marital difficulties; Bobby has dropped out of business school to pursue his dream of race-car driving; and Cindy worries that she will never be treated as an adult. (She is right to complain: for Christmas dinner she is seated at the children's table with her nephews and niece.) Problems quickly dissolve, virtually as soon as they are aired. Although Greg arrives without Nora, she unexpectedly follows him; Wally finds a job while joining Mike on a jaunt through the neighborhood; Peter and Valerie propose simultaneously, proving the equality of their relationship; Jan and Phillip reconcile after talking through their problems as Carol silently observes; Bobby confesses his career switch, and although Mike and Carol are upset, Mike admits, “I didn't always do what my parents wanted me to do”; and Carol invites Cindy to join the adults (“Cindy, would you like to come over now and sit with us at the big table?”), although she declines.

The simple stasis of the family sitcom is achieved anew, as viewers knew it would be.

Alongside these numerous plot arcs, the emotional highlights of *A Very Brady Christmas* hinge on its kitschiest and most sentimental moments, further stressing that this television movie seeks to enhance the experience of Bradyism through an excess of emotionality. For example, as Mike, Greg, Peter, and Bobby enter the family home with a Christmas tree in tow, they sing “Deck the Halls”; Carol, Marcia, Jan, Cindy, and Alice then enter from the kitchen, bringing with them refreshments and singing along. Soon the entire family gathers around the tree to sing “Jingle Bells.” On the show’s nostalgic level, this simple moment captures the emotional allure of the Brady family—singing together in perfect family harmony. This ideal stasis and kitschy nostalgia of *A Very Brady Christmas* further registers in its use of flashbacks to classic *Brady Bunch* episodes. As Carol and Mike reminisce over shared family moments from the past, the film segues into the camping trip depicted in the “A-Camping We Will Go” episode—thereby inviting viewers to relive their treasured memories of the Bradys as well. The climax of *A Very Brady Christmas* merges nostalgia with honeyed sentimentality: a building collapses because the owner did not heed Mike’s architectural specifications, and although the family fears the worst, Carol’s singing of “O Come All Ye Faithful” presages a holiday miracle, as Mike escapes from the construction site unharmed. This moment echoes the seasonal wonders of years past, when Carol sang the same melody for the Christmas service after Cindy’s miraculous request for Santa Claus to restore her mother’s voice in “The Voice of Christmas” episode. Such emotionally kitschy moments multiply as *A Very Brady Christmas* concludes: lest viewers miss the allusion, the news reporter covering the building collapse points to the street sign marking its location, celebrating “another miracle on 34th Street” in homage to sentimental yuletide films of the past. Sam the butcher, who has left Alice for another woman, returns to her, pleading, “Do you have it in your heart to take me back?” thus providing a happy ending for all. The movie concludes as the Bradys sing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”—with the direct address of the song’s title breaking the barrier between television program and television viewers. With its plot predicated on kitsch nostalgia, *A Very Brady Christmas* proved a ratings smash, as Lloyd Schwartz documents: “*A Very Brady Christmas* had the highest ratings of any TV movie over the last two years.”⁴³ And while it is easy for critics to scoff at kitsch, its appeal endures, and not merely for unsophisticated viewers lacking any critical sensibility but for those pleasurably aware of their appreciation of nostalgia tweaked to its rarefied essence.

At the same time, *A Very Brady Christmas* showcases the ways in which sexuality queerly undermines the promise of kitsch nostalgia—as it also

presaged the disastrous fate of the Brady Bunch's next incarnation in *The Bradys*—for the impossible innocence of its sitcom roots, as tenuous as they were in the series itself, could simply no longer hold in the 1980s. *A Very Brady Christmas* begins by obfuscating sex, in line with *The Brady Bunch*'s pilot episode. Carol flirts suggestively—“Remember, we don't have any kids at home anymore. . . . So, I thought maybe you and I could do some business together here”—but Mike responds as if the children still regulated their household. “You tempt me. You really do,” he claims before leaving for work. Soon, however, sexually suggestive story lines trouble the innocent foundations on which *The Brady Bunch* relies. When viewers learn that Sam left Alice for another woman, he explains in the note that leaves her in tears: “I met a younger woman. At first we just traded meatloaf recipes; then one night she asked me over to season her rump roast.” This double entendre hints at more candid treatments of eroticism, and the sexual obfuscation of *The Brady Bunch* soon cedes to images of the Brady children indulging in their amorous pleasures. As Greg passionately embraces Nora, who works as his nurse, another nurse interrupts them, and so he jokes, “It's OK. I'm just teaching this nurse mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.” Wally and Marcia kiss a bit too hungrily at the dinner table for typical Christmas celebrations, and after Valerie comforts Peter—“I can't help it if I'm your boss, Peter. And that only bothers me because it bothers you, and it shouldn't, sweetheart”—they embrace, with the film's otherwise chipper score now accentuating the seductive growls of a saxophone. When Jan and Phillip reconcile after their dispute, they kiss, and Jan interrupts their rising passion to tell Carol, “Thanks, mom, for bringing us back together,” as her mother acknowledges the likelihood that they will now consummate their reconciliation: “You can be late for breakfast.” Such candor about Greg's, Marcia's, Peter's, and Jan's sex lives is counterbalanced by Bobby's and Cindy's eternal innocence, with little hint of any romantic story lines yet developing for the youngest offspring, yet kitsch nostalgia evokes desire for the stasis of the past, not for maturity in the present.

These hints of sexuality in *A Very Brady Christmas* escalated in the family's next incarnation in *The Bradys* during the early 1990s, which bombed in the ratings and was quickly cancelled, for kitschy nostalgia evoking a queerly innocent past clashed with the characters' sexually active present. *The Bradys* sought to update the program's family sitcom foundations by infusing dramatic elements, resulting in an hour-long comic drama, or “dramedy.” The genre of dramedy, as Judith Lancioni attests, “fosters the weaving together of comic and dramatic elements across storylines, thus creating a highly complex text,”⁴⁴ yet drama and comedy have proved notoriously challenging for television to combine successfully. Foundational dramedies such as *Frank's Place* (1987–88), *Hooperman* (1987–89), and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (1987–91) struggled to find audiences; *Moonlighting* (1985–89) initially

succeeded yet soon lost its comic edge—notably after Maddie (Cybill Shepherd) and David (Bruce Willis) consummated their relationship, demonstrating that romance can be the deathblow for comedy based on repartee’s witty antagonism.⁴⁵ Later dramedies such as *Desperate Housewives* (2004–12), *Ugly Betty* (2006–10), and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–) are perhaps more accurately described as soap operas reveling in story lines so overdramatic that they verge on the self-parodic. Notably, few dramedies attract child viewers, so the transition of *The Brady Bunch* into *The Bradys* conjured a vast array of narrative disjunctions.

Riffing on *The Brady Bunch*’s famous opening credit sequence and theme song, with its jaunty explanation of how the families joined together, Florence Henderson sings *The Bradys*’ theme, with its lyrics alerting viewers to the program’s new perspective: “When our kids were small, their problems all were smaller. As they changed, so did their point of view.” By stressing the roots of *The Bradys* in its sitcom past, this theme song situates the program’s appeal in kitsch nostalgia, and to this end *The Bradys* maintains many plot points from its earlier incarnations, even down to Bobby’s good-luck charm that he carries with him in his racing career, with its nod to *The Brady Bunch*’s Hawaii episodes. When Bobby marries his fiancée, Tracy, Dabbs Greer returns to play the minister—the same actor who presided over Carol and Mike’s nuptials more than twenty years earlier. This character then reminisces about a farcical wedding he presided over that ended with a dog chasing a cat and the bride and groom covered in wedding cake, as he is then reminded that it was Carol and Mike’s. Bobby and Tracy’s wedding involves similar mayhem, as her sister goes into labor during the ceremony and Greg delivers the baby upstairs, as Bobby, paralyzed from a racing accident, then rises from his wheelchair and stands for his vows. With its mixture of nostalgic homage and contemporary struggles, *The Bradys* attempts to deliver the pleasures of the past while recognizing the necessity of adult story lines for adult actors.

Whereas family sitcoms typically seek viewers of all ages, dramedies face the challenge of juggling comic antics with their serious dramatic ambitions. In one such mishmash scene the family awaits Bobby’s return from the hospital after the devastating accident that left him paralyzed, with Carol hinting at the painful emotions she struggles to hide: “I’m going to try not to cry when I see Bobby in that wheelchair.” Heartfelt drama segues into a cheap comedy sequence as the family mistakes a parade of guests—Alice, Peter, an insurance agent offering Marcia’s husband Wally a job, and Bobby’s physical therapist—for Bobby. At last, when he enters his childhood home, the camera pans as everybody tears up. Yet from this somber moment of emotional connection spring numerous scenes of slapstick humor inspired by Bobby’s wheelchair. Alice sits in it for a test run but loses control and rolls down a ramp, and when Tracy accepts Bobby’s marriage proposal, it rolls backward and then

off-camera as they fall into a lake. Such scenes create a jarring effect, one that ultimately undercuts both the humor of the program's sitcom roots and the emotionality of its dramatic aspirations.

The Bradys ran for a mere six episodes, addressing as well such story lines as Marcia's descent into alcoholism and Mike's foray into politics, so viewers conditioned to see the Bradys resolving their problems in each episode were inevitably disappointed by nostalgia's failure. And for a program founded on innocence and asexuality—no matter the absurdity of this view—there is something jarring about seeing the Brady children pursuing their desires so openly. Having watched these characters in their youth, and having been encouraged to identify with the Brady siblings who match them in age and sex, longtime Brady fans were further confronted with the ways in which sexuality disrupts the sitcom's foundational promise of eternal innocence.⁴⁶ In one such instance, Jan and Phillip are depicted in bed together watching Bobby's car race on television; Jan says, "Bobby is making his move," and Phillip huskily adds, "So am I." Later Jan, mentioning their upcoming cruise, purrs over "three fun-filled days, three very fun-filled nights," and their marital intimacy includes household chores in dishabille (figs. 2.4 and 2.5). Likewise, Peter, who has broken up with his boss, Valerie, resumes his life as a Romeo: a coworker invites him to dinner at her place although he already has plans with another. "I hope you like your food spicy," she murmurs tantalizingly, to which he responds, "The hotter, the better"—as a saxophone wails seductively on the score. For fans of *The Brady Bunch* who grew up alongside it, such scenes break the formula of kitsch nostalgia, for it is a bit like thinking of one's siblings' sex lives: rationally, we know they are sexual beings, but musing over their erotic pastimes is a bit discomfiting and leaves one grateful for the incest taboo. Ironically, *The Brady Bunch* prospered in the early 1970s prior to the institution of family-hour protocols, yet *The Bradys* died by the family hour in the 1990s—beaten in the ratings by ABC's family-friendly TGIF lineup (standing both for "Thank God It's Friday" and, a bit more cozily, "Thank Goodness It's Funny") beginning with *Full House* (1987–95) and *Family Matters* (1989–98). The genre of dramedy mixed with Brady children's sexuality disrupted the winning formula of innocence reborn through kitsch nostalgia, and from these narrative problems *The Bradys* died while a series of cinematic parodies was born.

The Brady Bunch depicted an anachronistic and queerly innocent vision of the wholesome American family during its initial run in the early 1970s, and the failure of *The Bradys* testifies to the narrative limits of these themes against the passage of time. By the 1990s *The Brady Bunch* had become a symbol against which other family sitcoms openly revolted. In an unprecedented coincidence, three programs—*All-American Girl* (1994–95), *That '70s Show* (1998–2006), and *Family Guy* (1999–)—mocked *The Brady Bunch* in their



FIGURES 2.4 AND 2.5 Jan is no longer an innocent child, and thus no longer part of a profitable franchise, with these images capturing her in bed with her husband, Phillip, and attending to household chores while wearing lingerie. Frequent depictions of adult sexuality in *The Bradys* unsettle the pleasures of kitsch nostalgia, demanding that viewers see these characters as adults when their appeal lies in their impossible innocence.

pilot episodes, announcing their satiric disdain for this epitome of yesteryear's wholesome sitcoms. *All-American Girl's* Margaret (Margaret Cho) tells her mother, "Mom, this is how they used to fight on *The Brady Bunch*. We can do better" ("Mom, Dad, This Is Kyle"), and *That '70s Show* portrays Eric (Topher Grace) and Donna (Laura Prepon) satirically reenacting the Bradys' "oh, my nose" plotline, in which Greg accidentally throws a football into Marcia's face ("The Subject Was Noses"). *That '70s Show's* pilot alerts viewers to its anti-*Brady* ethos with pot smoking, beer drinking, a subplot about a gay auto mechanic, and mother Kitty Forman's admonition: "A car is not a bedroom on wheels" ("Pilot"). *Family Guy*, which packs so many allusions to television history and popular culture that its plots often fade into the background, launches its opening sequence with the Griffin family watching an outlandishly satiric version of *The Brady Bunch*: Jan tattles on Greg for smoking, and they are then respectively punished in the family's snake pit and chamber of fire ("Death Has a Shadow"). Collectively, then, this anti-*Brady* sentiment of the 1990s exposes a frustration with simple moralism, even as most of these shows similarly end with the family unit restored to its mutual, loving baseline—snarky Bradys, but Bradys nonetheless, who appeal to this program of the past through allusions both mocking and celebrating its kitsch appeal.

Excoriated by critics during its years of production, *The Brady Bunch* succeeded with a five-season run and then became a cultural touchstone over the ensuing decades, as it built a lasting legacy from an appealing suburban bubble that invites multiple and contradictory readings both celebrating its wholesome values and delighting in its kitschy underbelly. With an improbable innocence as its defining virtue, *The Brady Bunch* shunned sex in the 1970s yet could never entirely sever sexuality from its story lines, for which many of its viewers both appreciated and ridiculed its sentimental appeal. In the series' original run, Cousin Oliver (Robbie Rist) says to Cindy, "I think your mother has a problem about discussing sex" ("The Hairbrained Scheme"), yet these problems with discussing sex were key to the series' endearingly queer innocence, which created a pop-culture phenomenon of never-ending nostalgia for a past that never was. A family sitcom, even with the Bradys as its protagonists, inevitably summons the paradox of innocence and experience, thereby undermining and exposing the queer fantasies on which it is founded. And while the Bradys' innocence appeared out of step with the countercultural ethos of the 1970s, similar strands of erotic naiveté in family sitcoms continued unabated, with, as the next chapter details, the Huxtables of *The Cosby Show* illustrating in the 1980s and early 1990s the ways in which issues of race complicate the family sitcom's queer paradigms of innocence.