

What do we laugh at? Gender representations in “3rd Rock from the Sun”¹

Carmen Gregori Signes
Universitat de València

Abstract

Chandler (2006) argues that representation refers to the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of ‘reality’ such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts [...] such as gender, ethnicity, race, etc (cf. Fairclough 1995). These representations are often manipulated, exaggerated or distorted, with the purpose, among others, of making us laugh. Such is the case of the representation of gender in the American TV sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun*.

Upon assuming human form, a team of aliens who are on a fact-finding mission on the Planet Earth find themselves trapped in the bodies of three men and a woman. Lacking the awareness of what it means to grow up being a man or a woman, they find themselves immersed in different types of interactions with humans which they try to handle by applying logic, naturalness and honesty –as they would do in their world, where truth prevails upon politeness and social conventions; and gender does not exist. The result is a series of disparities that violate certain social premises and that make them hilariously funny and pragmatically extravagant, especially in the case of Sally, the woman and Dick, the eldest.

In this article I concentrate on the representation of women (Giles 2003) and femininity by analysing the character Sally in several episodes in which she is humourously portrayed as the alien overwhelmed by the juggernauts of being a woman who does not know what is socially expected from her. My intention is to show what kind of gender messages are present in the series –which often creates humour by making Sally act “inappropriately”. Across many theories of humour it is accepted that humour can provide some form of tension release, and can facilitate a reinterpretation of a given situation or event (Koestler 1964; Martin & Lefcourt 1983 in Moran & Massan 1999). Underlying the analysis is the intention to prove how humour may help to question many established

¹ This is the first draft of the paper.

stereotypes and can help override sexist representations of women, as well as some social premises concerning gender biases.

Key words: *gender ~ media representation ~ multimodal ~ humour*

1. Introduction

Chandler (2006) argues that representation refers to the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of ‘reality’ such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts [...] such as gender, ethnicity, race, etc (cf. Fairclough 1995). These representations are often manipulated, exaggerated or distorted, with the purpose, among others, of making us laugh. Such is the case of the representation of gender in the American TV sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun*.

Upon assuming human form, a team of aliens who are on a fact-finding mission on Planet Earth find themselves trapped in the bodies of three men and a woman. Lacking the awareness of what it means to grow up being a man or a woman, they find themselves immersed in different types of interactions with humans which they try to handle by applying logic, naturalness and honesty –as they would do in their world; where truth prevails upon politeness and social conventions and gender differences either do not exist or are irrelevant. The result is a series of disparities that violate certain social premises and that make them hilariously funny and pragmatically extravagant, especially in the case of Sally, the woman, and Dick, the eldest.

In this article I focus on the representation of women (Giles 2003) and femininity by analysing the character Sally in several episodes in which she is humorously portrayed as the alien overwhelmed by the juggernauts of being a woman who finds it difficult to act in the way that is socially expected of her. My intention is to show what kind of gender messages are present in the series– which often creates humour by making Sally act “inappropriately”.

Humour, as has been often argued, implies a violation of the social, linguistic norm or “subjective moral order”; at the same time that, as argued across many theories of humour, it is accepted that it can provide

some form of tension release, and can facilitate a reinterpretation of a given situation or event (Koestler 1964; Martin & Lefcourt 1983 in Moran & Massan 1999). As stated by Bippus (2003), “its ambiguity enables it to be used to communicate and enforce social norms and relational expectations (Kane, Suls & Tedeschi 1977; Seckman & Couch 1989; Slugoski & Turnbull 1988; in Johnson 1990) with the possibility of saying “Only kidding!” if comments are not well received (Johnson 1990)”. Underlying the analysis is the intention to prove how certain intended humorous comments may help question many established stereotypes and can help override sexist representations of women, as well as some social premises concerning gender biases.

2. TV sitcom 3rd Rock from the Sun

The TV series *3rd Rock from the Sun* is an American TV situation comedy that ran from 1996 until 2001 (season 1-season 5). The show was about a “family” of four extraterrestrials who landed on Earth to observe the human race, while pretending to be one of them. The show was aired in America on NBC and exported to many countries. The TV series was very popular and its protagonists won different awards for their interpretation in the series².



The aliens are four characters in total: Dick Solomon (the father and the main character; the episodes titles are often play on words on his

² Due to restrictions in space I will refer to different web pages that can be consulted to complete the information on the TV sitcom itself and concentrate here in the analysis. <http://www.3rdrockfan.com/mrsDubcek.aspx>

name: e.g. *Post Nasal Dick*, *Dick's First Birthday*, *Dick Smoker*, *Green-Eyed Dick*, *The Art of Dick*, *Ab-Dick-ted* I *Enjoy Being A Dick*, *Assault With A Deadly Dick*, Sally Solomon (Dick's sister), Tommy Solomon (Dick's teenager son) and Harry Solomon (Dick and Sally's brother). As argued in the presentation and summary of the series³, it provides:

[...] the bizarre vantage point of an innocent seeing everything for the first time [...] it provides the comic framework from which to satire the human condition and American society, to look at all of the injustices and absurdities and humorously point them out to us. *3rd Rock* cuts through our taboos and traditions with a childlike inquisitive logic and an impeccably paced humorous twist. We, the viewers, see ourselves in *3rd Rock*, and we see ourselves as the aliens." The humor of *3rd Rock* is always twisting the viewpoint to show the angle of an outsider looking in. *3rd Rock*, which we know as Earth, is the way travelers would look at the world —an insignificant blue speck that is, the *3rd Rock from the Sun*.

In my opinion, the series offers a rather unique environment to learn and teach about the human condition, about many aspects having to do with social premises; as well as with social, and conversational rules and pragmatic principles. Indeed, about all aspects that are part of social interaction, since it is not often that one gets the chance to look at human interaction "from the outside" unless it is through some kind of fiction. In this article and due mainly to space limitations, I will focus on the statements and image that the aliens have of what it means to be a woman.

3. Multimodality: Representation, gender humour and stereotypes

3.1. Multimodality

The idea of multimodality and multimodal theory has already been present for a while in linguistics (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen 1996), but is still at its beginnings, with regard to the production of pieces of research

³ http://www.tv.com/3rd-rock-from-the-sun/show/181/summary.html?full_summary=1&tag=showspace_links:full_summary

that include all the aspects that a multimodal analysis demands, looking into not only discourse and design but also production and distribution factors. However, this is not possible until we move to a multimodal medium of publishing, where space limitations will be substituted by parallel document/s that the reader can have access to –if interested– through linking for example. In that way images and sound can be also part of the analysis. This piece of research can be said to be an attempt to partly provide a multimodal analysis with the limitations imposed by the medium in which it will be published.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) see multimodal texts as making meaning in multiple articulations. Essential to my analysis is that as argued by Kress & van Leeuwen (2001: 8), any discourse may be interpreted differently from the way it was intended. A story may be written to entertain, but an interpreter may not be entertained because of the story's built-in ethnocentric bias against, for example, the interpreter's ethnic group. They argue that the degree to which intention and interpretation will match depends on the context (cf. Gregori-Signes 2005). Taking this argument as the point of departure for my analysis, I have drawn upon several concepts that helped me understand what type of representation of gender is offered in the series, such as the relationship between gender and humour, the concept of schemata, keying markers and the concept of implicature and inferencing.

3.2. The interaction between gender and humour

Along the same lines as Crawford (2003: 1413), who claims that “women and men use humour in same-gender and mixed-gender settings as one of the tools of gender construction, the purpose of this paper is to give an example of how humour can help alter and/or maintain certain roles or patterns assigned to both men and women. That is, “the unique properties of humour make it a valuable tool for gender deconstruction” (Crawford 2003: 1413).

As argued by Kotthoff (2006: 6) the relationship between gender and humour is becoming more and more complicated since “joking styles still play a part in social typification, [...] studies of male and female humorous behaviour have become more sophisticated and the

theoretical conception of gender has also changed in social and cultural studies” (cf. also Crawford 2003). *3rd Rock from the Sun* is one of the many examples that may be useful to study the relationship between gender and humour. In the series, gender is in fact a humorous issue, that yields to humorous comments both in overt and covert ways; it is almost always the center of humour that often foregrounds attention in both affirmative and subversive ways (Holmes 2006).

The study of gender and language (Crawford 2003: 14), is multidisciplinary with contributions from many different disciplines. Revising the different approaches to gender goes beyond the intentions of this article. However, I believe it is necessary to outline certain principles that sometimes come from opposite positions (e.g. essentialists, social interactionists, social constructivists) and that form the foundations for this series. That is, always using a playful mode and with the intention of being funny the series assumes that:

- a) men and women are different;
- b) men and women are assigned different tasks in life (e.g. Sally does the housework because she is the woman);
- c) being a woman implies having some limitations both physical and psychological (feelings, sudden mood changes etc.).

3.3. Conversational humour & Schemata

Conversational humour has been a topic of research for a long time now, and it is not the purpose of this article to review the literature available on the topic, but to analyse and discuss examples of gendered humour generated in the series through conversation. The basic premise that underlies the whole series is that although the aliens know several languages, among those English, they are unaware of the pragmatic dimension of language which among the many misunderstandings that this may cause, implies a total incapacity for going beyond literal meaning.

According to the theory of schemata, a new experience is understood by comparison with a stereotypical version of a similar experience held in memory. The new experience is then processed in terms of its deviation from the stereotypical version, or conformity to it (Cook 1994:

9). Meanings are constructed in the interaction between a text and the interpreter's background knowledge and schemata are activated by either linguistic items in the text or contextual cues. Once activated, schemata generate expectations and these fill in what is not explicitly mentioned in the text. However, expectations may be subverted, resulting in incongruity, which may give rise to humour. As is the case with many comedies the characters have been sketched to fit certain stereotypes in appearance and are meant to be humorous. But *3rd Rock from the Sun* is different from other series in that the humorous effect is mainly caused by their reacting in the exact opposite way expected of such a stereotype (e.g. Sally who apparently has the body and looks of a "bimbo" tends to act more like a man than a woman).

3.4. Keying markers

Kotthoff (1998, 1999, 2006) argues that laughter particles in utterances are important keying markers and that they often index that a text is to be interpreted as humorous. In TV sitcoms, although the audience is free to laugh at anything they find funny, canned laughter is often inserted in certain extracts, right after a humorous remark or action. Such is the case of comments about gender. Thus, keying markers, such as laugh tracks, longer-than-usual pauses or silences, exchanges of looks, funny face expressions etc., following an utterance are essential for a multimodal analysis of gender de/construction since if the audience find something funny, surprising or weird, it maybe because they are induced to do so.

3.5. Inferencing, implicatures and explicatures

As has often been argued in the field of pragmatics, much of conversational discourse involves inferencing, a fact that aliens seem to ignore and that is the basis upon which humour is built in the series. The aliens tend to interpret everything literally ignoring double meanings, innuendos, and social norms which lead to misunderstandings and "wrong" conclusions on their part.

With regard to women and gender, the aliens come to conclusions that seem to activate schemata and scripts that clash with/confirm-

depending on the individual (Gregori 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001) –what women are like. They do so by exaggerating or distorting certain women related activities (e.g. Sally becomes obsessed with her boyfriend, with make up, with dating, with looking beautiful and with men, among others). The question here, however, is whether the audience actually believe that the aliens conclusions are incongruent with what women really are; or whether they think women are correctly portrayed. That is, the fact that certain gender-related situations are keyed as humorous can have different interpretations on the part of the audience: a) the audience believe that the series is portraying reality and therefore women could be said to be “dysfunctional” human beings who cannot control their emotions and thus, act according to what their femininity dictates them; b) the audience interprets women's behaviour in the series as a distortion only created with the purposes of making us laugh; c) the audience believes that the representation of women is exaggerated but that there may be some “truth” in it; or, at least, that there may be some truth in the way women are perceived by certain members of society. In any case, the series leads to inferences of many types about the issue of gender, and this can be used as a starting point to alter, change or influence the final representation of women in society.

4. Objectives of the analysis

The objective of the analysis is to find out what kind of preconceived ideas about women are activated through the script provided to the aliens before they come to Earth, in contrast with what they gather from their direct observation of women's behaviour. I will analyse the first season in depth, since it is in this first season, when the aliens first try to come to terms with their gender and sexuality. Although the whole series is about the discovery of human beings by aliens, it is in the first episode in particular, when they become aware of –and rather confused about the existence of two genders and of the different (sexual) feelings that each one of them has according to their sex and age.

5. Reactions to the intended humorous view of women and their role

The whole issue is approached in a humorous manner but always presented from two points of view that require two different discourse/pragmatic strategies from the producers. That is, humour derives from: a) the interaction of the aliens with human beings; b) the interaction between the aliens themselves.

The humour deriving from the interaction between the aliens and other human beings is based on implicatures, double meaning, and a combination of several elements already described by Raskin (1985). The interactions between aliens and humans make the audience laugh at the social incompetence of the aliens who break politeness norms, social conventions (e.g. when they arrive at the party, the host asks Dick if she can take his coat to which he answers “Yes, as long as I can keep my pants”); and human habits in general (e.g. Harry is found having a shower fully dressed with his coat on). These situations are presented in sketches where humorous keying is almost always present at some point.

Humour is built into the series by a combination of visual and verbal elements such as exaggerated gestures, especially on the part of Dick, Sally and Harry either as a reaction to a particular situation or statement or as part of the characterization of the character itself (Sally's gestures for example are rather “unfeminine, and so is her voice and manners). Their physical appearance is also exploited with humorous purposes. Thus, in episodes 101 & 104 Sally dresses up exaggerating the “femme fatal” look and in Episode 203 *Big angry virgin from outer space*, Sally dresses up right in the opposite way, trying to copy the good wife's style of dressing and speaking as pictured in sitcoms such as the Dick van Dyke's series, for example; and tries to show her boyfriend that her only intention is to please him.

Nevertheless, it is conversation humour that is especially significant in the series, and as such it requires special attention. Producers structure reactions to the humorous comments on the part of the characters in two ways:

i) they go unnoticed on the part of the characters who seem to be oblivious to the rule-breaking –as is the case of most sitcoms (cf.

Gregori, Pennock & Bou 1998); “po-faced” (serious) responses to humorous teasing according to Drew (1987) are precisely non-amused reactions to a humorous turn in conversation in which case, the characters ignore the humorous remark and proceed without any further comment. The reason being that these funny situations are created for the audience’s benefit not for the characters’, and the only disruption to the progress of the sitcom is merely laugh tracks (or real laughter if the sitcom is being represented in front of an audience) and a move on to the next scene or sketch (cf. Gregori 2005).

ii) they are followed by a verbal, non-verbal or physical reaction on the part of the characters: usually an expression of disbelief or a verbal reprimand to the aliens for their behaviour (“That’s not funny!”) on the part of the characters. Along the same lines, one of the options of the audience of a humorous turn is to deny (self-defeatingly, in fact) its humorous nature.

As argued by many different authors there exists both laughter without humour and humour without laughter. So, it should be left to the audience to decide whether a particular remark is or not humorous. Nevertheless, the difference between real conversations and sitcom dialogues is the use of laughter tracks, which somehow may force or at least induce the audience to reconsider the nature of the remark, whether acknowledge or unacknowledged by the characters themselves.

To sum up, *3rd Rock from the Sun* makes us laugh by recurring to two types of humorous strategies. One is *internal* and dependent on our knowledge of the world and how, accordingly, the aliens are seen as to not fit into it. The other is *external* and presents us with the other side of the coin, how we are seen by the aliens and how their knowledge of their world –different from anything we know– presents us as incongruent, extravagant and complex in their eyes. It is these opposite points of view that make it interesting for the purpose of analysis. The audience laughs at it because of the capacity that human beings have to understand and account for any “deviation from the norm” (cf. Garfinkel 1967) and account for their actions as well as those of others. As for the expression of gendered-humour, this is alternatively expressed both overtly and covertly and in an affirmative or subversive way. Needless to say that

this technique has been used before and is the basis on which the argument of most films and series rests on.

In order to find out what kind of preconceived ideas about women are activated through the script provided to the aliens before they come to Earth, I will pay attention to several factors such as: the kind of gender messages present in the series, the ideas that aliens build of women and their social role, the role of humour in the reinterpretation of gender and whether it helps question many established stereotypes and/or overrides sexist representations of women, as well as some social premises concerning gender biases.

6. Femininity in 3rd Rock from the Sun

As reported by Ochs (200: 339) the notion of gender centers on the premise that the notions of men and female are sociocultural transformations of biological categories and processes. As argued above, 3rd Rock humorous remarks are based on some preconceived ideas about women which, at the same time may also be used as a way of fighting back or asserting certain stereotypes. Different audiences may react differently and what is humorous for some maybe an offense for others (Gregori 2005).

6.1. Gender inequality: Biological differences & Social status

Without knowing exactly where this idea comes from, the aliens somehow assume that the woman has a lower status, as can be inferred from example 1.

Example 1

(The aliens drew straws to see which body each of them was going to get, Sally lost and, thus, she was given the body of a woman).

Dick: Sally I want you to observe her and find out what women in this planet do

Sally: Why can't Harry do it?

Dick: Because you're the woman

Sally: That brings up a very good question. Why am I the woman?

Dick: Because you lost!

[101 → 2:14]

This exchange sets up the humorous key under which a great deal of the series rests: female role expectations are different from male role expectations. Humour is based on the fact that the aliens have internalised a cognitive schema concerning men and women behaviour, thus not only “enacting masculinity and femininity seems natural” (Crawford 2003: 1417) but also accepting and learning to live with it is part of being human. In example 2, Sally finds that after having been relegated to being the woman, she is constantly being bossed about by Dick. She finds that this treatment is a demeaning for someone who is the second in command and a well qualified soldier on her planet.

Example 2

1 Dick: A date! It's a perfect opportunity. You'll go

2 Sally: No I won't!

3 Dick: Trust me. I know what's best

4 Sally: **Why are you treating me like this?**

5 Dick: Like what?

6 Sally: Like this.

7 Dick: This

8 Sally: There, you just did it

9 Dick: I don't know what I'm doing

10 Sally: **You're acting as if I can't make decisions on my own.** I'm second in command, you know?

11 Dick: Well, one of us has to experience sex and I'm getting nowhere with her.

12 Sally: Why didn't you say so? I mean if sex is so important you and I can do it. Right here, on the desk. Get it out of the way

13 Dr. Albright: ok. I'll leave you alone to your venge lesson

Thus, one of the main objectives for the three aliens is to act as would be socially expected of men and women, but failing continuously to do so. Gender characterisation therefore becomes one of the main sources of humour.

Humour and gender are often paired in situations such as the one portrayed in example 3 –one of many in which the aliens find that they

cannot control certain reactions or feelings which they believe are in the nature of either men or women.

The aliens believe that Sally's reactions are the result of her being a woman and that whatever she experiences is something "given" to her that all women on Earth go or have being through. So she finds herself in situations –such as the one illustrated in example 3– which she is unable to control. Thus Sally finds herself heartbroken and crying because her boyfriend does not call her back. She does not know why she feels like that and declares herself unable to control it, something she is not used to.

Example 3

Sally: He said he'd call

Dick: Yes I know

Sally: He promised. He said he'd call

Dick: That changes everything

Sally: **Dick I can take more pain than the rest of you put together but right now I just feel so icky. Dam it**

Dick! Just give me some pain that I can define!

Dick: I am not going to jam your hand in the toaster again.

Sally: You **just can't imagine what it feels like Dick.** It's like he reached in and pulled all the bones out of my body [*she starts to cry*]

Dick: My god what are you doing?

Sally: **Apparently I'm leaking!**

Dick: Well, stop it!

Sally: All right Commander

She leaves the room crying

Additionally, the above examples (and the rest of the series) tell us that the aliens assume, from the very beginning that women are not only different but more complicated than men, as inferred from examples 4 and 5. Consequently, they soon realise that what seemed like a simple task turns out to be more difficult than expected, especially for Sally.

Example 4

1 Tommy: Every night!

2 Sally: No. Absolutely not!

3 Dick: Ok, fine, you leave me no other choice! Now we have to experiment at a party.
4 Sally: Dick, listen to me. Women are trouble. I should know. I've been one for two weeks!
5 Dick: I know. Which brings up another point. **I command you to shave under your arms.**
[Laughs]
6 Sally: Doable. I'm sorry you find me so offensive [starts to cry]
7 Dick: Damn it! put yourself together man. We are going out!
8 Sally: Ok. Ok. Give me an hour
9 Dick: An hour?
10 Sally: Yeah, an hour. I've got to rotate this! [points at her breasts] it's a party

Example 5:

1 Dick: Lieutenant we need to talk!
2 Sally: This is all your fault! I didn't want to be the woman, you made me be the woman!
3 Dick: You condecorated better: I thought you could handle it.
4 Sally: Well I can't. This is hard [starts crying again]
5 Dick: Please don't. No no please no
6 Sally: [goes on crying]
7 Dick: Maybe he can't call, maybe his phone is out, maybe he injured himself running with scissors or using the dry cleaning bag as a toy!

In sum, the whole series is about what it means to be a man vs. what it means to be a woman and in turn, what it means to be human. In their belief women and men are different and they have different social roles and tasks assigned accordingly. Thus, the aliens try to copy everything the different sexes do and keep it strictly separate, since that will –theoretically– allow them to be more efficient in their collection of information. This is all done in a playful, humorous key and humour is built through Sally's reactions when faced with attitudes or situations in which she is expected to behave “as a woman”.

6.2. Men vs. women: social alignment, bonding and biting

There are three other women who appear regularly in the series apart from some other secondary characters and they all represent certain stereotypes, a common practice in sitcoms: Dr Mary Albright, an average academic; Nina, the secretary; and Mrs. Dubcek, a low class uneducated woman who rents the flat in which they live.

Although their reactions to Sally's behaviour show that they find her a bit weird, they still bond with her when she needs it, using gender-related humour against men. As reported by Kotthoff (2006: 15):

The first works on conversational joking among women called attention to the display of commonalities, equality, and group ties through humour (Kalcik 1975; Jenkins 1985; Painter 1980; Davies 1984). These studies showed that women's humour produced intimacy and familiarity. Women joked about shared experiences of disappointment, of having to deal with difficult people, and overcoming the constraints of their lives.

In episode 4, Sally has her first experience of this cooperative form of joking when Mary and Nina share with her some of their personal misfortunes with men. During this conversation, Sally comes to the conclusion that her episode with Brad is similar to other women's experiences and that being tolerant with this kind of behaviour is part of being a woman.

Example 6

1 Nina: You see Sally, you are not the problem. Guys are jerks. You are never going to find the perfect man

2 Dr. Albr: Yeah the perfect man would have Bill Gates's money, Jimmy Smith's ass, Lemison's shoulders, Michael Jordan's thighs..

3 Nina: And we need a brain

4 Dr. Albr. Ha! No we don't!

[laughter]

5 Nina: Yeah you're right. Then he'd think like a man.

You see Sally, there's just no dealing with the opposite sex.

6 Sally: **Yes, yes the opposite sex! I didn't do anything wrong! It's men, they are completely opposite sex! They hunt, we gather. They sweat we glow. They shit we wipe**

YOU [*addressing a guy in the bar*] your sexual organs are in completely diametrical opposition to mine!

7 Guy: Hey so can I give you a call sometime or?

8 Sally: Yeah hahaha I'll be waiting by the phone hahaha [*leaves the room*]

9 Nina: have we poisoned her?

10 Dr. Albr: Noo. Now she a boxam leggy powdy bitch with attitude [*laughter*] I think she'll do just fine.

[*Sally goes to visit Brad again*] [*the previous time something happened between them and Brad has his arm broken*]

11 Sally: Hello Brad

12 Brad: Sssally

13 Sally: I came here to tell you that I understand your limitations [*tch*] I expected too much. I'm so sorry. All the best.

Humour here is based on the fact that Sally is unaware of the pragmatic function of this cooperative form of joking and interprets everything literally, one of the main handicaps of the aliens.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the exchange is cleverly designed and has the same effects as if she had understood it: Sally moves *one step forward* towards understanding what it means to be a woman and *aligns herself socially* with this role; at the same time that the conversation creates a bond between her and the rest of the women on the planet that she did not have before.

6.3. Indexing un/femininity

It is a fact argued by many studies on gender that it is difficult to pinpoint what is characteristic of a woman and what is not, especially nowadays, when many women claim their right to move away from more traditional images of women. Ochs (1992: 342) talks about “indexing gender” and argues that “in relating sociocultural constructions of gender [...] few features of language directly and exclusively index gender”. I would like to take this concept a step forward and talk about indexing femininity/unfemininity which would include other features such as behaviour, gestures, and social and cultural expectations among others. That is, despite the fact that the aliens assume that certain

characteristics of being a man/ woman all come in the one package, Sally does not conform. This is reflected in the series with: a) the way she deals with her beauty; b) the way she talks to both men and women. That is, her character has been manipulated, with humorous purposes, to represent just the opposite to what her looks have required for a long time in some media representations.

Despite the fact that the aliens assume that certain characteristics of being a man/woman all come in the same package, in the case of Sally humour is built through the clash that is produced by her “rebellion”. That is, Sally represents the opposite of ladylike behaviour and she acts so accordingly, breaking all expectations that humans have about a *beautiful blonde lady*. It is also worth noticing that she's not alone in this role, since Dr. Albright and Nina, and Mrs. Dubcek themselves, also break stereotypes regarding ladylike behaviour. This, in my opinion, is not new, and has been made obvious and still is in many TV series that are making an effort in breaking the stereotype of the submissive woman –taking the term in its broadest sense– and favouring unladylike behaviour as a step towards gender equality. Still, canned laughter indicates that this is done with humorous purposes. she has a deep voice, moves ungracefully and roughly, her way of walking and sitting is not graceful; she dresses either to exaggerate her woman condition as a femme fatal or as a “lady” when trying to conform (*204 Big Angry Virgin From Outer Space*). Additionally, she hits and menaces men in the way men often do and takes the initiative when this would not be expected.

6.3.1. Beauty, women's looks and gender norms of behaviour

Sally, as she repeats many times, has been provided with the perfect conditions to experiment femininity. And she is convinced- and proves it, when she realises how men react in her presence- that her body makes her irresistible and capable of arousing any male's sexual desire. No matter what she says or how she acts, men feel attracted to her, as is the case with the boy in the bar who despite her incoherent words still wants to call her.



Example 7:

Dick: How old are you?

Sally: Well, whatever the perfect age is by me I mean maybe I got stuck with being a woman but at least I'm in my prime. Check it up how firm this is hard [*pulls up her shirt so that Dick can touch her stomach*] You know if I was a guy I'd be all over me right now.

However, although she has been given the appearance of a beautiful woman, a '*body for sin*' she does not know neither the societal norms of beauty, nor how to socialize or how to behave as a woman. Her actions are keyed with laughter and are supposed to be humorous. Despite the effort that Sally makes to behave *like a woman*, she is humorously portrayed as overdressing, her manner of speaking with a rather masculine voice (Pennock 2006); adopting masculine postures, and distorting her face (Porter 2002, in Kotthoff 2006) and body whilst trying to be humorous.

Example 8:

[*Sally's at the bar talking to a guy*]

Sally: hey, if you could change one thing about me what would it be?

Guy1: [*he looks at her*] Nothing

Sally: Bingo (0.5) [*she smiles*] Doesn't get any better than this ha? Check this out. [*Pulls up her shirt*] See

how this curves round here [*pointing and moving her
finger up and down her stomach*] oopsie daisy brings back
just like a cat

6.3.2. Active vs. Passive role of women: Striking back

Related to the above mentioned is the fact that she always strikes back to men's comments, although this is also a characteristic of the other women in the series. That is, Sally represents the opposite of ladylike behaviour and she acts so accordingly, breaking all expectations that humans have about a *beautiful blonde lady*. She ignores most of the social conventions of talking lady like and acts according to what she feels rather than what is expected of her by adopting an active role in relationships, being the one who initiates actions which have traditionally been assigned to male characters in many media representations (e.g. asking her boyfriend out, assaulting her boyfriend and many other men in the series, threatening men etc.)

She also has a masculine, deep voice and flat intonation. This seems to go along with what Pennock (2005, 2006) argues is found in many young American actresses nowadays, who have adopted a creaky voice which lowers pitch thus making their voices more similar to men's. He puts forward that deeper, creaky voices are felt to be more attractive.

The other women in the series also react similar to Sally, helping therefore break the expectations that the aliens have about women's behaviour. This, in my opinion, is not new, and has been made obvious and still is in many TV series that are making an effort in breaking the stereotype of the submissive woman –taking the term in its broadest sense– and favouring unladylike behaviour as a step towards gender equality. Often, on TV or cinema a traditional performance of masculinity, can be exploited by women to communicate distance from societal expectations of femininity (Kotthoff 2006: 14). Still, canned laughter indicates that this is done with humorous intentions.

6.4. Preconceived ideas about women

The representation of women in the series is reached, in the first season of the series, through the characters of Sally, Dr. Mary Albright, Nina Campbell and Mrs. Dubcek. All of them are different and have been

intelligently chosen to represent certain stereotypes which allow the series to give a fair –or at least varied– representation of women. This is what makes the series a good medium to explore gender.

6.4.1. The women in the series: Sally vs. others

Dr. Mary Albright, Nina Campbell and Mrs. Dubcek are the other women in the sitcom. Although they have been stereotyped to be funny. The main difference between them is that Sally has not had any previous experience of “being a woman”. Dr. Albright: a colleague of Dick’s at Pendelton University who becomes instantly attracted to the alien physics professor. As Dick begins to reciprocate Dr. Albright’s romantic feelings, it is their relationship which makes him extend their stay on Earth and ultimately begin to understand human emotions.

Humour is obviously reached through Sally, the alien who throughout the first season is seen to go through and suffer most of the preconceived ideas of women. They do not specify how and where they got these ideas from but, supposedly, their minds were filled with some basic information about the human race which, surprisingly, they find is not quite the same as they were told. For Sally, gender is something “given” to her which:

- a) most of the time she tries to fight back (her previous condition as equal, powerful, strong etc. makes her rebel against this “weak” human state she has to go through) but the others, and society do not let her.
- b) some other times she finds carried away by (e.g. when she cries because a man does not call her; when she argues that she needs an hour to get ready);
- c) and some others she will be pleased with (e.g. after using beauty products she finds herself irresistible and likes it).

With regard to language, and although it maybe exaggerated and done with the purposes of being humorous, Sally's character turns out to be a good representation of the fact that, as argued by Ochs (2000: 342): “in relating sociocultural constructions of gender [...] few features of language directly and exclusively index gender”. This is very well

depicted in the series by Sally, who ignores most of the social conventions of talking lady like and will act according to what she feels rather than what is expected of her. She also has a masculine, deep voice, flat intonation and not

5.4.2. Gender inequality: social & human status

The aliens somehow assume that the woman has a lower status since as stated in the first episode, Sally is the woman because she lost. That is, they drew straws to see which body each of them was going to get, she lost and she was given the body of a woman, a real bimbo.

Example 9:

Dick: Sally I want you to observe her and find out what women in this planet do

Sally: Why can't Harry do it?

Dick: Because you're the woman.

Sally: That brings up a very good question. Why am I the woman?

Dick: Because you lost! [101 → 2:14]

This first exchange sets up the key under which the whole series will be based: female role expectations are different from male role expectations. Thus, Sally –second in command and a well qualified soldier in her planet– finds herself relegated to.

In their belief that women and men are different and have different social roles and tasks assigned accordingly, the aliens try to copy everything the different sexes do and keep it strictly separate, since that will –theoretically– allow them to be more efficient in their collection of information. The humour is based on the fact that the aliens seem to have internalised a cognitive schema and “enacting masculinity and femininity seems natural” (Crawford 2003: 1417). Accordingly, Sally is in charge of finding out everything about women.

5.5. *Men vs. women: social alignment, bonding and biting*

As reported by Kotthoff (2006: 15):

the first works on conversational joking among women called attention to the display of commonalities, equality, and group ties through humour (Kalcik

1975; Jenkins 1985; Painter 1980; Davies 1984). These studies showed that women's humour produced intimacy and familiarity. Women joked about shared experiences of disappointment, of having to deal with difficult people, and overcoming the constraints of their lives.

Already in episode 104 Sally has her first experience of such cooperative form of joking when Mary and Nina share with her some of their personal misfortunes with men. During this conversation, Sally comes to the conclusion that her episode with Brad is similar to other women's experiences and that being tolerant with this kind of behaviour is part of being a woman.

Example 10:

Nina You see Sally, you are not the problem. Guys are jerks. You are never going to find the perfect man

Dr. Yeah the perfect man would have

Albr. Bill Gates's money, Jimmy Smith's ass, Lemison shoulders, Michael Jordan's thighs...

Nina And we need a brain

Dr. Ha! No we don't!

Albr.

[laughter]

Nina Yeah you're right. Then he'd think like a man.

You see Sally, there's just no dealing with the opposite sex.

Sally Yes, yes the opposite sex! I didn't do anything wrong! It's men, they are completely opposite sex! They hunt, we gather. They sweat we glow. They shit we wipe
YOU [addressing a guy in the bar] your sexual organs are in completely diametrical opposition to mine!

Guy Hey so can I give you a call sometime or?

Sally Yeah hahaha I'll be waiting by the phone hahaha [leaves the room]

Nina have we poisoned her?

Dr. Noo. Now she a boxam leggy powdy
Albr. bitch with attitude
[laughter] I think she'll do just
fine.
[Sally goes to visit Brad again]
[the previous time something
happened between them and Brad has
his arm broken]

Sally Hello Brad
Brad Sssally
Sally I came here to tell you that I
understand your limitations [tch] I
expected too much. I'm so sorry.
All the best.

The humorous side here is that Sally is unaware of the pragmatic function of this cooperative form of joking and interprets everything literally, one of the main handicaps of the aliens. Nevertheless, the outcome of the exchange is cleverly designed and has the same effects as if she had understood it: Sally moves one step forward towards understanding what it means to be a woman and aligns herself socially with this role, at the same time that this conversation creates a bond between her and the rest of the women on the planet that she unacknowledged before.

7. Conclusions

In this article, I have analysed the representation of women in the series *3rd Rock from the Sun*. As is the case with many situation comedies, the series is to be interpreted as a comedy whose intention is to enjoy the audience and to make them laugh. One of the issues used as a humorous instrument is gender and its representation.

Due to space limitations, this article has focused on the representation of women through the character Sally for several reasons: a) in the eyes of the aliens, Sally is supposed to impersonate the “perfect woman”: right age and right body; b) with regard to women, it is Sally's social behaviour that allows a contrast between the aliens schemata

(which have apparently been provided to them and held in their memory before coming to Earth as a way of providing them with some helpful information and help them to adapt to human life) and reality. Supposedly, the incongruity between what they believe is the correct behaviour of a woman and what women really behave like (e.g. as shown by other characters in the series, who, for example use verbal dueling continuously) is what rises humour.

The result of this contrast is that the series provides a rich environment to allow gender deconstruction and to break as well as build on certain female role expectations. The sitcom is divided into sketches which are supposed to end with a humorous remark. As such, Sally's behaviour is always celebrated with laughter, which, in terms of gender may have two opposing consequences:

- a) perpetuate the traditional gender roles, since if we laugh at it it may mean that we find it as deviating from the norm, an incongruent behaviour; and in many occasions. Sally “rebels” against the image of the bimbo that she is supposed to have been provided with and which clashes strongly with what she was used to as an alien: power, strength, capacity to decide, etc.
- b) at the same time that her distancing from traditional gender roles can help proposes a renegotiation of traditional standards. Since the incongruities may be questioned and the feminine role redefined accordingly.

References

- Attardo, S. (1994) *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. New York: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Chandler (2006) *Media Representations*. [date of visit 7 June 2006] <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/MC30820/represent.html>
- Crawford, M. (2006) “Gender and humor in social context”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(9): 1413-1430.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Media Discourse*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Giles, D. (2003) *Media Psychology*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gregori-Signes, C. (2005) “Descortesía en el discurso televisivo de los Dibujos Animados: la serie *South Park*.” In M^a Luisa Carrió Pastor (ed.)

- Perspectivas Interdisciplinarias de la Lingüística Aplicada*. Valencia: Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. Vol. II. 117-126.
- Gregori-Signes, C., B. Pennock & P. Bou (1998) "Humour in American Sitcoms." In B. Penas (ed.) *The Pragmatics of Misunderstanding*. Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza. 73-82.
- Holmes, J. (2006) "Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace". *Journal of Pragmatics* 38(1): 26-50.
- Karpf, A. (2006) *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kotthoff, H. (2006) "Gender and joking: On the complexities of women's image politics in humorous narratives." *Journal of Pragmatics* 32(1): 55-80.
- Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther & Theo van Leeuwen (2001) *Multimodal discourse. The modes and media. of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.
- Moran, C. & M. M. Massan (1999) "Differential influences of coping humor and humor bias on mood." *Behavioral Medicine* 25: 36-42.
- Pennock Speck, Barry (2005) "The changing voice of women." In Juan José Calvo García de Leonardo *et al* (eds.) *Actas del XXVIII Congreso Internacional de AEDEAN*. Valencia: Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat de València. 407-415.
- Pennock Speck, Barry (2006) "Voice and the construction of identity and meaning." In Ignasi Navarro Ferrando & M^a Nieves Alberola Crespo (eds.) *In-Roads of Language. Essays in English Studies*. Castellón: Publicacions de la Universitat Jaume I. 91-102.
- Raskin, V. (1985) *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Raskin, V. (1987) "Linguistic Heuristics of Humor: A Script-Based Semantic Approach." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 65: 11-25.
- Simpson, P. (2004) *Stylistics: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.

3rd Rock from the Sun. Websites

<http://www.3rdrockfan.com/mrsDubcek.aspx>

<http://www.tv.com/3rd-rock-from-the-sun/show/181/summary.html>

www.memorabletv.com/sitcomsw.htm

www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/