

The Sitcoms Have Become Self Aware: A Discussion of the Current American Sitcom

Ethan Thompson

Why the Sitcom Matters Now (and Figuring Out How it Can Matter More)

I want to talk about what sitcoms can do to make comedy on television more responsive to our desperate need at the moment for more informed social dialogue. I use the term “comedy” here because I don’t mean “comic TV”—I mean humor in narrative. I want us to re-embrace the notion of TV as a cultural forum, and in particular, the role of the sitcom in that forum.

Despite persistent rumors of its demise, there is clearly a continued taste for the sitcom. Nostalgia abounds for the old-fashioned, multicamera sitcom among journalist-critics (evident in the “sitcom is dead” rhetoric) and sitcom writer-producers such as Bill Lawrence (who made a multicamera episode of *Scrubs* as an homage to the format) and in the creation of shows like Comedy Central’s *Big Lake*, which appears to be attempting to force the ironic, self-reflexive trend in TV comedy into the multicamera, live audience format.

There is also evidence for audience taste for traditional sitcom pleasures. On the one hand, there is the continued success of sitcoms that academic and journalist-critics shun, but which Nielsen ratings suggest audiences love, such as *How I Met Your Mother* and *Two and a Half Men*. Then there is the very fact that critics are so vocal about shunning these shows and wishing there were “better” sitcoms more suited to their tastes and nostalgia. Sitcom nostalgia extends to general TV audiences as well. Besides the strip programming of syndicated sitcoms such as those just mentioned, and relics like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, I am recognizing among my students a growing trend of bingeing on DVDs of 1980s and 1990s sitcoms such as *The Facts of Life* and *Full House*, and brandishing knowledge of those texts and the ways in which they dealt with conflict as hip cultural capital.

One sign of continued relevance of the sitcom is the breakout success of *Modern Family*, which adopts the comedy verite style to produce a narrative structure and visual style that seems about equal parts *Arrested Development* and *When Harry Met Sally*. *Modern Family* fits the typical complication/confusion/alleviation through family model of the domestic sitcom very nicely. If I had more space, I would describe an episode. If you are interested in this panel, I expect you have already seen it. Besides the annoyingly exaggerated handheld camera, *Modern Family* uses the verite format to produce humor that deviates from linear narrative in ways conducive to more aggressively articulating cultural critique. The couch segments, in which individual characters or couples speak to the camera about their familial experiences, provide opportunities to cutaway to past comic episodes, at the same time they reiterate the persistence of the family, since they suggest that outside the immediate episode, the family persists, prevails, and can be positively reflected upon in order to teach us something. In short, they fulfill the

reaffirming “conservative” function of the domestic sitcom, but they also allow commentary that isn’t as bounded by narrative constraints.

Personally, I don’t think *Modern Family* qualifies as satire at all, but I don’t wish to dismiss it as a regressive sitcom, either. Rather, I want to cite its popularity and success as evidence that sitcoms can, and should, do more to serve as the cultural forums we need aside from *Fox and Friends*, *The View*, Alex Jones, Glenn Beck—and aside from *The Daily Show*, *Colbert Report*, and *South Park*, too. I think that there is something especially powerful about narrative, and about characters that viewers can empathize with, and this is why Jon Stewart, Colbert, or even a new Dave Chappelle isn’t enough. (Hell, while we’re at it, how about a new Richard Pryor?)

Given the continued popularity of sitcoms, the abundance of “sitcom nostalgia,” and the embrace of the neo-traditional domestic sitcom *Modern Family*, I think it’s time to 1) reiterate how we define the sitcom by describing its narrative structure in ways that accommodate recent innovations in modes of production, performance, and visual style and 2) consider how that narrative structure can take advantage of such innovations to more aggressively mediate culture, articulating controversy more routinely, if less narratively bounded, than it has in the past.

Is it unreasonable to ask a sitcom to do that in 22 minutes? Given the damage that Glenn Beck can do in two, I don’t think so.