

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

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Understanding the cultural meanings and values of the sitcom, and how they may be changing, means understanding the pleasures—or lack thereof—viewers gain from sitcoms. I bring this up not to turn away from the questions raised about aesthetics, format, production, and history, but rather to suggest ways in which issues of reception might fold into these discussions. The proposed question asks, “How do successful sitcoms engage with sitcom history, format, generic conventions, etc?” In response, I raise another question: by what metrics do critical/cultural media scholars measure this success? If we measure it in ratings and longevity, for example, then we would be hard-pressed to consider *Parks and Recreation*, *Arrested Development*, or *Party Down* successful. If we measure it in the amount and intensity of laughter, then we equate that response with comedy’s success, which in turn flattens the complexities of humor and the different reactions to it. When we bring an individual viewer’s interpretation, reception, and taste into the discussion, success becomes even more difficult to pinpoint in any cohesive manner. Since comedy is often linked with the processes of audience reception and interpretation (the idea being: if it’s funny, it’s comedy), it seems only natural to discuss viewers and audiences when considering the state of the sitcom.

To highlight a brief example of the sitcom’s intertwined textuality and reception, I bring up the laugh track. With this device, the desired emotive outcome of reception (whether laughter, jeers, “aww”s, or “woo!”s) has long been manifest in the sitcom’s poetics. Additionally, the presence or simulation of a live studio audience has afforded the format a sense of liveness that aligns the sitcom with traditions of live comedic performance that predate the invention of television and radio. Thus, if the laugh track aligns joyous pleasure with popular comedy, the recent cycle of “cringe” comedies and the increasing disappearance of that laugh track seem to suggest changing parameters of acceptable reception. At the very least, the laugh track’s absence signals that certain sitcoms allow for different responses to the program’s narrative proceedings and formal qualities. More precisely, the genre’s endorsement of a response seemingly oppositional to that of enjoyment (i.e., the cringe) underscores the extent to which sitcoms such as *The Office* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* support forms of reception not directly aligned with the supposed merriment of the half-hour television comedy.

That said, I do wonder whether some of these forms of reception are truly new. When one considers the history of sitcom storylines built around miscommunication, embarrassing situations, and zany mishaps, it is clear that the cringe has always been a part of sitcom reception. So even if the formal qualities are new, the viewer’s pleasure may follow familiar territory. And while the last decade has seen its share of sitcoms that play with self-reference, inter- and meta-textuality, and the blurring of reality, the viewer’s acknowledgment of these tactics is but one facet of his/her reception of a program’s humor and aesthetic. Though today’s sitcoms may look different and perform different comedic work, it seems likely that they carry some of the same pleasures as more traditional sitcoms.

Though audience research is necessary to investigate these ideas in a comprehensive way, my hope is that our discussion allows us to hypothesize the role of audience pleasure/displeasure in the shifting dimensions of sitcom aesthetics and programming strategies. From this, we might even approach broader questions about the social, political, and emotional functions of laughter as a form of media reception. For example, do we consider someone who chuckles at a metatextual in-joke on *Arrested Development* or *Community* a different “type” of sitcom viewer

than one who laughs at a one-liner or pratfall on *Two and a Half Men* or Tyler Perry's *House of Payne* (or, for that matter, a one-liner or pratfall on *Arrested Development* or *Community*)? If so, what are the sociocultural dimensions of those differences, and how do we comprehend them without valuing one over the other? And what of laughter at racial and gendered content or subversive tactics of ironic or sarcastic laughter? Finally, how can we as media scholars interpret and understand the role of the sitcom's varieties of pleasure across different programs, contexts, and viewers without simply repeating industry discourse about target audiences and demographics? After all, as an emotive pronunciation of pleasure, derision, and/or comprehension, laughter is inherently political. In turn, comprehending responses to these comedic texts might help us better understand the cultural politics of the contemporary American sitcom.