

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

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To consider the state of the contemporary American sitcom is, in many ways, to consider the state of contemporary American humour. The situation comedy is one of central sites at which media societies produce and engage with humour, and, as such, the sitcom and social notions and norms of humour can be understood as mutually reinforcing. As such, to speak to transformations and continuities within the sitcom is to speak to transformations within the dominant mode of American humour, and the political and cultural ramifications thereof. Thus, what I want to argue here is that transformations in the current American sitcom can be located at the level of humour – the structures it employs, the targets (or butts) that it takes, the audience it presumes. More specifically, I want to suggest that the recent movement in American sitcoms towards a more self-aware, reflexive – what once would have been labelled ‘postmodern’ – style mark a shift towards novel modes of humour distinct from previous iterations.

As I’m sketching this rather rapidly, I hope that you can furnish my suggestions with examples, or indeed counter-examples, where necessary: though I do want to take one concrete moment as my point of departure. Though it’s not a contemporary example, I think that the competing modes of humour employed in *Seinfeld* and *Friends* – two situation comedies definitive of the 1990s – suggest something of a formative break that speaks usefully to the current moment. On the one hand is *Friends*, a show that demonstrates a continuation of a long tradition of American sitcom humour, whose humour is premised around the behaviour of wacky characters, placed in unusual or uncomfortable situations. On the other hand, *Seinfeld* can be interpreted as a departure from the ethical and aesthetic strictures of not only its antecedents, but also its contemporaries – a show where humour is premised around the acknowledgement of the structures and systems that shape our everyday lives.

This is a broad characterisation that clearly overstates its case – *Seinfeld* did still rely on wacky characters and situations, increasingly so in later seasons. However the point I want to make, and this is important when considering the current mode of humour, is that in *Seinfeld* there is the beginning of a turn away from laughter at characters to laughter at the expense of structures and systems. Moreover, in contemporary sitcoms the patterns of *Seinfeld* have been extended beyond observations regarding everyday life, to now take in the aesthetic and institutional markers of television in general, and sitcoms in particular. This could thus be considered a more reflexive mode. As such, this new form of humour takes the traditional structure of the sitcom, and the expectations it engenders, as a point of departure; as a norm whose subversion engenders laughter and amusement. Traditional plots, joke-forms, character types become grist to the mill in this new arrangement, which assumes an aware and sophisticated viewer who cannot just identify common sitcom tropes, but know them well enough to take pleasure in their acknowledgment and their subversion. These new sitcoms thus engage with the form and history of their antecedents at the same time at which they disavow that connection, as something that is now subject to ridicule.

This isn’t the only mode of humour currently operative – many contemporary sitcoms, such as *The Big Bang Theory*, for instance, continue on in a classic vein, and most are perhaps better understood as hybrid forms. However, this structural, observational, reflexive form of humour does define a particular set of shows – *The Office*, *Scrubs*, *Community*, *30 Rock*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* – to which this panel’s attention was drawn. The narrative and documentary modes that recur within this set of contemporary sitcoms enable a form of reflexive humour that

would be less available without the presence of a guiding personality. Such a mode of presentation allows the construction and integration of observational modes of humour, premised upon sophisticated, critical and ironic statement, rather than the more blunt forms of address characteristic of the performative modes of humour that I've associated with *Friends*. Of particular note, and this is my final point, is the manner in which this new mode of humour opens up the possibility of sustained structural critique through humour. Optimistically, one could argue that sitcoms that employ this contemporary mode of humour increasingly serve a critical political function. However, at the same time, there is also the problem that the prevalence of this knowing mode of humour could generate a form of cynicism – an acknowledgment of the structures of the (formal) sitcom, of television (institutional) and society (political) that leaves those structures acknowledged but intact. As such, the shift in sitcom humour echoes a wider shift in socially dominant forms of humour, towards more complex, epistemologically slippery comic styles that complicate straightforward readings of the underlying politics.