

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

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While American sitcoms (and television) have a long history of reflexivity, the insidious incorporation of it within discourses of “quality” TV is something more recent. Indeed, talking about sitcoms in terms of quality didn’t become a pervasive practice until sitcoms started to look and act less like sitcoms and more like documentaries. But as Michael Z. Newman reminds us, the discursive positioning of these single-camera sitcoms as “quality” against “primitive” multi-camera ones relies on hoary progress narratives. In other words, we need to be wary of characterizing the current cycle of single-cam sitcoms as an “evolution,” something that brings us out of the dark ages of laugh-tracks and studio sets and into an enlightened age of smart, sophisticated, film-like comedy.

I’m confident we’re all well aware of this dynamic. While popular commentary and critics’ reviews tend to be the outlets that most commonly laud single-cams over multi-cams, accounts in trade journals seem to be conflicted. On the one hand, broadcast networks are tripping over themselves to land the next *Modern Family*. Single-cam shows in primetime give networks a sheen of respectability and lure coveted young viewers. On the other hand, multi-cam sitcoms dominate the syndication market where comedy programming makes its (multi) millions. Multi-cams, supposedly, provide televisual “comfort food,” familiar character types and tropes that we’re more receptive to seeing on a repeat basis.

It’s important to see the big picture here. Single-cams are all the rage now and have been for about a half-decade, but who’s to say momentum won’t swing back the other way (How many times have you heard a colleague exclaim with faux-exasperation: “Instead of piling more praise on *The Office*, we should study *Two and a Half Men!*”)? More importantly, we need to step back from seemingly straightforward typologies and examine areas of overlap and new spaces for innovation. The two most recent efforts from Louis C.K. prove handy in this regard.

In 2006 HBO ignominiously made *Lucky Louie*, a multi-camera, live studio audience parody of/tribute to the 70s Lear sitcoms, their first and only original series to be canceled midseason. The network’s leadership fought with C.K. over how the show fit its brand of “quality,” a struggle exacerbated at the time by HBO’s inability to replenish its stock of not-TV-like programming that had defined it for much of the 2000s. Despite taking full advantage of HBO’s lack of restrictions on content, *Lucky Louie* just didn’t look right. It was just so *TV*.

His new sitcom on FX, *Louie*, retains much of the comedian’s mordant sensibility, but its visual aesthetic and narrative structure are far from the characteristics of “quality” ascribed to the docu-coms that dominate broadcast. Stand-up segments from C.K. provide interludes between vignettes that hew more closely to the feel of short films than to the A-plot/B-plot structure of sitcoms. The technique isn’t entirely new (*Seinfeld* tried

something similar before abandoning Jerry's stand-up bits altogether), but its use in *Louie* is indicative of a different industrial climate. C.K. took far less money up front from FX than he would have gotten from NBC or Fox so that he could maintain more control. The resultant product feels like it comes from a much more personal place, which C.K. credits to not having to capitulate to network overseers and their vision of what a sitcom should or should not look like. Despite steadily-declining ratings, the program has already been renewed for another 13-episode season. FX seems more interested in building a brand based on taking chances than on toeing the bottom line.

Louie isn't part of an ever-forward moving sitcom evolution; it's a step sideways, simply adding to [what Christine Becker calls](#) "a range of available choices" in sitcom aesthetics. We might think of *Louie*'s ebb and flow of stand-up to sketch-like segment as yet another possibility for a genre that has proven itself to be both dynamic and resilient over the years. It's comedian comedy for the post-network era.