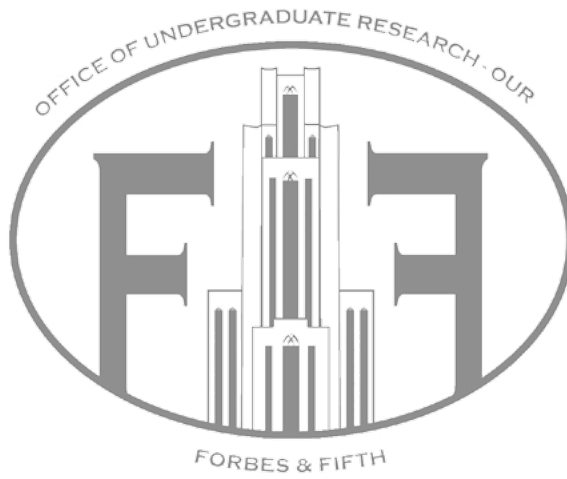




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FORBES & FIFTH



Comedy Vérité: Arrested Development and the Docusoap Form

In the season four episode of the '90s sitcom *Seinfeld* entitled "The Virgin," George Costanza uses his newly acquired job as a sitcom writer to pick up women. However, to his dismay, the women he meets find his job laughable, disgusted that he can "write that crap." The repetitive, monotonous nature of the situational comedy had led several critics to proclaim at the turn of the century that "the sitcom is dead."¹ But within the last decade, a new format of the situational comedy has come forth, blending in elements from documentary filmmaking in order to create a wholly new comedic form. This new style, described by scholar Brett Mills as "comedy vérité,"^{*2} utilizes a mixed genre form to shift situational comedy away from its music house origins and towards an individualized comedic structure, specifically tailored to the television medium. This new form can be seen in a number of post-millennial TV shows, among them *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Flight of the Conchords*, both the British and American versions of *The Office*, and, as this paper will focus on, *Arrested Development*. Through its use of the comedy vérité style, *Arrested Development* heightens the absurdity of its comedy by treating it with a serious, "truthful" tone while also furthering the form of the television sitcom.

Situational comedy, "sitcom" for short, is a television genre that has always been criticized "for its simplistic use of stereotypes, outmoded representations, and an apparent failure to engage with social or political developments."³ Initially formed as a "compromise between [vaudeville's] theatrical origins and the necessary strictures of television and radio broadcasting," the general sitcom format has "developed little since it was first created."⁴ While the "majority of [television] genres

* Vérité, French for "truth," is spelled in its native language with an accent aigu over both letter "e"s. With the word's transposition over to English, various authors choose to either include or remove these accents. Brett Mills and Stephen Mamber omit both accents, while Ethan Thompson and Trisha Dunleavy include only the second accent. For the purposes of this paper, all quotations will use their source spellings, while all comments and paraphrased sections will use the correct French spelling with both accents included.

have now evolved their own televisual language” that separates them from theatre, “a major part of the pleasure derived from sitcom results from its attempt to recreate the music hall experience.”⁵ Sitcom remains “one of the few genres that [is] still, on the whole, shot in front of a live audience, and staged as if theatre... [sitcom] format [acts as] ‘the electronic substitute for collective experience.’”⁶ Held to its theatrical origins, sitcom is one of the few television genres that neglects to form a “complex and fully-formed narrative space,” instead retaining a “shooting style which serves to ‘encode presence and the status of live performance,’”⁷ through a three-camera setup and omission of the fourth wall. Sitcom intentionally neglects the capabilities of the television medium in order to foreground “the aspects of its own performance, offering pleasure in the presentation of verbal and physical comic skill” rather than cinematic development.⁸ These clearly-outlined genre conventions help sitcoms to differentiate themselves from serious programming and establish a comedic environment “in which the laughter track, the theatrical shooting style, and the displayed performance clearly demonstrate sitcom’s artificial status and its clear, precise, single-minded aim: to make you laugh.”⁹ “By distancing itself from the verisimilitude associated with other, more serious genres, sitcom form signals its intentions to be understood as nothing more than entertainment.”¹⁰ These concrete boundaries help to reinforce the conservative, stable format of the genre and its content.¹¹

On the opposite end of the cinematic style spectrum, there is documentary filmmaking (*cinéma vérité*) and its reality TV-based cousin, the docusoap. Rather than constructing artificiality, both of these cinematic modes are concerned with portraying the “real.” “*Cinéma vérité* is a practical working method based upon a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself.”¹² It is “an attempt to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of filmmaking and reporting.”¹³ To do this, *cinéma vérité* employs “hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound” so that “instead of having people come to the camera, the camera goes to them. The filmmaker must be free to follow action without dominating it through sheer mechanical presence. Tripods, heavy lights, cables, and the rest of the paraphernalia of studio shooting are eliminated. The filmmaker is a reporter with a cam-

era instead of a notebook.”¹⁴ Docusoaps build off of the *cinéma vérité* aesthetic (if not its ideology). Brett Mills describes the concept of docu-soap as “a form in which traditional documentary shooting techniques are aligned with editing practices more associated with popular drama or soap opera.”¹⁵ Richard Kilborn says that docusoaps “display distinctively hybrid qualities. They combine features associated with ‘classic’ observational documentary with structuring techniques that are regularly deployed in soap-opera narratives.” He continues, stating that “the recipe for a typical docu-soap could not be simpler. One gains access to a group of people working for a particular organisation or pursuing some form of professional activity and films their interactions as they go about their appointed tasks.”¹⁶ Distinct from traditional documentary, docusoap is not issue-based, but rather focuses “always on personality and character interaction.” Docusoap’s basic appeal is that it offers its audience with “the prospect of a voyeuristic encounter with ‘real-life’ (often larger-than-life) individuals.”¹⁷

In his article entitled “Comedy Vérité: Contemporary Sitcom Form,” scholar Brett Mills argues that a new trend in television blends these two genres to create what he calls “comedy vérité” (a portmanteau of situational *comedy* and *cinéma vérité*).¹⁸ In comedy vérité, the “visual characteristics of [cinéma] vérité [are] adopted by sitcom for comedic purposes.”¹⁹ More than a definition of style, comedy vérité also “indicates a use of television comedy to interrogate the processes and representations of media forms, in a manner similar to the aggressively involved characteristics of *cinéma vérité*.”²⁰ Ethan Thompson claims that comedy vérité “can best be understood... as an emerging mode of production that is being adopted for its efficiency, visual complexity, and semiotic clout.”²¹ Trisha

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Dunleavy notes that genre hybridization is most evident in forms that blend conventions “which have been historically distant from each other (such as comedy and documentary),” and the success of comedy vérité’s

distinct format is “justified by its blending of conventions from sitcom and ‘reality’ docusoap, the latter being itself a blend of ‘observational documentary’ and ‘character-driven drama.’”²² She identifies six main conventions that characterize comedy vérité programs and distinguish them from their sitcom counterparts. These are as follows:

- [1] the use of a situational premise that reconciles the progressive potentials of ‘reality’ docusoap with the sitcom’s conventional stasis and entrapment;
- [2] narration through ‘reality’ TV’s vérité-styled aesthetics...;
- [3] characters who, exploiting the additional opportunities afforded by vérité-styled aesthetics, acknowledge the camera and/or try to manipulate what is being recorded;
- [4] the striking of a narrative balance, down to the structure of an individual episode, between the self-containment and circularity of sitcom and the seriality of most docusoap;
- [5] a focus on the kind of flawed, incorrigible characters whose entertainment credentials were established by sitcom and adapted by ‘reality’ docusoap via the recruitment of suitable figures from real-life;
- [6] a self-consciousness in comic performance which, encouraged by the vérité-styled interplay between characters, the camera and sometimes including the programme-makers, increases the edgy discomfort of the resulting humour.²³

“Vérité comedies use [these six] markers of a proximity to ‘the real’ in the highly constructed context of a fictual situation and a scripted narrative that is performed by actors.”²⁴ Each of these characteristics blends elements from both genres, assembling them into something entirely different. The unique style of comedy vérité therefore “demonstrates not only sitcom’s new-found engagement with alternative modes of representation, but also inevitably critiques the necessity for the distinction between the two forms.”²⁵

In adopting the docusoap aesthetic, comedy vérité transfers the style of documentary filmmaking into the comedic realm. Mills describes this new genre mix in terms of the British comedy series *The Office*, stating that the show simply “does not look like it a sitcom... [it is] shot on hand-held cameras, with muted colours, and abandon[s] the fourth wall.”²⁶ “The camera appears to roam the office, capturing

events as they happen, with jerky, hand-held shots and, frequently, pictures that are out of focus.”²⁷ Comedy vérité series thus use “the aesthetics and conventions of docusoap... for comedic ends.”²⁸ As demonstrated in *The Office*, “humour is constructed through documentary rather

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than sitcom conventions,” as comedy is formed through the availability and interaction of the filmmaker with the show’s subjects rather than the sole interplay between the characters.²⁹ Comedy vérité shifts “the source of humor

in the television comedy from the constructed joke to the observation of a comic event,” as the documentary aesthetic “creates comic effect through the comic contrast between the discourse of sobriety and the hilarious ineptitude of the subjects.”³⁰

Exemplifying the style of comedy vérité is the American comedy series *Arrested Development*. As stated by the show’s narrator, Ron Howard, in its opening credits, *Arrested Development* is the story “of a wealthy family who lost everything and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together.”³¹ The show follows the lives of the “eccentric, wealthy Bluth family, thrown into chaos when the SEC investigates the Bluth house-building business.”³² Featuring an all-star cast including Jason Bateman, Jeffery Tambor, Jessica Walter, Portia de Rossi, Will Arnett, Tony Hale, David Cross, Michael Cera, Alia Shawkat, and others, the show follows the lives of its various characters as they struggle to cope with incest, unemployment, and their own personal neuroses. The show primarily focuses on the family’s golden son, Michael Bluth, who acts as the show’s moral compass and attempts to keep everything from falling apart. Marc Peyser of *Newsweek* described the show as “clever, nutty and utterly original, it’s something like ‘The Royal Tenenbaums’ meets ‘Malcolm in the Middle,’ held together with ‘Monty Python’ Silly Putty.” Though it was a favorite of critics and won six Emmys over the course of its run,³³ the show failed to find an audience and consistently fared poorly in its Nielson ratings.³⁴ The half-hour show ran for only three seasons, the latter two cut down to only eighteen and thirteen episodes, respectively (from the standard twenty-two). *Arrested Develop-*

ment was finally cancelled at the end of its third season in 2006.³⁵

In describing the series' conception, creator Mitchell Hurwitz said that:

Ron Howard [Hollywood producer/director and the show's narrator] had this idea to do a single-camera comedy that was as funny as a multi-camera comedy... His question was, 'What if we shot a show in digital video, so we could go very fast and didn't have to spend an hour and a half lighting for each shot, we could just go out there and start shooting... Could we spend that time sharpening the jokes and making a more ambitious production? What would happen if we applied the sensibility of multi-camera to single-camera?'"³⁶

The result was *Arrested Development*, a "scripted comedy with a reality show feel... Instead of the usual three-camera comedy in front of an audience, which would create a laugh track, [the] show [is] shot with a single handheld digital camera, using natural light in most cases" to create the look of a documentary.³⁷ Producer Victor Huso says that "with reality TV and documentary, handheld style being popular, we thought that would be an interesting way to shoot a sitcom... [the show is] not documentary style, per se, but it maintains the spirit and style of that approach."³⁸ One critic even stated that the show had a "faux-documentary, cinéma vérité style."³⁹ While the show looks improvised, creator Mitch Hurwitz says that "we write in the [line] overlaps often. We write in the stutters sometimes, if that's important to a scene... but it's a very tightly scripted show, because we're trying to accomplish so much in a short amount of time."⁴⁰

Arrested Development's use of a documentary aesthetic puts it squarely in line with Mills' conception of comedy vérité. The show conforms to five of Dunleavy's six characteristics of comedy vérité, as it (1) utilizes the situational premise of George Sr.'s arrest and the family's subsequent financial troubles, (2) offers deadpan narration by Ron Howard as a counterpoint to claims by the characters, (4) strikes a narrative balance between sitcom circularity and docusoap seriality with episode-specific and season-long plots (e.g. banana stand hijinks and Kitty's attempts to overthrow the Bluth company, respectively), (5) focuses entirely on each of its "flawed, incorrigible characters" (with Buster's Oedipus complex, Gob's failures as a magician, Lindsey's vari-

ous pseudo-philanthropic ventures, etc.), and (6) is quite self-conscious with its cinematic presence. The only characteristic *Arrested Development* does not comply by is #3, that “characters... acknowledge the camera and/or try to manipulate what is being recorded.”⁴¹ With the exception of one moment in the middle of its first season, *Arrested Development* never acknowledges the presence of the camera.⁴² This is not a fault, as it merely echoes a difference in ideology relative to documentary filmmaking: that is, the unresolved ethical debate as to whether the filmmaker’s presence in documentary work should be felt by his or her subjects, a question which is then implicitly carried over into comedy vérité. *Arrested Development*’s conformity to this hypothetical, if not to Dunleavy’s third characteristic, demonstrates its fit in the comedy vérité realm.

The question remains: how does *Arrested Development*’s construction as comedy vérité differentiate its comedy from that of the traditional sitcom? The application of a documentary aesthetic in *Arrested Development* heightens the absurdity of its comedy through two specific characteristics, both directly related to the series’ mode of production. The first of these is simply the show’s visual aesthetic, formed through the use of a single handheld digital camera with no additional lighting or intense scrutiny. It was previously stated that situational comedies distance themselves “from the verisimilitude associated with other, more serious genres.”⁴³ The use of a documentary aesthetic reverses this, as

“While the traditional sitcom attempts to artificially construct the feel of the music hall experience, the documentary aesthetic attempts to re-create reality.”

the entire intent of the documentary aesthetic is to convey to its audience that what they are viewing is the camera’s version of the unadulterated truth. While the traditional sitcom attempts to artificially construct the

feel of the music hall experience, the documentary aesthetic attempts to re-create reality. As it has been adopted by comedy vérité, this tacit appeal to verisimilitude functions to elevate the show’s absurdity by not addressing it as such. As stated by Marc Peyser, the best part of *Arrested Development* is that it “treats every inane (or insane) twist with

utter seriousness, as if the show were a documentary of the absurd.” The show creates “comic effect through the comic contrast between the discourse of sobriety and the hilarious ineptitude of the subjects.”⁴⁴ The show’s comedy *vérité* aesthetic acts as “a strategy of ‘claiming the real,’ marked by its documentary style as well as its radical deviation from sitcom form. . . whether the comic is improvised or carefully scripted, it looks like it just happened.”⁴⁵ Therefore by utilizing the comedy *vérité* aesthetic, *Arrested Development* “can effectively create opportunities for producing laughter that hadn’t been there before.”⁴⁶

The second characteristic *Arrested Development* features is the utilization of interjection editing and an omnipotent narrator. Though it primarily claims “the look of the observational documentary, [the series is] accentuated by still photos and flashbacks” which put “the viewer in a position to witness not just everything that happened to the family but what might have happened to them many years prior or in front of some other camera altogether.”⁴⁷ These sequences are seamlessly interwoven into the show by Ron Howard, the series’ omnipotent narrator. While a character may be stating one thing (Michael: “I’m not lying any more, Mom”), the interjection of the filmmaker through narration and short vignettes allows the audience to hear the objective truth (as Ron Howard curtly notes: “Michael was lying,” concurrently showing a five-second clip of what Michael was lying about).⁴⁸ Humor lies in “accessing the truth of documentary. . . [with] the gap between the truth [a character] attempts to construct. . . and that which is apparent to everyone else. Thus the comedy emerges as an effect of the different levels of narrative which the documentary form offers, where one contradicts the other.”⁴⁹ Like the show’s use of the stoic documentary mode, Ron Howard’s position as the calm, trustworthy narrator with the ability to deliver lines without judgment provides juxtaposition to *Arrested Development*’s fast pacing.⁵⁰ Once again, this contrast between the serious and the absurd, this time seen through the filmmaker’s interaction with the characters’ stories, heightens *Arrested Development*’s comedic tensions.

In an interview with *The A.V. Club*, Mitchell Hurwitz claimed that part of the reason for the show’s ratings problems had been that *Arrested Development* was “a different kind of show. We really aspired to do something that wasn’t on TV. And when you do that, you quickly discover there’s no lead-in, because your show’s not on TV.”⁵¹ In recent

years, the sitcom has been said to be floundering. Mills, in articulating the new concept of comedy vérité, claimed that the commercial nature of the sitcom makes it an inherently conservative and stable genre, and therefore resistant to change.⁵² In his 2004 article for Time magazine, James Poniewozik claimed that *Arrested Development* was “remaking the sitcom.” Summarizing the show’s concept, he states that with its

Sharp jokes [and] nutty family... there’s no difference between *Arrested Development* and [*Everybody Loves*] *Raymond*. But *Arrested* is different in other ways—and thank God, since sitcoms are in a years-long creative and ratings slump. Whereas most sitcoms are set in that familiar fake world of couches and canned laughter, *Arrested Development* looks real and spontaneous. It has no laugh track and is shot documentary style, in handheld digital video, with sober narration by Ron Howard... Viewers often think the show is improvised, though it’s meticulously scripted... In looks and structure, *Arrested Development* is like a 30-min. drama, just a hilarious one.⁵³

Critic Lee Alan Hill claims that *Arrested* “is not a typical sitcom.”⁵⁴ Sitcom expert Rick Mitz likewise said that *Arrested Development* “is like nothing else on TV, [it’s] utterly unique... there is a sense that the series has taken the sitcom genre in a slightly different direction, and that’s a positive creatively.”⁵⁵ *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine asks “Can Save the Sitcom?”⁵⁶ and critic Jaime Weinman calls *Arrested Development* “tremendously influential,” changing the story from “the death of the sitcom to its rebirth.”⁵⁷

The adoption of the comedy vérité style not only heightened *Arrested Development*’s comedic tensions, but also helped push the traditional sitcom genre away from its stable, inflexible state. As the sitcom matures, it is now ceasing to resemble “its previous self, [and] has also begun to interrogate and break down the very characteristics of [television] whose forms it is finally beginning to embrace. Comedy vérité, then, is comedy for audiences raised on television formats.”⁵⁸ The willing adoption of “comedy vérité has upgraded the sitcom for a popular culture now steeped in the aesthetics, concerns, and even the jargon of ‘reality TV’... [and] has also contributed to the necessary revitalization of one of television’s oldest, most cherished genres.”⁵⁹ *Arrested Devel-*

opment's willingness to engage in a “what-if” experiment and break out of the mold has pushed the sitcom to new heights. “Significantly, [the inception of comedy vérité] marks comedy’s reengagement with [its] active social role [of criticism]... which sitcom has traditionally been criticized for abandoning.”⁶⁰ While short-lived, the show demonstrated that programs can break out of the mold and not only remain funny, but actually increase their comedic value by engaging with elements from other genres.

In the end, it appears that *Arrested Development* was too much too soon for the sitcom genre. Though it may have helped to usher in the popularity of the new hybrid form called comedy vérité, the show went too far against its available audience’s perception of the sitcom genre to be accepted in its time. In a mock article to *The Guardian*, creator Mitch Hurwitz outlines eleven steps in a guide “to getting a sitcom cancelled.” These include such bits of wisdom as “try to do too much for a 20-minute program,” “don’t bother with a laugh track,” and “add a sprinkle of incest.”⁶¹ Though its comedy may have ended up being too complex for its available audience, the show has since received a cult following on DVD and is currently slated for another season and a movie to be filmed sometime in the near future, with scripts already in the works.⁶² But while it had a short run, *Arrested Development’s* contributions to the sitcom genre and comedy vérité form have not gone unnoticed. By mixing in elements from situational comedy and docusoaps into a hybrid “comedy vérité” style, *Arrested Development* heightens the absurdity of its comedy by treating it with a serious, “truthful” tone while also furthering the form of the television sitcom.

