New Style in Sitcom

exploring genre terms of contemporary American comedy
TV series through their utilization of documentary style

Johanna Sander

2014

Masteruppsats från Masterprogram i Kultur och mediegestaltning
Abstract: Through exploring the use of documentary style in a selection of contemporary American comedy series, this thesis closes in on the question whether texts that stylistically differ from traditional sitcom can still be regarded as part of the sitcom genre. The contemporary American TV series that are being analyzed are *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Michael J. Fox Show*. As the series’ place within sitcom becomes apparent, the analysis ultimately leads to a critical investigation of the term “comedy verite.” Questioning the concepts applicability for the American series and their development leads to the investigation of new definitions. This analysis of contemporary televisual styles reveals a myriad of deeper issues and elucidates how stylistic developments point towards broader developments of the TV medium – towards a medium more and more defined by, or even drenched in, “reality.”
# Table of contents

0 Prologue

1 Introduction
   1-1 Aims
   1-2 Questions
   1-3 Method and Theory
   1-4 Delimitation
   1-5 Disposition

2 Background
   2-1 Television Studies
   2-2 Stylistics: TV-style and methods of style analysis
   2-3 Genre and Genre Theory
   2-4 Television Series
   2-5 Television History and Sitcom
   2-6 Comedy and Sitcom

3 Previously on...
   3-1 The Office (UK) and Comedy Verite
   3-2 Arrested Development and Comedy Verite
   3-3 New Comedy and The Office (US)

4 Next time on...
   4-1 Parks and Recreation and Brooklyn Nine-Nine
   4-2 Modern Family
   4-3 The Michael J. Fox Show

5 Conclusions: A rose is a rose is a rose is a...
   5-1 & Sitcom?
   5-2 & Comedy Verite?
   5-2 & Reality TV?

6 Epilogue

Bibliography
0 PROLOGUE

Whilst I was studying film theory I got more and more drawn towards television both as a medium of delivery and a content provider, as well as to the increasingly more complex serial narratives displayed in it. In writing my bachelor thesis “Hamlet on Bikes” I was interested in narration and adaptation. In my magister thesis “The television series Community and Sitcom” my focus was on modern genre definitions. But in both I felt boxed in and limited by film theory. This is why I’m now, in this master thesis, making a deliberate difference between the fields, and want to highlight that television is best analyzed with tools aimed at this specific medium. What leads me into the subject of style, and documentary style sitcom in particular, is my analysis of Community in a genre context. This series diverges strongly stylistically from sitcom and adopts the styles of completely different genres, such as western or documentary. This made me realize the importance of style as this surface we meet before the text unfolds. One chapter of my thesis on Community is concerned with that series employment of documentary film style and narrative features. In a documentary-concept episode of Community, one of the characters even refers to other documentary style television comedies as useful and easy storytelling devices for this actual episode. Rather than looking at it as a storytelling device however, I’m more interested in the presumption of the existence of a coherent group of documentary style comedy series. Therefore, this thesis will be concerned with exploring the coherence of this presumed new group.
1 INTRODUCTION

It is noticeable that contemporary American television comedy series have started using documentary-film devices more frequently this past decade to tell their fictive stories. This has changed the style of the series to a greater degree than ever before, as the new style is applied to the whole series rather than just an episode. It is this extent that is new rather than the combination. Additionally, the new style sets them consciously apart from the sitcom genre in general.

Merging a documentary aesthetic with a fictive story has often and since long ago been used in dramatic stories, such as for example in the radio-play adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* (H.G. Wells, 1898) by Orson Welles’ Mercury Theater Group in 1938. Back then the way that the invasion of earth by aliens was portrayed, interrupting regular entertainment with urgent news broadcasts, resulted in a public panic that would be close to impossible to reestablish today considering our constant connectivity with each other and all news channels. Another reason for why this probably would not be possible again is also the way we view and trust media today, as constant media consumers we do not take everything we are shown or told instantly as pure truth, even if delivered in a form that has conventions implicating truth. We accept and are always aware that for instance films such as *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) or a series like *The Office* (UK BBC 2001-2003) are fiction even though they are portrayed with all the most well known conventions of documentary film-making. No longer do these conventions stand for conveying (subjective but non-the-less real-world) truth. They can now also convey a truth coming from a writers-room and replay a fantasy. If an unspoken contract between media producer and audience exists that constitutes that certain devices are documenting a real-life experience, then this contract has now been significantly changed due to the more frequent use of documentary devices in fiction storytelling. Nonetheless is it pertinent to our experience and knowledge of the world that much of what we know, has been learned through the way things are portrayed in mass media. TV is still one of the most influential media as it is a big part of our everyday lives, and the initial idea of transporting the world into our living rooms still holds a lot of truth even though the “Black Box” now has to compete with many mobile streaming platforms. Maybe the ideal of directly delivering the world to the audience is even more important now, considering the huge amount of so-called Reality programming and the greater accessibility of content through the devices with which we are constantly connected. As one of the most widespread cultural media, the content of TV, no matter which
platform it is being consumed through, has a great impact on opinions and culture.¹ TV-series strive to represent and voice or express (their respective) today’s society; “knowing how to watch TV is a crucial skill for anyone living in our media saturated world.”² Right now our culture, our conversations, are drenched in pop-cultural references which is reflected in and fertilized by the heightened metatextuality of films and series. Comedy especially has always sought to be representative of its time – in the history of sitcom series (as excellently described by Michael Tueth in Laughter In The Living Room and here addressed in chapter “2-5 Television History and Sitcom”) we can often see characters that represent their eras great role models and mimic the most common values and norms. The Kennedys, for example, are mirrored in The Dick Van Dyke Show (CBS 1961-1966).

Comedy is more influential than it might appear considering that its first layer seems to be to take nothing seriously. Sitcom is one of the most often produced and widely consumed formats and has throughout the history of TV maintained its popular cultural position.³ But whilst themes and representations of societal norms have changed with the historical circumstances, the sitcoms style and structure has remained in a kind of stasis for the approximately five decades following the original instatement of its stylistic conventions through the multi-camera production practices developed for I love Lucy (CBS, 1951-1957). Sitcom in this “original form” does still exist and is still frequently produced.⁴ However, as formats such as docusoaps and Reality TV appeared that were faster and cheaper to produce, and television had to battle a vaster array of entertainment possibilities in the home, the sitcom lost its dominion over viewing statistics. Change was predestined.

This change occurred in the mode of production. The single-camera approach to producing sitcom had already been tried in the 60s, but it didn’t become competitive until the late 90s, and the advent of hybrid genres brought about new kinds of half-hour comedy series that do not quite fit the sitcom bill. With the theory of New Comedy, Antonio Savorelli explored the difference between the traditional sitcom and the emerging single-camera comedies, arguing for the new texts moving beyond sitcom due to their reliance on several levels of metatextual enunciations. One of those levels is the metasemiotic appearance of the texts, a separation from classic sitcom by making use of aesthetics from other types of texts. “Within the past ten years [sitcom] has radically reinvented itself and that reinvention has

---

largely occurred within the realm of style.”\(^5\) A resulting approach of the genre’s reinvention is a style that is based upon the conventions of documentary film. It seems that this form of presenting comedy has come alongside of documentary films regaining commercial success throughout the past ten years, leading back into what has been called a New Golden Age of Documentary Filmmaking.\(^6\) During the 90s docuseries became hugely popular on British TV followed by “the global rise in reality programming,”\(^7\) and with the advent of the 21\(^{st}\) century, documentary films have reentered the cinema and been popularized through such films as *The Kid Stays In The Picture* (2002) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). In comedy series today we find the format of documentary storytelling and visual style not only applied in single episodes such as on several occasions in, for instance, *Community* (NBC 2009-), but also to the concept of an entire show such as *The Office* (US NBC 2005-2013) or *Modern Family* (ABC 2009-).

Academic exploration of this specific stylistic evolution has essentially been limited to the inception of a narrowly analyzed term. In a 2004 edition of the journal *Screen*, Brett Mills offers in an analysis of the British series *The Office* (UK BBC 2001-2003) the term “comedy verite.” It is based on the for him evident connections of the series, and other similar British and Australian programs, use of documentary conventions with the Cinéma Vérité tradition.\(^8\) Mills goes in fact so long as to proclaim that these signal “the point at which the traditional sitcom form died in Britain and Australia.”\(^9\) Taking what Mills had developed as his foundation, Ethan Thompson applied and evolved the term for the US market into a mode of production.\(^10\) Overall, Thompson’s reapplication of the term to American series has been merely accepted but not further researched. “Comedy verite” is applied as truth to all American documentary style series, albeit only in an academic context, without the term itself having been researched further. Even Thompson himself has not worked further with it.\(^11\) When Mills’ comprehensive book about sitcom was released a year after publishing the above referenced article, it seems that he is taking a step back as well. “Comedy verite” is rarely mentioned and not applied during his analysis of *The Office*. Here he goes so far as to say that to truly see the implication of the new form of sitcom and its significance (‘as both an

---

\(^2\) Dowell, Ben: *Steve James hails a golden age of documentary filmmaking*; The Guardian, 2011-06-06; http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jun/06/steve-james-golden-age-documentary (read 2013-04-18);
\(^5\) Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (*Screen* 45, Spring 1, 2004)
\(^7\) Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (*Velvet Light Trap* 60, Fall 2007)
\(^8\) Private Twitter conversation between me and Mr. Thompson, 2014-04-30
industrial product and the focus of academic analysis,”

and, might I add, as a general term of product identification also applicable for audiences) there first needs to be an example produced that is truly popular and mainstream, uniting “audiences in the ways sitcoms from earlier decades did.”

Considering the success of Modern Family, I believe this form of comedy now warrants a reexamination. It is not my aim to inquire why one show or another has more or less success, neither do I want to claim what the implications or significance of the new form are; instead I’m curious about the current state of affairs. How do contemporary American sitcom series of more recent years (2009-2013) make use of documentary conventions? How do they look, how are they structured, where are they set and what themes do they address? Through analyzing the style and structure of a selection of contemporary documentary style American comedy series, I aim to explore their relationship to both sitcom and “comedy verite.”

1-1 AIMS

The aim of this thesis is to further explore the development of television genres with the example of a certain portion of the evolution of the sitcom genre. “Contemporary sitcom offers a useful case study for these debates, precisely because sitcom is one genre whose characteristics are often assumed to be comparatively rigid and clear;” the sitcom is also a rich ground for analysis due to the limitations of the term sitcom in today’s much broader style of televisual comedy series and the limited research on the subject. Especially the only marginally explored term “comedy verite.” Exploring the genre relations of contemporary comedy television series to traditional sitcom through their specific use of the documentary style, the concept of “comedy verité,” as well as the concept of New Comedy, shall thus also serve as a case study in approaching questions of genre development through TV style.

1-2 QUESTIONS

My main questions are regarding what unites this group of series that announce themselves to use documentary style and whether that could define the advent of a new (sub)genre. How do contemporary American sitcom series of more recent years (2009-2013) make use of documentary conventions? How do they look, how are they structured and where are they set? What are the most prominently featured elements? How does their look relate to earlier

---

13 Ibid, p.66

5
documentary style comedy series? How do style and narrative etc. relate to classic sitcom and “comedy verite”? Is “comedy verite” applicable to more recent American series? If the explored series employ a style that does not conform to the most dominant criteria of sitcom, does this change their generic definition and diminish the comedy in them to a mode rather than a genre? Or are those series still essentially sitcom, disguised with a different style?

1.3 METHOD AND THEORY

Generally in serial television criticism, and media studies as a whole, the first and main questions to be asked have been “what does it mean” and “why does it matter.” In his keynote lecture entitled “The end of serial criticism”16 at the Serial Popularity conference Jason Mittell argued for, and expands on this argument in his work on narrative complexity, the shift from these questions towards asking “HOW does it mean” and “HOW does it matter.”17 Essentially describing a shift from cultural politics to cultural circulation being necessary to further the research in the field, with the ultimate goal being a combination of the strategies, enabling scholars to ask “what does it mean through how it means” and “why does it matter through how does it matter.” He vividly argues that understanding how series’ storytelling works gives deeper meaning to why it matters, the how is shaping the why. Thus I can conclude that the much neglected analysis of style is pertinent to the expansion of the rather young field of television studies, in which this thesis is to be placed. I draw upon fairly recent theories and methods from within the field to realize my analysis of contemporary American sitcom series and their use of documentary conventions, and aim to focus on the how-questions by exploring the style of the selected texts. My analysis will be a comparative analysis of media texts focused on the series relationships to each other in the context of genre. The main reason for this is that genres are best defined by a texts relationship to other texts within and outside the same group. To better clarify the different elements of a television text I want to separate between intra and outer textual features (for example: story and visual style versus industry practices such as production company and scheduling). Whilst it is necessary to examine the latter in the future, focus in this thesis shall be on the intra textual features: “Critical analysis of texts – the television programs themselves – is a central technique for helping us to unpack what this world of images, messages and representations mean.”18

I will make use of Jeremy Butlers methods for analysis of TV-style (primarily descriptive and analytical stylistics).19 Butler describes several methods for analyzing TV-

---

16 2013-06-06; Popular Seriality International Conference; University of Göttingen
17 Mittell, Jason: Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13)
19 Butler, Jeremy: Television Style (Routledge, 2010, New York)
style, but only two of them are relevant to my analysis, they can concisely be summarized as follows: descriptive studies of style aim to describe - to thoroughly explore how a program is structured, looking closely at for instance camera movements, length and frequency of cuts, setting and so forth. Analytical studies of style place the style in an imagined or concrete context, for instance in the context of the TV medium, of the narration, of a genre or a particular program. This type of analysis asks what the meanings and functions of the style are. Combining the two answers thus both how and why the style is employed. I will however not describe the minutiae of the texts, but through these methods of analysis highlight key characteristics of the texts.

As the aim of this thesis is to explore the generic relationships of contemporary sitcom series, I will within the method of analytical stylistics draw upon two theories that concern precisely this recent development of the genre: the style specific “comedy verité” and the notion of New Comedy. In devising his New Comedy hypothesis Antonio Savorelli uses structural semiotics, thus straying from the in TV studies established path based on socio-psycho-economic paradigms, focusing instead on the series as texts. Also, his choice of employing tools from semiotics is, as Savorelli himself explains, rather uncommon in the field. Thus debunking a common doubt on the role of semiotics by stating that the purpose of structural analysis/semiotics is not (solely) to take texts apart layer by layer to reveal their deeper structures, but rather can also illuminate the texts use of other levels in the production of meaning. When applying structural semiotics to audiovisual media it has to be paid attention to the fact that tools such as the generative model or theories of enunciation were originally developed for verbal/literary texts and only later extended to visual texts, which means that these tools differ slightly based on which type of media they are being applied to.20 Most noticeable is this in the fact that in studies of literature, semiotics are used to reveal deeper underlying structures and meaning, but applied in television studies structural semiotics is more often and meaningful used to reveal structures stretching over several texts/utterances within the medium.

Rather than, what is often criticized in the semiotic approach, getting too caught up in taking apart a text layer by layer to reveal its meaning, I see structural semiotics as enabling to realize the aim of finding connecting patterns and overlaying structures. A general as well as my main critique of the semiotic approach is its tendency to finality or definitiveness, not fitting TV due to the mediums multiplicity, variety of semiotic systems and open ended nature. Thus, for me structural semiotics aims not necessarily to find deep underlying

meanings of a text, but rather repetition of elements, form and structures across (different) texts and thusly connecting them due to it being less tied to the finality of language systems in the context of film/TV-theory.\textsuperscript{21} I want to emphasize that television texts of course aren’t following a static or rigid set of rules but rather are made up of a “language” (=sign system) that is continuously developing. Thus the aim here is not to find a definitive set of structures employing documentary style in comedy, but rather to explore how these structures look and develop. So even though structural semiotics might be limiting (restrictions are for instance the sole focus on the internal qualities of the text) they are certainly the most obviously helpful method in defining style and structures that can be compared to others, making genre conventions more obvious. I aim to find the repetition as well as the grander connection structures through dividing the texts into their different elements. Consequently, my analysis will be a combination of structural semiotics employed in correlation with Butlers descriptive as well as analytical study of style, thus through comparative textual analysis connecting the singular texts to the greater discourse constituted by the entirety of the considered group. In the text of this thesis the predominantly visibly employed analysis will be the method of analytical style studies combined with comparative textual analysis, approached from a structural semiotics point of view. To simply describe the elements would not be fruitful, but this also means that the thesis will not be a detailed account of the entire descriptive analysis made but more of a concise version, functional to the goals of this research (i.e. none of the statistics and stylometry used to choose the exemplifying sequences and determine key elements will be shown in this text).

Both Mills and Thompson draw on a differentiation between sitcom and televisual sitcom (televisual ~ non theatrical, abandonment of displaying theatrical origins of the sitcom form). This is thoroughly described and defined by Butler through poising multi-camera and single-camera sitcoms against each other in a stylistic analysis.\textsuperscript{22} Even though this distinction based on mode of production is helpful, it is not sufficient, as it does not account for the content of the texts but simply its technological inception. Through the concept of New Comedy Antonio Savorelli delivers a further distinction of a new type of comedy series (as separate from traditional sitcom) that focuses more on several levels of communication and on the text rather than mainly on the mode of production. Thus functioning as a complement to the above mentioned distinction. New Comedy is mainly defined through its heightened metatextuality, meaning the series within it employ several levels of metatextual enunciation as defining traits of form, style and structure as well as metatextual components being


\textsuperscript{22} Butler, Jeremy: \textit{Television Style} (Routledge, 2010, New York)
inherent to the story. Series that can be placed within this term are showing more consciously set apart strategies of communication. For the term “comedy verite” the strategy of communication is important as well, since it is defined through sitcoms engagement with other media formats and the demands on the audience to have “at least a working knowledge of other television forms.” Both theories on contemporary comedy series are highlighting the texts consciousness of their own and other genres.

The concept of intertextuality is a base of the comparative analysis here, because I first have to relate the texts to each other within the same parameters and to similar texts outside and inside their own categorical frame: ”Intertextuality is a valuable theoretical concept in that it relates the singular text principally to other systems of representation, rather than to an amorphous ‘context’. In order to even discuss the relation of a work to its historical circumstances, we are obliged to situate the text within its intertext and then relate both text and intertext to the other systems and series which form its context.” Thus the explored texts have to be related to for instance both sitcom as well as “comedy verite” to support the hypothesis of the possibility of a new genre developing within the overlaps of the texts.

1-4 DELIMITATION

Whilst I generally see genres as cultural (operating across the realms of media industries, audiences, critics and historical contexts) rather than just textual categories, I will here focus on studying the texts, since I reason that to be able to see how new genres or changes within genres connect to bigger cultural or societal circumstances there needs to first be an exploration whether these new categories actually exist, as well as how they look and are structured. This does however not mean that I am unaware of the realms outside the text, but simply that they will not be on the forefront yet still visible in the periphery (the consciousness of and aim to address program, audience, institution and contexts is inherent of the TV-studies approach; see chapter 2-1 “Television Studies”). This is unproblematic as this thesis is aimed at exploring the fusion of two genres and “generic mixture is most activated and manifest within the realm of the text.” Similarly, I have to specify that the section of TV referred to here is very narrow in comparison with the content actually contained within the medium. Whilst TV contains a myriad of different both scripted and unscripted programming, from sports and news shows over commercials and shopping programs to movies and game shows, focus here lies solely on scripted series. Thus genre here means not to include all the

23 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (Screen 45, Spring 1, 2004), p.77
different types of television genres (or formats), but the specific genres of TV-series. Additionally, I am in this text making a conscious distinction between TV and television, where I in this paper designate television to mean the technical device whilst TV refers to the content (more often this will be used the other way around, but the abbreviation TV will be more useful to my purpose here as it provides a good way to save space and time). TV can be delivered through several different platforms, the contents on these platforms however are provided through TV; which is why even for instance a Netflix original series still should be called a TV-series even though it never airs on the apparatus we call television. TV is a style and format as well as a production industry, television one of the technical devices able to show us these contents. The delivery system will be of secondary to no importance here as I will view the texts for themselves and separate from the flow established as typical for TV-television (i.e. my viewing does not contain commercials and no period of waiting in between episodes etc.). But television is the medium through which all the texts analyzed here are supposed to be originally presented or for which they are produced, meaning that they were produced for television in the sense of by the TV-industry for network broadcasting. They were all later syndicated as well as available on DVD and different streaming services. My main form of consumption for this analysis will be through DVDs, my DVR and the Swedish streaming distribution through the services Netflix and HBO Nordic. Similarly to the navigation within these distribution platforms, the episodes of the here analyzed series will be referenced with their title and/or a number. The number indicates first the season and then the episode within that season, for example the very first episode would thus be 101 “Pilot”.

I chose to limit my material for analysis to contemporary American comedy TV-series to keep continuity and focus in my examples, especially considering the differences in production practices between countries and the fact that the American TV industry by far produces the internationally most widespread content and thus is the most influential over all. “The popularity and comprehensibility of American comedy programming across the globe can be tied into debates about globalization and imperialism.” American TV-series are relevant even in a European context, mainly because the American television industry has been the beacon which all television (in the western world) follows ever since they gained an extreme lead during the 1950s. In Sweden this is especially visible in the structure of the bigger commercial channels, such as kanal5 and tv6 where most of the content consists of US productions (the schedule of the latter is dominated by American sitcom series). Thus the American TV-series get a lot of space to define the Swedish TV culture and discourse. In fact,

27 Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): *A European Television History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p.4
only a year after the emergence of television in Sweden did the first American sitcom series air: *I Love Lucy* in 1957.

As to choosing which specific series to include, the first criteria are that the series will be defined as comedy through the intentions of their production, the intention of all the productions is to evoke emotions related to laughter. Equally important is that the entirety of the series have documentary style as a main element and are introduced as such by the intent of production, thus being utterly representational for the style and known for their style. The series selected to represent the employment of documentary style are also chosen based on their critical and commercial success as those generally are the most influential texts. Critical success shall primarily be defined as the series earning critical recognition through winning television oriented awards such as the Golden Globe or Emmy. Commercial success is determined through the industry’s own ratings system, which also influence the longevity of a series (i.e. how many seasons will be produced). I believe that even though TV studies generally focuses on critically acclaimed rather than commercially successful programs, an exploration into the questions of contemporary genre development should take commercial success into serious account for the choice of which textual objects to study. History has proven that the commercially successful programs do shape the TV landscape as long as the industry is primarily dependent on an advertisement economy system. The restriction of the for analysis chosen material to broadcast network content is largely dependent on the difference of the business model of production between network and Pay-TV. So, whilst HBO has created some of the earlier entries into the documentary style sitcom group with *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999-), their inception and measurability of success is not compatible with that of network television series. Nielsen ratings do not apply to Pay-TV channels like HBO and thus the longevity of their productions is not as dependent on ratings numbers, additionally Pay-TV channels do generally not divulge viewing numbers making it hard to compare mainstream popularity. Also, channels like HBO are not as accessible to a wide audience due to their subscription based business model.

The chosen series shall be produced for a mayor channel of the US broadcast network with an original first air date of the pilot either between 2000 and 2009 or between 2009 and the end of 2013, to enable comparison of recent historical development of the style. Due to its critical acclaim and the many successful remakes in different countries, *The Office* is usually the first series that comes to mind when mentioning documentary style in TV-comedy.28 Both

---

the British and the American version of *The Office* shall here act as a reference to which other series are being compared, as they both are essential to the emergence of the theories of “comedy verite” and New Comedy. The fact that the British version of *The Office* is essential to Brett Mills conception of the “comedy verite” term makes the analysis of this series important in the context of this thesis even though it does not entirely fit the parameters of selection for analysis material. Additionally, it has to be considered as important in this context due to its clear influence on many of the American series, especially considering that the creative staff behind the remake would continue to employ a similar style in their later work. The American remake would turn out to be a critical as well as commercial success, which clearly legitimizes its place in this comparison. A second point of reference is constituted by *Arrested Development*, also essential to the definition of the “comedy verite” theory. As to the series produced after 2009, *Modern Family* (ABC 2009-) and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009-) shall act as chronologically parallel examples. The first one chosen due to it combing critical and commercial success more prominently then any of its predecessors or contemporaries.29 The latter one chosen due to its critical success as well as being created by the writer/producers behind the US remake of *The Office*. For the most recent examples I have looked at which shows for the fall 2013 season were announced to have a documentary element and choose, before knowing of their success or failure, to include *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (NBC 2013-) and *The Michael J. Fox Show* (NBC 2013-). *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is also created by some of the creative minds that worked on *The Office* (US) and *Parks and Recreation*, concretely illuminating the differences and similarities of an evolving style due to the creative teams’ unparalleled immersion in it. *The Michael J Fox Show* represents an example of a common tactic for the inception of a sitcom series, being based upon, named after and dependent on the performance of a popular comedic actor or actress. These seven examples provide diversity, sampling the style throughout the past decade and showcasing the most recent development. Whilst referring to the series as a whole, I will also focus on taking apart more thoroughly certain segments or sequences I found to be most representational. Predominantly the pilot episodes shall serve as the main example as they for all the chosen series establish a style and dramaturgy that is held throughout the seasons. The first episode of a television series is called a pilot and is traditionally filmed separately before the actual production starts, whether the series is going to be broadcast depends on the quality and success of the pilot; it is also the episode that not only starts off the story but sets the mood of the whole series.

The dominance of series produced by/for NBC within the here for analysis selected series should not be surprising as it is one of the networks that orders most scripted serial content overall and especially comedy. Additionally, it has traditionally been the giant of comedy – home to the “Must See TV.” The NBC Thursday night block has for many previous decades been iconic, once dominating the Thursday night ratings with sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-1992), *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993), *Seinfeld* (NBC 1990-1998), *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) and *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998-2006). Although more recently the networks viewing numbers are dwindling due to a partially involuntary development of a narrow brand of cult comedies; the network has made itself visible in the critics’ circuit through creatively challenging comedy series, giving more screen time to innovative single-camera comedies. Additionally, a lot of the dominant comedic talent both behind and on the screen has been and is employed at NBC through the long lasting, acclaimed and popular sketch show *Saturday Night Live* (NBC 1975-). Many of those writers and actors are part of the here analyzed series. Comedy is traditionally the network’s strong suit. Therefore it is only reasonable that several of the here explored series stem from NBC.

As previously explained, series from HBO shall not be explored here due to the difference in production practice to network series, it is however important to mention that HBO features several comedy series that employ the documentary style as these are part of the possibly emerging genre, for example *The Larry Sanders Show, Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Comeback* (HBO 2005). Other examples of series that could have been included in this paper are *Better Off Ted* (ABC 2009-2010) or *Death Valley* (MTV 2011-). The latter could also be argued to belong in the fantasy or horror genre, only employing comedy as a mode which makes it an inherently difficult example for a broad genre study, possibly deserving its own separate analysis. Additional similar series, often based on less scripted material, are for instance Comedy Centrals’ *Reno 911!* (2003-2009) which is a parody of law enforcement themed Reality TV such as *COPS* (FOX 1989-), or the travelogue *Gerhard Reinke’s Wanderlust* (Comedy Central 2003). Other channels employ a quasi-reality approach, such as MTV’s *My Life as Liz* (2010-2011), a series that centers on the life of semi-fictional character Liz Lee and employs real people in their real environment. So whilst multiple scenes are planned, the events and relationships are “true.” Similarly reshaping Reality TV is *Real Husbands of Hollywood* (BET 2013-), following series creator Kevin Hart along with other married celebrities playing a comical fictionalized version of themselves. Telemundo and truTV chose to reenact real events in *Operation Repo* (2007-) and *Southern

---

30 Schneider, Michael: NBC Boss Why We’re Tweaking or Comedy Brand; TV Guide; 2013-11-14; http://www.tvguide.com/News/NBC-Comedy-Changes-Office-Spinoff-Up-All-Night-1056218.aspx (read 2013-11-14)
Fried Stings (2010-), both of these are however marketed as Reality TV despite being reenactments. The children oriented Nickelodeon channel depicts in The Naked Brothers Band (2007-) the daily lives of a rock band in an exaggeration of their real lives, and the fictional presence of a camera is often acknowledged. Even Netflix has followed up its success with the fourth season of Arrested Development with a new series by Ricky Gervais, Derek (2013-). This small selection is exemplifying that there are many more comedy series on all types of channels employing the documentary style beyond the series analyzed in this paper.

1-5 DISPOSITION

The remainder of this thesis is divided into four sections. Firstly I will present the historical, methodological and theoretical backbone of the analysis through providing background context from research in the field. Chapter 2 “Background” shall thus serve to not only place this thesis in its field but also to provide the reader with essential knowledge about TV, the sitcom genre, its history, conventions and definitions. Following this, the analysis of the series’ is divided into two main sections, spanning chapter 3 “Previously On” and chapter 4 “Next time on.” The first one considers the series whose Pilot aired between 2000-2009 and acts also as a presentation of the theoretical concepts of “comedy verite” and New Comedy. Thereafter I will explore the series from 2009 forward. The final chapter summarizes and expands on the analysis’ results of the two preceding chapters by relating them to 1) sitcom, 2) “comedy verite” and 3) Reality TV, thus presenting conclusions as well as offering suggestions for further research.
2 BACKGROUND

The following chapters also illuminate the delimitations of this thesis in the sense that they define the here applied understanding of terms. I will present to this paper relevant background about genre and genre theory, the history of television and specifically sitcom in the US, as well as try to define television and the comedy genre. Beyond that I will also more specifically present the academic field of television studies and one of its subsections regarding the study of TV-style.

2-1 TELEVISION STUDIES

Presumably it should no longer be necessary to explain or argue the significance of a technology found in next to every home, to which the general public devotes several hours each day and which has become a pillar in our everyday lives as well as a cornerstone of furnishing: “You don’t own a TV? What’s all your furniture pointed at?” But as Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz state in their introduction to the book Short Introductions: Television Studies, those studying television went from “explaining why it was important to study a popular medium such as television” to “being rhetorically supplanted by ‘new media’ and rendered yet again unimportant,” leading to a continuation of the defense of the fields importance. And yet, however often it may have been predicted, television is not “dead” and neither has it been replaced by any other medium so far. In fact, “this is a particularly dynamic moment in television history around the world.” The medium promises greater artistic freedom than the increasingly conventional Hollywood film. The market for quality content is still growing. Fan activism is more intense than ever. The industries interest and capabilities for technological innovation has garnered a fast growing bulk of platforms and transmedia content, thus creating even more outlets, as well as the new platforms aiming to be producers as well as distributors and being quite successful at it. TV is an exponentially influential medium, garnering interest, discussion and opinion: “television continues to be a crucial part of the media landscape in most societies, and it is only just arriving as a major cultural force in many others.” It thus seems that in 2012, when Gray and Lotz publish their introductory guide to TV-studies (the first of its kind according to themselves), the study of this medium should be legitimized and widely accepted. Yet they have to dedicate several pages on the defense of the field and the medium it explores. This is common practice, and

31 Joey Tribiani (Matt LeBlanc) on Episode 923 Friends (NBC 1994-2004)
33 ibid, p.1
34 ibid, p.1
35 ibid
similar arguments can be found in for instance Jeremy Butlers book on TV-style.\(^{38}\) This practice of defense is also common in texts about the sitcom, as exemplified in Mills’ *Television Sitcom*.\(^{39}\)

Lotz and Gray expand on the necessity for TV-studies today: “while patterns of use and the screens we use are changing, the need to understand the relationships of television as a business, cultural storyteller and object of considerable popular interest remains as crucial as ever.”\(^{40}\) Possibly more so, due to greater accessibility and possibilities for audience involvement. The mediums, and especially TV-series, power of persuasion has most recently been demonstrated by the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign to which over ninety-thousand fans from around the world donated. Their financial commitment made possible the production of the movie based on a series that had been off the air for about six years. If done right, the stories and characters stick with the audience long beyond their actual on-screen live, thus also serving functions beyond entertainment.

Besides a heavy cultural studies background, television studies spring partially from film studies, to set aside a clear difference and with hopes of lifting up their medium from the low status it held/holds, scholars would focus less on the mediums aesthetic values and more on its importance for society, the cultural and political contexts of the programming. Traditionally television is defined in context to other communicative media:

> Academic studies of television have attempted a range of definitions of the medium, primarily based on how the medium communicates, which have mainly involved distinctions between television and cinema or radio. The subject’s analytical methodologies have derived from disciplines including film studies, its methods of discussing audiences and television institutions have come from sociology, and overall these ways of describing the development of television can amount to different ontologies and histories of the medium.\(^{41}\)

In academia there has been a dual tendency towards defining television in which the medium is either treated as a medium like any other or a medium like no other. Similarly a split has happened in how the medium is researched in its modern history. Whilst media studies often focus on television as “new media” and elevate technical advances (but thus neglecting history, content and industry production), other branches have solely focused on content neglecting the technical side. This split is also apparent in the research around televisual serial narratives, where technical developments generally are explored completely separated from textual content, or rather not at all. Gray and Lotz ultimately define the field based on the following parameters: “we distinguish television studies as an approach to studying television


\(^{41}\) Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): *A European Television History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p.3
or other media that typically references at least two of the program, the audience and the industry. Regardless of focus […] television studies takes great effort to specify the context of the phenomenon of study in terms of sociocultural, technoindustrial, and historical conditions. […] It may be too much to ask of prospective researchers that they analyze programs, audiences, industries, and context in their project. Nevertheless, television studies not only asks, but requires, that researchers be well-read about programs, audiences, industries and contexts.42

Television series, especially American contemporary series, have become a more popular field of research in the past decade, letting expressions from the TV medium become valuable outside the context of the medium’s impact on the consumer. In fact, TV-series are slowly on their way to being treated more equally to films, as a narrative and artistic expression valuable to explore on its own merits, even though research on style and aesthetic is still underrepresented.43 Generally in studies of TV there is a tendency towards exploring the medium’s importance for society, the cultural and political contexts of the programming, this is also true for research within TV series. Straying from the by cultural studies inspired “established path of television studies based on socio-psycho-economic paradigms”44 does mean to grant the series autonomy. To focus on their aesthetic and narrative value through textual analysis (and structural semiotics) recognizes the texts “necessary autonomy to produce meaning independent of an audience’s presence. This is not to say that a text doesn’t need a receiver, or that the audience is totally irrelevant in the process of televisual communication,”45 but rather acknowledges that TV, just as film and literature, has the capacity to produce autonomous meaning found in the text itself and not solely dependent on the receiver.

2-2 STYLISTICS: TV-STYLE AND METHODS OF STYLE ANALYSIS
In the previous chapter the duality of TV-studies became apparent; in looking at TV-style the negative implications of the long standing disregard of the autonomy of TV texts and their aesthetic values becomes evident. Jeremy Butler begins his book Television Style46 with explaining that the study of TV style for a long time has been hindered by the claim that TV cannot add to style since it is simply a transmitter. This has shaped television studies in the way that for example cultural studies rather looks at the recipient (who and why rather than what). Since most studies of TV take stance in film studies, the notion of auteurism has been

43 Butler, Jeremy: Television Style (Routledge, 2010, New York)
46 Butler, Jeremy: Television Style (Routledge, 2010, New York)
another restriction for exploring TV-style. Auterism, a term coined by Francois Truffaut and his colleagues at Cahiers du Cinéma in the mid 1950s, focuses on the importance of the creator, claiming that even a collaborative medium such as film can have one artistic voice behind it thus not unlike literature having one originator. In their view of the term, there could be no style without an auteur. They saw the practices of television production as far too industrialistic for the voice of an auteur to shine through. This is primarily due to their notion that the auteur always is the director, which in television isn’t possible since the director often doesn’t control the shape of the program but rather does the series creator who often also acts as (executive) producer or writer. This is a constant position that might involve directing as well, but generally the director changes between different episodes. Today many series are acknowledged as having an auteur, generally the person who comes up with the concept and drives the production – the creator, writer and/or showrunner; often the same person occupies several positions. Acknowledging the differences in production practices opens the medium up to investigations of style.

Butler bases his exploration of style on David Bordwells previous research in film style. Style here is easily defined as what first meets the eye (and ear): “Style is the tangible texture of a film, the perceptual surface we encounter as we watch and listen, and that surface is our point of departure in moving to plot, theme, feeling – everything else that matters to us.”

Expanding on this definition, Butler emphasizes that “all television texts contain style. Style is their texture, their surface, the web that holds together their signifiers and through which their signified are communicated.” Thus, to move into an analysis of a text means to first look at and contemplate the style. Whilst Butler describes several methods for analyzing TV-style, there are only two of them relevant to my analysis. There are four categories into which media stylistics (i.e. the analysis of style) can be divided: 1 – descriptive stylistics, 2 – analytical stylistics, 3 – evaluative stylistics and 4 – historical stylistics. Of these it is the first two that will be in focus here.

Descriptive studies of style aim to describe - to thoroughly explore how a program is structured, looking closely at for instance the lighting, framing, camera movements, length and frequency of cuts. This is influenced by Christian Metz and here semiotics offers clearly the “most comprehensive set of tools for accomplishing the detailed description of television style.” In the 1960s when semiotics were initially introduced into media studies they were used in research concerned with the larger questions of narrative form rather than the

---

48 ibid, p.15
49 ibid, p.3
enunciation of that form in sound and image.\textsuperscript{50} Early application of semiotic description of television can be found in John Fiske and John Hartley’s \textit{Reading Television} from 1978, where instead of different types of illustrations they rely on a verbal shot list. The aim here was to articulate the structure of a program’s sign system, thus accounting for its aesthetic codes, meaning a “set of conventionalized stylistic elements.”\textsuperscript{51} Fiske works similarly in his influential volume \textit{Television Culture} from 1987: “His detailed analyses of television texts […] do not include frame captures, but they do describe framing, camera movement, editing and so on, in detail.”\textsuperscript{52} For Fiske it was important that stylistic description not just be a description of techniques in individual shots, but that those observations are placed in broader contexts. The emerging codes, or structures of style, are by Fiske described as “a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture.”\textsuperscript{53} This essentially also defines genre, making the two terms connected, but with style being part of genre definition. Fiske further “divides television’s stylistic codes into technical codes governing television’s image and sound techniques and social codes, sets of conventions of dress, hair style and the like that belong to the host culture.”\textsuperscript{54} This division is similar to the classic division of movies in film studies into a dramatic (the theatrical dimension of the film image = what is put in front of the camera such as lighting, costumes, acting; in film studies this is called mise-en-scène but in TV-studies instead generally referred to as “staging”\textsuperscript{55}) and cinematic dimension (the composition of the movie achieved through camera positions and editing),\textsuperscript{56} albeit even more strictly focused on separating culture and technique/mechanics. In Fiske the unification of different strains of television studies seem to become possible, since he concludes that “A textual study of television […] involves three foci: the formal qualities of television programs [that is, their style] and their flow; the intertextual relations of television within itself, with other media, and with conversation; and the study of socially situated readers and the process of reading. Fiske’s last focus clearly bears the influence of cultural studies, but the first two are more comfortable within the province of semiotics.”\textsuperscript{57}

What Fiske does is not a sole descriptive analysis, rather is descriptive stylistics used to better focus the analysis of style. Instead of leaving the reader with just still pictures to decipher themselves without the context of the frames surrounding the printed one, the writer

\textsuperscript{50} Butler, Jeremy: \textit{Television Style} (Routledge, 2010, New York), p.4
\textsuperscript{51} ibid, p.4
\textsuperscript{52} ibid, p.4
\textsuperscript{53} ibid, p.4
\textsuperscript{54} ibid, p.4
\textsuperscript{55} Mittell, Jason: \textit{Television and American Culture} (Oxford, 2009) , p.177
\textsuperscript{56} Corrigan, Timothy: \textit{A Short Guide to Writing About Film} (Pearson Education, 7th edition, 2012)
\textsuperscript{57} Butler, Jeremy: \textit{Television Style} (Routledge, 2010, New York), p.4
successfully employing descriptive stylistics can guide the recipients focus to what is relevant for the study and for the analyzed text. The description of style becomes thus the launching pad for deeper analysis: “Description initiates interpretation. […] A description of a television show should not replicate that show. It should, obviously enough, only serve to further the analysis.”58 Thus the descriptive approach smoothly moves into the next approach to style described by Butler. Analytical stylistics place the style in an imagined or concrete context, for instance in the context of the TV medium, of the narration, of a genre or a particular program. This type of analysis asks what the meanings and functions of the style are, and depends on assumptions about the purpose and function of style in a text, the aim of it becomes thus to dissect whether and how the style fulfills that function by looking for patterns and structures of stylistic elements, how the elements relate to each other and possibly even for structures amongst the patterns themselves. Thus the aim is not to singularly dissect style, but to interpret its application. In the analysis here I will employ a combination of both methods for analysis of style. I will also take aid of screen shots capturing important stylistic moments to be able to more concisely focus the analysis and keep it shorter than a classic minutiae descriptive analysis would be.

But before I can begin the stylistic analysis, there is a need to first provide contextual knowledge about concepts of genre, series and historical context.

2-3 GENRE AND GENRE THEORY

Even though the importance of genre (labeling) has been challenged in academia (for example in The Shifting Definitions of Genre), genre theory is of importance as genre defines so much of our everyday interactions with media, both in choosing between texts and in understanding the content. It is often vital to read a text based upon the conditions of its genre, for instance can a floating object in a realistic melodrama be a sign of a dream sequence or the state of mind of a character, whilst the same object in a science fiction story can be an actual plausible part of a there established reality. A genre is thus in a semiotic meaning defined as a code which decides what types of signs can be combined and how they can be combined within a certain category of texts.59 Thus genre is not only an academic field of research, but the norms and conventions of genres have everyday application. Classification is a fundamental aspect of the way in which texts of all kinds are understood. Genre, from the French word for kind or type, is a universally accepted term for categorizing audiovisual narration to help the viewers navigate and choose based on expectations and conventions. Genres are defined through

conventions that are agreed upon by creators, recipients and industry. Knowledge of genre is important for creating texts ourselves, as well as for how and where to distribute them. Genre is the primary way through which the huge range of TV texts are being identified and classified. A creation does not have to be defined by only one genre, neither does one piece define an entire genre; texts shall not be forced into a category but instead use conventions as inspiration both to apply and to challenge. Together with the historical era the definition of a genre will change, every added text will have an impact on these definitions. In the introduction to his book *Genre and Television* Jason Mittell asks why genre labeling matters and then proceeds to answer that “Television genres matter as cultural categories.” He further explains this by stating that “television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found [solely] within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts.” The categories that genres constitute are connected to concepts such as cultural values, social function and implied recipient. Mittell argues that even though many other modes for television categorization are active today, genre is still the most common one: “Through the prevalence of generic mixture and niche segmentation, genres may be even more important today than in previous television eras.” Together with genre definitions connection to historic periods (“changing cultural circumstances bring about generic shifts”), this merits investigations of the possibility of new genres or subgenres emerging from the sitcom. Changes within genres are indicators of societal/social change, because they are dependent on how society sees itself and thus come into being because of social change but might even be part of catalyzing the change. Even though I concur with this view on genre as discourse, I here have to consider genre as mainly a textual and format strategy (and only secondly as part of the system of television production and consumption) to efficiently achieve the purpose of this text.

To choose a genre is to opt for or against a certain emotional experience: expectations on a sitcom differ from those on a procedural. Genres enable audiences to easier organize fan practices. Journalistic critics take help of genres to locate programs within common framework. Of course genre is not only meant for consumers, the industry itself needs genre division to define brands and target audiences through scheduling. In the practice of industries we find some features that are unique to the television medium. Scheduling for instance is not

---

62 Mittell, Jason: *Genre and Television From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.xi
63 ibid, p.xii
64 ibid, p.xiii and p.22
found in any other medium, but it is a cornerstone of television. When and where a program airs impacts even its patterns of narration as for example visible in the structure of daytime soap opera versus the high concept prime time drama. Also, the time of day or type of channel can determine what can be said or shown in the stories. Scheduling is thus a central mechanism for television programmers to distinguish between programs, a practice that as part of genre definition is unparalleled in any other media. The same goes for genre-specific channels, building brands through focusing on genre specific programming, such as SyFy which limits itself to science fiction programs. Despite some differences of media specifics, in the basic foundation terms and genre labels can be transferred from feature films to television series (notable is however that for instance the sitcom is a medium specific genre). Based upon Joachim Friedmanns and Stefan Wilkes four basic functions for categorizing films into genres, Gunther Eschke and Rudolf Bohne transfer these functions onto TV series, creating a useful classification strategy: the audiences emotional expectations, meaning the effect on the viewer (Comedy - laughter, Horror - fear); the heroes main conflict or universal basic conflict which leads the nature of the plot (Procedural - justice, Soap Opera - love); the setting as in location, time and milieu (Medical - hospital); structure and means of narration (Daily Soap - slow moving and long-term). Usually one of these will be dominant enough to characterize the genre, but the four categories are inherently connected to each other. There is thusly a range of indicators that guide the viewer to actively pick the formats and contents that are of interest. However, Eschke and Bohnes classification strategy does not account for style.

But it is not always simple to identify a genre, hybridizations are more common and conventions are questioned (although mixture might be a better term than hybridization, since hybrid implies the combination of two distinct biological species which does not fit this more fluid process). “Genre mixing […] is a cultural process, enacted by industrial personnel, often in response to audience viewing practices.” Generic sections are open to debate and interpretation, genre does not always fit into neat and tidy categories: “genre definitions are no more natural than the texts that they seem to categorize.” This makes even genre theory variable to a degree and not fixed to certain laws; constant change, hybridization and the creators questioning of conventions open up a permanent challenge of genre labeling. But no less is genre theory an excellent tool for our understanding of TV-series. “Genre, then, is not

---

66 Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), p.91-92
67 Mittel, Jason: Genre and Television From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.9
68 ibid, p.1 23
simply important as a way of classifying different modes of artistic expression, but explaining how these different modes of expression can actually create meaning for an audience.”

Criticism against genre (labeling) mainly concerns the notion of putting works of literature, film or any other kind of art in a canonic body, due to the chosen works not necessarily being the best ones as well as generic terms often being imposed retrospectively. For example was the term “Science-Fiction” not coined until the 1920s, but the film Le Voyage Dans La Lune (1902) is still considered under it. Taking the text out of its historical context and imposing a new understanding that might not correlate with the original one “can do violence to our sense of history.” But genre definition is always also a reflection on the society which makes the definition. As earlier pointed out, genres and their definitions change and develop over time, with that the understanding of certain texts might change according to the historic period in which the recipient lives. This does not necessarily mean that only the first, original meaning is more true or authentic than any other. The definition of what a genre might incorporate HAS to change over the years, as more and more texts get added and need to be labeled. With greater mass comes greater variety and a need for redefinition to incorporate those varieties. Certain genres however are historically and culturally dependent, for instance can a Western not exist before 1800 (both in regard to the stories setting and to when the story was written). Another point of critique against genre theory is the different content of the same named genre in different media: “In order to understand contemporary film genres, it is therefore important to recognize that they are often intimately connected with developments in other media. Part of the problem is that while genre terms might cut across different media, it is not the case that they necessarily mean the same thing in each medium.” As the basis of understanding a genre is the knowledge of representative texts within that genre, this understanding can be eschewed by which texts are considered to be representative as well as dependent on the individuals’ memories of the genre. Those memories from one medium might not apply to another medium. Memory is a vital part of understanding genre: “Generic definitions are bound up with memory in different ways. On one hand, generic definitions are related to the processes of remembering and forgetting and, on the other hand, they also operate to produce a sense of the past. If different generations continually revise the films and television shows that are included or excluded from specific genres, it is also the case that the very notion of genre works to establish relationships above

---

72 Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.204
and between different forms of visual media, and so creates senses of lineage and development.” So the development and change within genre categories and the overall definition of what genres constitute is bound to an interlaced play of remembering and forgetting, which is both the most vital and the most critiqued aspect of genre.

2-4 TV SERIES

TV series are a visual storytelling medium. Whilst other storytelling media such as books and movies are internally closed stories and have an ending, thus occupying a closed space of time, TV series have a different duration and are based on an “endless”-concept. The closed stories follow the traditional dramaturgical model, spanning from antique drama theory until today and particularly popular in the Hollywood feature. Knut Hickethier describes this as “Dramaturgie der geschlossenen Form,” which essentially translates to dramaturgy of the closed form. TV series on the other hand have a completely different actual length: from a few episodes to tens of seasons, with episode-length ranging from a couple of minutes to over an hour. Not only the text has a different length, also the creation/production stretches several years and is very dependent on outside resources such as cast and crew, capital and sponsors, network and audience. At the same time, the text has to be produced under incredible time pressure taking into consideration the schedule of its television channel and that much more content needs to be produced in a much shorter time compared to feature films, as well as continuously over a longer period of time. Change of one component could easily alter the whole story midway. This leaves the show in constant risk of being altered from the original vision or even to be left completely unfinished. Hickethier calls this open form, referring to its risk for incompleteness. On one side the narrational structure aimed at infinity gives creators the possibility to tell long ongoing stories and also adjust them to fit outside demands, whilst on the other side leaving the channel that orders the series with both the option to order more episodes or cancel the show whenever they feel it to be adequate. Open dramaturgy is the predominant form in TV with its vast array of serial narratives, as opposed to the feature films closed space of cinema. In TV series, individual episodes are arranged for continuation, ergo open, but simultaneously usually closed in their structure: interaction between characters and the meaning as perceived by the viewer concludes a story in an episode. Thus being of double structure, where the conclusion of an individual episode is in correspondence with the incompleteness of the series as a whole. Whilst this puts the programs at constant risk of

75 Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007), p.116
76 Binder, Nora Annika: Kurzweilige Neurosen Zum Fascinationspotenzial von Ally McBeal und Monk (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2009), p.59
elimination, this openness also becomes one of the mediums greatest assets; for instance, giving the viewer opportunity to join the story late but still understand its premises, giving resolve in one episode whilst also calling the audience back to the screen for more and becoming a continuous part of the viewers’ life. Thus it is able to involve them in a much bigger manner than other storytelling media. Seriality best utilizes the strength of the television medium: "22 hours to tell a story, long-arc characterization, that intimate loop with viewers who watched alone, at home – and then in communion online." \(^\text{77}\)

For a long time the distinction between series and serial had been clear (differentiate here between series as a narrative structure within a TV program, and series as equal to show or program); the actions of the series are concluded after each episode, featuring the same characters yet being independent from stories told in other episodes (for example 21 Jump Street FOX 1987-1991). It was originally aimed at men and featuring more action, as for instance cop shows. Serial was more aimed at women and the episodes were not in themselves concluded. Themes concerned relationships such as love, friendship and family, the most evident example being daily soaps as for example Days Of Our Lives (NBC 1965-). But today those two concepts are seldom divided. The success of the double structure in television series is generally credited to the police series Hill Street Blues (NBC 1981-1987), in which most episodes have an overall story arc concerning for example the main characters relationships spanning the whole season or series as well as subplots such as a murder investigation which will be concluded during the episode. This integration of several stories taking place simultaneously is often referred to as double dramaturgy. A distinction has however to be made for the classic sitcom, here an integral part of the narrative model is a type of re-set button structure: every episode passes from one equilibrium through a disequilibrium back to the same first equilibrium, thus lacking the continuity and development of characters that define the above described dominant model of TV-series narration. Increasingly serial storylines have been added to this model without disturbing it.

In general the television medium is often more experimental with narration structures (comparison here is made between the American mainstream TV and the American aka Hollywood feature film). This is most evident in the prime time drama such as for example Desperate Housewives (ABC 2004-2012), where the main character established in the pilot dies during this first episode only to become the voice that guides the viewer through the suburban drama season after season, dead and yet very much alive.\(^\text{78}\) But comedies have also

\(^{77}\) Nussbaum, Emily: When TV Became Art: Good-bye boob tube, hello brain food; Published December 4th 2009; New York Magazine; http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/; 2012-05-22

\(^{78}\) Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p. 11
become more experimental, such as the unique narrative structure in the successful sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005-2014): through a constant flashback visualizing a story as told by a father telling his children how he met their mother, which in itself is again broken up in different flashbacks and -forwards, as well as laying out hooks for events happening later on in the story the biggest one of course being the meeting of The Mother. Playing with the chronological order like this relies upon the viewers’ capability to edit in the chronology whilst watching, a cornerstone of film viewership, and a sign that the TV audience is accepted as an active participant in the communication process. No longer just glancing over at the screen whilst performing housework, but actively choosing to watch. One of the first sitcoms to employ a more serial approach was *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004). Part of what made this sitcom so popular and successful in the long run was its combination of *serial* and *series* attributes of storytelling: presenting self-contained stories about everyday situations in which the grander narrative, character and relationship developments happened slowly and subtly enough to be enjoyable for occasional viewers, as well as adding reward for the faithful fan with for instance the back and forth between Ross and Rachel making jokes more meaningful when knowing the context of their relationship. Story is thus not sacrificed for jokes, but adds to them as well as there being room for drama and emotions other than laughter. Another example of TV playing with narrative structures and the heightened genre development is *Ally McBeal* (FOX 1997-2002), the series is credited with creating the genre term dramedy, a combination of drama and comedy.79 The original vision for the series, similar as in the later *How I Met Your Mother*, was to let the main character share their thoughts and feelings with an added aspect of the characters imaginative fantasy world being openly presented to the viewer (the most famous example being the dancing baby, also one of the first examples of so called postdependent or 3D comedy).80 This was however soon abandoned for the benefit of an all-knowing outside narrator. Sharing the imaginative mind of the main character as a dominant story-telling device was successfully realized in another hybrid genre show, the medical dramedy *Scrubs* (ABC 2001-2010). Hybrid genres, particularly with comedy, have become more common. This hybridization leads to problems in defining the series genre, specifically whether comedy can still be seen as their genre or has to be seen as their mode.81 For expansion on comedy as mode versus as genre, see chapter 2-5 “Television Comedy and Sitcom.” On the other hand have dialogues between series become much more obvious, a fundamental part of the New Comedy theory is the text referring to other texts (see chapter 3-

---

79 Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: *Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien*, Praxis Film Band 52 (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010), p.90
3 “New Comedy and The Office (US)”). An overly apparent example can be found in Raising Hope (FOX 2010-) which on several occasions refers to the creators previous series My Name Is Earl (FOX 2005-2009). Additionally episode 314 “Modern Wedding” was made into a homage to Modern Family. The change in style was explained through making the episode part of a wedding video production, but in the intro-sequence the reference to the other series is made verbal and then followed up by changing the usual opening theme sequence into one similar to Modern Family’s opening theme. Making this episode also an excellent example for the series’ place in New Comedy. Raising Hope is a recent example that proves the validity of the New Comedy theory and its claim of the increasing metatextual nature of the medium. This metatextual nature is also exemplified in episode 418 “Dinner with Tropes,” which is concerned with reflecting upon the sitcom series double goal to imitate real life situations as well as reference its own generic history. This demonstrates how quotations and references make influences more visible.

2-5 TELEVISION HISTORY AND SITCOM

In the 70s and 80s the sitcom genre dominated the ratings.82 Even though the overall ratings of sitcom have been comparably low this decade, it is still one of the most produced and consumed formats and generally regarded as “the most popular genre in America.”83 Besides sitcom series being the most syndicated and most often rerun programs, as well as most successfully sold to other countries (without being remade), comedy is also the most produced of the scripted formats. Generally the five biggest American television stations - which are NBC, CBS, ABC, The CW and FOX, incidentally also being the ones producing most original series - will order more comedy pilots than drama pilots (being the two strongest genre competitors in the scripted series category). For example have CBS and NBC as the two channels who order most series overall ordered more comedies than dramas in both 2012 and 2013.84 “The sitcom is one of television’s founding genres – having existed on radio before making the transition to television.”85 Thus it is pertinent to the study of sitcom today that one first explores its history. In this chapter I will give a summary of US television history focused on comedy and sitcom in particular.

In recent years American television has become the beacon which contemporary television all over the (western) world follows.86 It is not surprising that the American

---

82 Winzenburg, Stephen: TV’s Greatest Sitcoms (Baltimore: Publish America, 2004), 243-6
86 Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas: Introduction: Comparative European Perspectives on Television History – Aims and Audience; In Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): A European Television History (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p.4
television industry would turn out to be the strongest and develop the fastest considering that
the mediums greatest developments and actual entrance into households and everyday lives
took place in the aftermath of World War II. Whilst all other industrial nations had been
severely weakened and needed to focus on rebuilding, the US as the winning nation with the
lowest losses, in soldiers and of course no civilian losses as well as no damage to industry or
land, could refocus all its industrial capability from ensuring military superiority to the
manufacture and development of leisure items. \(^\text{87}\) Thus “television’s entrance into American
live coincided with the beginning of the era of peace and prosperity.”\(^\text{88}\)

The television industry is in existence thanks to the radio on which it depended for both
the technical development itself, the channels and the content, as well as the financial
resources. The first of America’s television networks were also its strongest radio networks -
NBC, CBS and ABC - since they were the only ones able to afford the financing of television
during the depression in the early 1930s. For a long time these powerful channels had barely
any competition worth mentioning. Public service channels did exist since 1952, but without
any success until the government support came in 1967. Otherwise radio had to provide the
capital to fund a television channel due to the FCCs (Federal Communications Commission,
regulating any type of media output, founded in 1927) ban on television commercials. NBC
was the first company to show a commercial on their television channel, the WNBT, after
successfully pushing the FCC to lift the ban in 1941.

In the beginning it was easy to fill the channels with programming, simply transferring
the contents of the respective channel’s radio shows over into the new medium, leading to a
predominantly theatrical style. The 50s hadn’t offered any competition for the powerful three,
even though the first steps at trying to create Pay-TV had been taken, pushed by Hollywood
after heightened loses at the Box-Office due to the New York base of television. Successful
variation in the channel selection had to wait until 1972 when Time-Life launched their Home
Box Office (HBO) as the first well-functioning Pay-TV channel, sending their programming
without commercial breaks for an extra fee via cable. 1979 saw the rise of assortment, with
children oriented Nickelodeon, sports channel ESPN and the CNN news broadcaster. The
creation of identity and strong image had become of utter importance for the television
channels and remains so until today. All of these channels were based on concepts that had
proven successful earlier on. Only the creation of MTV had to wait until 1981 because the bad
relationship between the musicians union and the television industry had allowed the radio to
maintain the monopoly on music. Sitcom is the one genre employed on all channels and used


\(^\text{88}\) ibid, p.2
to form brand identity by aiming the texts at specific groups of viewers. Therefore often clustering together compatible series in a prime-time slot such as NBC’s “Must See” Thursday nights during the 90s (2006 slogan: “Comedy Night Done Right” – since then including amongst others *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*). MTV used *Beavis and Butthead* (1996-) to go beyond the music video as channel content, as well as to present the humor and world of their target audience.

Whilst determining actual dates for when a medium has reached a position of power in the audiences’ life is always hard, in *Watching TV – Six Decades of American Television* the authors Harry Castleman and Walter Podrazik make a convincing case for the year 1953. They base this on three birthdays, one of which also illuminates the importance of the sitcom genre in everyday life and thus illustrates the sitcoms immensely important role for TV culture. The first ones were the birthdays of an actual and a fictional child: the actress Lucille Ball, portraying Lucy in the popular sitcom *I love Lucy* (CBS 1951–1957), had a son both in real life and on the show. Both births created great enthusiasm with the American television audience, making the episode the highest rated single television event to that point, thus representing the American viewers’ complete acceptance of TV and the represented characters as part of their daily lives. It also symbolizes the importance that the sitcom holds in the viewers lives until today. The third so called birth was the election of Eisenhower for president and Nixon for vice-president. The process had been closely covered by television representing the governments’ complete and utter acceptance of the medium. TV emerged as more than just a mere source of entertainment, it also became a serious medium for delivering information.

As to the creation of TV series, just as game shows and sports broadcasts were copied from the radio, so were also these serialized stories. In the infancy of television, the 30s to the 50s, most of the programming stemmed directly from the radio. Everything from the daily soap operas to the most successful (mostly so called ethnic-)sitcoms as *I love Lucy* were not only inspired by the radio shows but also drew the big stars of broadcasting from radio over to television. Actress Lucille Ball had gained more fame through her CBS Radio Sitcom *My favorite husband* (1953–1955) than through any of her Hollywood-movies. When the radio show was canceled she and her husband, musician Desi Arnaz, started filming their TV sitcom *I love Lucy*. This was the first TV series not to be broadcast live from New York but pre-taped in Los Angeles and also the first one to make use of the now iconic “three-headed
monster,” the three-camera set-up with studio audience. “The three-camera set-up meant that in any filmed exchange between two characters, one camera would shoot both characters together, while the other two covered close-ups of each of the characters.” The series not only became a raging success but it also made the couple the first television superstars. Many other shows were inspired by its concept of family and the dominion of the sitcom began. Additionally, the shows style would define the look of the sitcom for decades to come.

With the contained space of the studio set the sitcom was cheap to produce. The then established mode of production (stage, multi-camera, switched-live editing, audience and laugh track) would remain dominant, and even though the first single-camera sitcom aired in 1948 (The Life of Riley, NBC) the mode of production didn’t become competitive until the late 1990s and didn’t bloom until the 2000s. Today, both are roughly equally in use, often enough mixing the two, but the pure form of classic sitcom production (stage with live-audience, comparably static cameras and live broadcast) is rather rare. Live-broadcasts are basically only employed for special episodes such as the 30 Rock (NBC 2006-2013) special live episodes in 2010 (504 “Live Show”) and 2012 (619 “Live from Studio 6H”). If the series is recorded in front of a live studio audience this will be indicated by a voice over announcement at the beginning of each episode.

The technical differences in production also influence the style. The performance of the actors depends on whether laugh-track is recorded live or edited in later or completely abandoned. Between multi-camera and single-camera, the stylistic differences are instantly visible: how close the camera can get or whether ceiling and the forth wall can be shown or not. Butler discusses these differences at length in his book Television Style. However, changes in mode of production have also led to the sitcom becoming “the second most expensive programming to produce, with its requirement for actors, writers and sets.” It should be said here that single-camera sitcoms have become the more common form, since the filming is less strenuous on the actors as well as less restricting since the locations can more easily be moved between – but often it is still supposed to look as if it were filmed in a classic sitcom manner. For example, How I Met Your Mother strictly applies the forth wall and room hierarchy, both in the bar and apartments, as used in classic sitcom despite being filmed in a single camera mode of production, thus essentially being a multi-cam hybrid.

Changing definitions of what a genre houses (in terms of themes, characters and setting rather than visual style) become very logic and vivid in reading the history of television

---

93 ibid, p.39
94 Butler, Jeremy: Television Style (Routledge, 2010, New York)
comedy as written by Michael V. Tueth in his book *Laughter in the Living Room: just as the outward circumstances, such as a country’s political and social situation, changes so changes also what the genre needs to show to let the viewer feel reflected or reassured (depending on what is needed in this particular period in time) and thus stay interested. Whilst up until the 50s the comedy-variety shows were the main form of televised comedy, from there on in the sitcom would become dominant, solely accompanied by the new form of variety, the host and the sketch centered Late Night Show. “As television reached out across America, it soon became clear that the viewers preferred the milder format of situation comedy rather than the raucous revelry of the comedy-variety show.”96 With the social and political circumstances so also the focus of sitcoms changed. The 50s were filled by marriage- or domestic-sitcoms like *I love Lucy* mirroring the return to normal family life and the then normative husband and wife gender roles. The 60s came with escapist-sitcoms such as *Gilligans Island* (CBS 1964-1967) and nostalgia like *Bonanza* (NBC 1959-1973), brought on by the need to escape the nightmare of political and social upheaval set off by the Kennedy-assassination. The event had turned America during one weekend “from a print-and-radio-nation (we read and heard the news) to a television nation (we saw the funeral),”97 letting television provide viewers both with the bad news and the way out into a simpler world of escapist fantasies to the old west or wholesome small town life. The 70s and predominantly the 80s came with workplace-sitcom such as *M*A*S*H* (FOX 1972-1983) and *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993) with a more sophisticated and witty dialog. The workplace was a concept long combined with the marriage-sitcom that finally managed to come into its own right, presenting a new kind of “family” and being the most successful subgenre of television comedy considering their long original runs and long afterlife in syndication. After the workplace-sitcom had started to test the boundaries both plot- and character-wise, the 90s urban ensemble-sitcom got to portray the more cynic big city life, centering on predominantly a group of *Friends*. Just as the Americans themselves moved back into the urban areas to better accommodate the need for being close to the job and due to the cities being perceived as safer, the sitcom characters also moved into the cities. The city would, as for example New York in *Seinfeld* (NBC 1990-1998), almost become a character in its own right hosting in its womb the often eccentric urbanites that even with their quirks were something close to role models.

It seems that the characters’ function of the role model is of utter importance. Following the path of comedy illustrates that the most successful comedies of their time featured the role models of their time, from the attractive socially liberal couple similar to the Kennedys in *The

---

97 ibid, p.87
*Dick Van Dyke Show* to the emancipated, yet neurotic *Ally McBeal*. The characters would become the embodiment of their time. Sitcom reflects the kinds of relationships which the broader society finds normal. Television allows us to invite the world into our living room, and thus role models visit viewers at home and become something like friends. In the final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977) Mary said: “What is a family? A family is people who make you feel less alone and really loved. Thank you for being my family.”98 This sentiment has held up on screen until today. In finding new ways to bring the viewers and onscreen characters closer together, the employment of documentary style has become a useful device. The series employing documentary devices are stretching through all the different themes and sub-genres. But with what it seems like a focus on either work or family or a combination thereof, rather than simply a random group of friends. It is thus quite obvious how the characters belong to each other and their relationships are conditioned by biology or setting. Overall, the original idea of marriage or family as main theme for a comedy series does still have much success today with such shows as *Malcolm In The Middle* (FOX 2000-2006), *Modern Family*, *The Middle* (ABC 2009-), *Mike and Molly* (CBS, 2010-), and *Suburgatory* (ABC 2011-). “In the 1990s comedies the gang in the office or the friends who hung around the apartment became each other’s family.”99 The surrogate family of friends is still a successful form, for example in shows like *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-), and *New Girl* (FOX 2011-). But clear workplace comedies (which in a way also build surrogate families) such as *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Just Shoot Me* (NBC 1997-2003) and *Ground Floor* (TBS 2013-) are also plentiful.

**2-6 COMEDY AND SITCOM**

Sitcom is the dominant form of American primetime TV, providing a huge amount of texts for over 60 years. The range of the field comedy is enormous and connects to a vast array of variations within the forms it fills and the most popular genre to use for hybridization. Paired with the academic neglect that the genre has suffered, this makes comedy one of the hardest genres to define concisely.100 “The idea of comedy as something that ‘makes one laugh’ is not only reductive but not necessarily true. The term comedy, even in the stricter sense of television series, shelters a number of texts very different in nature.”101 Despite all the different kinds of comedy and all the partial definitions (from humour theory102 over Hobbes’ superiority theory applied on aggressive jokes and Bergson’s mechanization theory for farce

---

99 ibid, p.182
100 King, Geoff: *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.18
all the way to Freud’s sexual theory for dirty jokes), a complete and satisfying definition has yet to be developed.

Geoff King tries in his book *Film Comedy* to offer up a couple of basic definitions of comedy: “A comedy might initially be defined as a work that is designed in some way to provoke laughter or humour on the part of the viewer. This is the dominant definition in contemporary usage […]. Comedy, in this respect, has something in common with forms such as horror and the ‘weepie’: defined to a significant extent according to the emotional reaction it is intended to provoke.” This is a concise, but not an exhaustive definition, limited due to it demanding to be understood solely from the point of view of consumption - what is intended might not happen and the other way around. King further states that “to be clearly defined as a comedy, a film should be dominated to a substantial extent by the comic dimension […] but the exact balance varies considerably from one example to another.”

King suggests that instead of as a genre, comedy in film might best be understood as a mode, “in which a variety of different materials can be approached, rather than any relatively more fixed or localized quantity. Any genre might be treated as a subject for comedy. A variety of possibilities exist. A western might include some comedy without altering its primary definition as a western.”

To explore the relationship between mode and genre King introduces the use of the term comedy as either adjective or a noun, which he exemplifies by making the distinction between a comedy in a western milieu and a comic Western. As this does not lead him to a more comprehensive definition either, King circles back to the basics: the first association made from the word comedy is the thought of something that is funny or makes us laugh. But it is not always agreeable what is comic, and therefore to describe a film or TV-series as just comic leads to the realization that things are never just comic, but only “in particular ways and for particular reasons.”

Thus, comedy “can only be understood in relation to a number of specific contexts, including many of our basic expectations and assumptions about the world around us.”

King ultimately says that the closest his book comes to a definition

is that comedy tends to involve departures of a particular kind – or particular kinds – from what are considered to be the ‘normal’ routines of life of the social group in question. In order to be marked out as comic, the events represented – or the mode of representation – tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world. Comedy often lies in the gap between the two, which can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration. […] Comedy can result from a sense of things

---

104 Ibid, p.2
105 Ibid, p.2
106 Ibid, p.2
107 Ibid, p.4
108 Ibid, p.4
being out of place, mixed up or not quite right, in various ways. One set of examples is found in films that derive much of their comedy from temporal, geographical or other forms of displacement.109

What then, if we instead look for a definition of the television specific genre sitcom – situation comedy? Brett Mills explains in *Television Sitcom* that “a standard definition of sitcom [is] concentrating on the recurring set-up and characters, the happy ending and the fact that individual episodes rarely refer to events in previous ones.”110 Similarly to King, Mills criticizes simplified definitions that for instance ignore the content in looking at nothing but the structure, a structure that could very well occur in almost any serial narrative. Mills adds that genre definition is always somewhat personal, dependent on previous knowledge (and cultural circumstances), thus it can be complicated to draw the line of when a work no longer is part of that genre. What makes genre meaningful is the existence “of core characteristics which would be agreed to by most people.”111 The sitcom genre has quite many of those, in fact it is the genre with the most agreed upon characteristics ranging from the laugh track and three-camera setup to casting choices and program lengths, as well as typical stories and narrative tropes. Basically, the traditional sitcom will be a half hour long (20-30 minutes), in a static setting employing stereotypical characters. They lack the ability to change themselves or their circumstances despite constantly trying, and thus repeat the same or similar actions in a comic fashion, leading to a constant return to status quo (re-set button). Additionally the characters will frequently use catch-phrases: “This is a concise way of revealing their idiosyncrasies, which the audience will need to appreciate as swiftly as possible within the brief duration of each episode.”112 The comic will be aided by a laugh track which also forces the actors to take pauses between their lines to leave room for the live-audiences or canned laughter thus the performance differs clearly from other genres. The theatric effect of the laugh track will be enhanced by the placement of the camera as a forth wall which also somewhat hinders the mobility of the picture. This also places the audience at a constant distance as well as dictating how characters can move in the space with entrances being very obvious placed within the rooms’ hierarchy. In fact there is no other genre that employs hierarchy within the settings this strongly. However, the laughtrack has been phased out since the 1970s, so its absence or presence can no longer be argued to be the most important signifier of sitcom (style).113

---

111 ibid, p.26
One last remark shall be made on the difference between comedy and sitcom. As mentioned before, comedy can be seen as “a mode drafted onto something else, and its funniness is limited by the requirements of the dominant genre.”\textsuperscript{114} The comic moments cannot undermine the coherence of, for example, a drama or a western. This is possible since humour exists both within and outside the medium. Comedy as a genre “suggests material whose primary purpose is one of funniness, usually created by specific people with that aim, and understood as so by audiences.”\textsuperscript{115} The sitcom has a deliberate production process that needs to be understood as comic by the audience, the “nature of the genre, and the successful cueing of genre expectations, is vital for successful comedic communication.”\textsuperscript{116} Comedy is not necessarily a clear cut genre but can act as a mode; sitcom however is definitely and always a genre:

one of the ways in which sitcoms function […] is that it is produced and understood as a form which is as distinct as possible from seriousness, upholding the validity of the serious in the process. Because of this, seeing comedy as a mode – as it conventionally is seen within Film Studies and the analysis of other media – is difficult to argue for […] television comedy generally, and the sitcom specifically. If genres differ from modes because they are groups of forms who share similar characteristics and whose intentions and pleasures result from an understanding of the genre and the specific characteristics and whose intentions and pleasures result from an understanding of the genre and the specific characteristics within them, then the sitcom is clearly a genre, even if it uses the characteristics of the comedy mode as part of its makeup.\textsuperscript{117}

The simplest definition of the genre sitcom is visible when picking apart the term. Situation comedy: a situation is a position, locale or a state of affairs, the latter can be seen as a metaphoric extension of the first,\textsuperscript{118} a story about this (stable) situation told with nothing but comic intent in a pattern of repetition, is a sitcom. Thus sitcom can employ other modes or styles because it is a genre in its own right. One of these styles is the documentary, as will be explored in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{114}Mills, Brett: \emph{Television Sitcom} (London: BFI Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 2008), p.18
\textsuperscript{115}ibid, p.17
\textsuperscript{116}ibid, p.17
\textsuperscript{117}ibid, p.19
\textsuperscript{118}Savorelli, Antonio: \emph{Beyond Sitcom New Directions in American Television Comedy} (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010), p.21
3 Previously on...

Instead of just relaying the two theories about contemporary sitcom, “comedy verite” and New Comedy, I will in this chapter fuse the summary of these theories with the analysis of the The Office (UK & US) and Arrested Development as examples of TV series produced during the first part of this decade that abandoned the sitcom style for the benefit of documentary style. I aim to relay the term “comedy verite” as used in Mills and Thompson based on those analyses. The last section of this chapter will present Savorellis New Comedy theory, using the series explored throughout this thesis as examples, as well as comparing The Office (US) to its originator. Thus I aim to present the early series of the here explored category alongside the theories that they have (partially) given origin to, as well as their relationship to each other. These shall serve as the basis to which the later explored series will be compared.

3-1 THE OFFICE (UK) AND COMEDY VERITE

Whilst The Office (UK BBC 2001-2003) wasn’t the first series to employ documentary style as an overall style for the entire series, it most certainly popularized the application of the style to the sitcom genre. Its primarily critical success (the first non-American series to win a Golden Globe for Best Comedy), led to the adaptation of the series in several countries, such as Stromberg (Pro7 2004-) in Germany or the Swedish Kontoret (TV4 2012; which also simultaneously is a spinoff from the popular Swedish comedy series Solsidan TV4 2010-). NBC bought the rights for the US market and remade the series adopting the cultural specifics of the US private sector workplace, yet still exploring the same themes and following the daily lives of the office employees of a fictitious paper-industry company with a similar character setup circling around a very similar office manager who perceives himself in a much more positive light than how he actually behaves, as well as making use of the same office-romance tensions and general character types used in the British original. The implementation of markers of the receiver culture made this one of the most successful adaptations of a British program for the US market. It is important to mention the original The Office in the context of exploring the utilization of documentary style in contemporary American comedy TV series due to it, and its remakes, being the series that popularized the application of documentary style to the comedy genre.

The Office was created by Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais. The inspiration came most likely also from the popular British docusoaps of the 90s, which are part of what made

---

the concept successful since the TV viewer was used to a similar format. Those types of Reality series revolved around regular people in regular jobs (for example see footnote). 120

Creator Gervais also plays one of the central characters, office manager David Brent, in this series about the daily lives of the office employees of the fictitious Wernham Hogg Paper Company. Themes explored are social circumstances, social clumsiness, and the trivialities of human behavior, connected to self-importance, conceit, frustration and desperation. The documentary style of the series comes from within the diegesis: a fictitious BBC documentary film team follows the staff and its manager as the branch faces being closed by a company in the process of downsizing. This also means that the presence of the camera is often acknowledged, and brings a certain style with it dominated by a slightly shaky camera that eagerly moves around the space, aiming to follow the action as well as filming more private sequences from slightly obscured positions and frequently employing one-on-one interviews between one of the characters and the camera/implied interviewer. “Hand-held camerawork, long a staple of documentary and news footage, tends to be less steady and jumpier than with mounted cameras, as camera operators need to capture unplanned action on the run.” 121 Through the handheld camera though, “small pieces of action are missed as the camera attempts to keep up with what’s going on” 122 as the camera pans between action and reaction. The four most common types of shots are wide shots of the office landscape (Still 1), half to close ups of the people in action in this office landscape, close ups of the face of the person being interviewed (Still 2) and the obscured shot (Still 3).

The Office is meant to be understood as a documentary team collecting material for a film, the series itself then is supposed to be the collected material arranged in a meaningful narrative at the time of its collection. This is heightened by the unpolished look of the picture and the lack of extradiegetic inlays – there is no music, no voice-over, no text or other digital inlays. The cast consists of rather unknown actors and the picture is lower in quality and darker (does not seem to be specially lit), thus also having a darker tone that comes closer to

120 EXAMPLE: Airport; British documentary television series; London Heathrow Airport; fly-on-the-wall series following a handful of passengers and staff based at the airport, who work for either the airlines, the animal reception centre, the ambulance, fire and police services at the airport, customs and immigration, resident press etc. Different airlines/staff almost every season, some are recurring though. First season of Airport aired on BBC2 in 1996. Specifically parodied in the Little Britain spinoff Come Fly with Me (BBC 2010)
121 Mittell, Jason: Television and American Culture (Oxford, 2009), p. 194

37
the British docusoaps. This heightens the styles implications of the series being a documentary format. Despite its large critical acclaim the series was canceled after two seasons with six episodes each and a 45-minute Christmas special. This final episode expands on the myth of the production, as a different documentary crew visits the characters after the documentary film aired to see what they’re up to. Instead of the finished product we get to see its consequences.

In its basic setup The Office belongs within the subgenre of the workplace-sitcom, being entirely set in a workplace environment. The workplace-sitcom had long existed as an integral part of the marriage-sitcom, following the husband at work whilst the wife is up to something else at home. During the 70s and predominantly the 80s, the workplace-sitcom gained a life of its own. In this sub-genre writers soon experimented with a more sophisticated and witty dialog, often also presenting a new kind of “family,” away from blood bonds and consisting of people that the main characters spent the dominant time of the day with. This did not necessarily only mean colleagues, but for instance also costumers such as the regular bar patrons in Cheers. However, whilst set in a workplace environment the workplace sitcom will deal less or not at all with professional issues and instead focus on the different relationships between those residing in the setting: “in workplace comedy characters are constantly at work, even though they rarely seem to get any work done. In the end, the place itself dominates the scene and the action.” Sitcom with a workplace setting fairs generally well, many series had long original runs and a long afterlife in syndication (for example M*A*S*H, Spin City, Just Shoot Me). Considering that workplace is generally perceived as the most experimental, or experiment friendly, subgenre of sitcom, it is logical that the first major innovation in sitcom style, since the invention of the genres style through the three-camera setup in the 50s, should take place in the workplace setting. All the documentary style HBO series predating The Office have a strong workplace component focused on the entertainment industry. Similarly are the road-paving hybrids such as Ally McBeal and Scrubs set in a professional workplace environment. Stylistically the first noticeable differences to the classic sitcom is the abandonment of laugh-track and bringing the audience closer to the action by ditching the theatrical set and instead placing the camera in the midst of the room/action – through this variable camera position the camera no longer acts to cover the fourth wall, “meaning that camera set-ups can be more complex, and narrative spaces are fuller.” Also, the characters in The Office are aware of the existence of the camera, contrary to the

---

characters in the classic sitcom which aren’t aware of the observing audience. This awareness is most obvious through three types of interaction with the camera:

1 - The interview situations: although the interviewer is never heard or seen, it is obvious by the rhetoric that most of those scenes are answers to questions posed before the cut. Function both as commentary on the surrounding scene/s and as segways between scenes.

2 - Acknowledging the camera within the situation: such as the manager David Brent making sure that the camera is on him when telling a joke or doing something he thinks will be funny or cool, at times he will even force employees to reenact conversations that had played out in the absence of the camera team. Another example is salesman Tim (Martin Freeman) who keeps looking at the camera, as if to exchange glances that signify him wanting to get away from the uncomfortable situation and it seems he is looking for an ally in the outside observer.

3 - The third type is not quite an interaction, but more of an avoidance of interaction: Often enough characters aim to hide a conversation or some behavior from the observing eye of the camera – to filter the outside worlds perception of them – in these instances the camera will record them from a partially obscured spot such as from behind half-closed window blinds or from behind a houseplant.

For *The Office*, but to a lesser extent in the other series employing the documentary style, it is also important that the editing differs from continuity editing (editing style developed through classic Hollywood feature film that aims to hide the mediation) and instead employs an editing style most commonly seen in observational documentary films. Instead of cutting between shots from different camera angles, the handheld camera pans between the protagonists. In continuity editing, when a character looks at the camera, the cameras position implies the position of the character to which the first one reacts. In *The Office* however, when a character looks into the camera they are looking at the actual camera aiming to bond with the audience behind it and not at an implied second character.

In the article “Comedy Verite: Contemporary Sitcom Form”125 Brett Mills analyses *The Office* (UK) and its style (without explicitly stating that he aims to explore the “style” as he instead mainly calls it “form”), tracing the root of the style to the documentary film tradition Cinéma Vérité. Cinéma Vérité stands in correlation and opposition to Direct Cinema; both were initially created through filmmakers’ desire to directly capture “reality” and to represent it truthfully, as well as to question the relationship between cinema and “reality.”

---

125 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (*Screen* 45, Spring 1, 2004)
The inception of both traditions was dependent on the technological development of cameras into smaller handheld devices with lighter weight, crystal sync audio recording in the late 1950s. This enabled filmmakers to directly follow the action, recording events as they were happening. The style of Direct Cinema is strictly observational, assuming that the subjects eventually will forget the presence of the camera and behave naturally; additionally no voice-over or any other kind of outside narration is used to influence the audience. Cinéma Vérité has resemblances to the Direct Cinema, such as the handheld camera style and a mutual concern with social and ethical questions. Essentially they are two opposing ways in trying to achieve the same goal, the presentation of reality. Generally film historians will place Direct Cinema as the North American, and Cinéma Vérité as the French version of the movement. The main difference is that Cinéma Vérité not only acknowledges the existence of the camera in the situation but that the camera here actually acts as a catalyst to provoke or reveal, as well as force reflection such as in the final episode of *The Office* where the characters are shown handling the outfall from the airing of the documentary film. Thus Cinéma Vérité is interactive and Direct Cinema purely observational. Whilst the aim of Direct Cinema was to capture real life without intruding, to impartially observe without interfering, Cinéma Vérité is defined through recording true events but with an explicit viewpoint to be conveyed through the work. What essentially sets them apart is Cinéma Vérités acknowledgement of the cameras presence and its impact on the events.

It is this tradition of Cinéma Vérité to which Brett Mills relates *The Office* in his analysis. In specifying the relationship of the series to a certain tradition of documentary film, he highlights the fact that the abandoning of the aspects of the traditional sitcom form for the benefit of the characteristics of in this case documentary, does not mean that the characteristics of all types of documentary are adopted. The conventions that differentiate between different types of documentaries are also in motion when reapplying the documentary form to a fiction text. Thus, stating that a series employs a documentary style is actually too general a statement, warranting the further analysis of the texts. For *The Office* then, it is important to note that beyond the use of a handheld camera, interviews and hidden angles to indicate the other genre by style, *The Office* also clearly engages with the tension between the camera as objective record and the effects of filming – a trait explicitly used within Cinéma Vérité. In fact, this tension becomes essential to *The Office* as much of the humour in the series relies on the tension of the acknowledgement of mediation for its effects. From his analyses of *The Office* Mills suggests a development of what might be

---

126 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (*Screen* 45, Spring 1, 2004), p.75
termed “comedy verite,” “in which the visual characteristics of verite have been adopted by sitcom for comedic purposes.”

For him it is not only a style, but “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 cinema verite.”

Thus the texts’ ability to engage with other media forms becomes pertinent, both for The Office and “comedy verite” the gap between the presentation of informational television and its content is of concern.

To fully understand the text it demands from the audience experience with other genres: “Comedy Verite […] is comedy for audiences raised on television formats.”

A claim that can also be made for New Comedy. This metatextual engagement relates the texts within Mills’ “comedy verite” to Savorellis New Comedy, a form which on several levels demands its audience to know of other texts. Mills concludes his reasoning by stating that “comedy verite not only represents the logical conclusion to contemporary developments in television forms […]; it also suggests that the sitcom, a form forever maligned for its stability, offers a site for subtle, yet powerful, critiques of television media.”

Thus the acknowledgement of the mediation process is a corner stone of “comedy verite.”

### 3.2 ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT AND COMEDY VERITE

Building upon Mills’ theory of “comedy verite” Ethan Thompson further explores the term and aims to expand its definition by relating it to American productions, with a focus on Arrested Development and Curb Your Enthusiasm. The main difference in Thompson’s definition of the term “comedy verite” to Mills’ is Thompson seeing it as a mode of production “that is being adopted for its efficiency, visual complexity and semiotic clout” and “that can be selectively employed within more traditional styles or can even be embraced as a distinct alternative to the standard multicamera and single-camera modes of production.”

Focusing on the production side, Thompson presents technical and economical background to the mode – proving that the insertion of documentary style into sitcom is equally dependent on technological progress as the birth of both the classic sitcom and the documentary traditions of Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema were. He finds through his selection of series two textual reasons to employ the documentary style: one being “necessitated by the lack of standard preproduction scripting,” i.e. largely improvised

---

127 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (Screen 45, Spring 1, 2004), p.75
128 ibid, p.75
129 ibid, p.76f
130 ibid, p.78
131 ibid, p.78
132 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007), p.63
133 ibid, p.63
134 ibid, p.70
(exemplified with *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), the other one being “the verité mode of production as deliberate stylistic choice.” Arrested Development falls into the latter category.

Arrested Development (FOX 2003-2006; Netflix 2013-) chronicles the life of the dysfunctional Bluth family and their strive to save their company; summarized at the beginning of every episode by the voice-over narrator: “Now the story of a wealthy family who lost everything, and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together. It’s Arrested Development.” Whilst this introduction already puts one of the sons into focus, and Michael (Jason Bateman) will indeed be the center or filter of the show, the series eagerly provides many simultaneously evolving storylines and gives every family member something meaningful to do each episode. All characters develop and each one has their own agency. The series features extreme characters and essentially enables the audience to laugh at rich people for being stupid, as its title not only refers to the fact that their housing development company had to pause (arrest) its latest development after CEO George Sr. (Jeffrey Tambor – an actor familiar with the documentary style mode of production due to previously starring in *The Larry Sanders Show*) was arrested for embezzlement, but also refers to the fact that all family members have not developed as human beings because of their wealth. With accounting fraud being the basis for the crisis in which we enter this family’s life, the series addresses an issue that was relevant for its time (in the wake of Enron and connecting accounting frauds). This type of actuality was expanded in hints of political satire such as the storyline about building houses in Iraq. In addition it is the series of the here explored texts that features the highest socio-economic class.

*Arrested Development* unites domestic- and workplace-setting, as both narrative settings are closely connected and entwined, the series resembles more the early combination of domestic- and workplace-sitcom. The setting therefore presents a clear difference to *The Office*, which is (predominantly) contained to the office building, whilst *Arrested Development* is moving between many locations with a few stable ones such as the Bluth company office, the banana stand and more private locations such as the model unit home, and mother Lucille’s (Jessica Walter) apartment. *Arrested Development* also spends, contrary to *The Office*, a lot of time outdoors. Whilst only family members are active characters, many of Michael’s storylines evolve around professional issues. What also sets the series apart from sitcom is that not only story and characters display evolution and continuation, but also the jokes. In fact, many jokes are treated like storylines, either compiling into being more

---

135 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (*Velvet Light Trap* 60, Fall 2007), p.70
136 Ron Howard, voice over, Arrested Development (FOX 2003-2006), beginning of every episode except season4 on Netflix which instead uses this opening phrase to present which family member will be the point of view filter of the episode
meaningful or funny for each evolution of the joke or building up to a great finish and thus paying of later instead of or as well as instantly. An example for this is Busters loss of his hand due to it being bit of by a seal in 212 “Hand to God,” predicted by him throughout the preceding episodes of that season often using or being around hand-related jokes, as well as different types of hands and seals, such as furniture or toys.

In the pilot episode we are introduced to the characters, setting, issues as well as the style that will be held throughout the series (with exception of the fourth season on Netflix which approaches storytelling through a different chronology, all the episodes revolving around the same events but from different points of views announced by the narrator in each opening theme and can thus be viewed in any order the audience wishes to as opposed to the static order of previous seasons). The visual style clearly stems from a single camera approach of production. The cameras are mainly handheld which frees up the comedy: a free camera can follow the action to many different places – not only many more locations overall than traditional sitcom, but many more outside locations. The handheld camera is acting seemingly independent of a studio set. Similarly as in The Office the handheld camera in Arrested Development comes with many zooms and movements rather than the clean cuts and steady framing as in classic studio/multi-cam sitcom. But Arrested Development is making use of more traits of continuity editing, such as employing reaction shots. This has implications for the disparities in style between the two. The use of editing to shape the story is a trait of Direct Cinema, instead of Cinéma Vérité. The series differs greatly in setting and character relationships from the workplace centered The Office, but they both have a rather big ensemble cast and not only employ the documentary style but actively acknowledge it, albeit in very different ways. As stated previously, in The Office we follow the work of a documentary film crew collecting material for a movie through viewing that material put together in a meaningful narrative. Arrested Development is through several indicators made to look like a finished program, and within which other programs are being made about the same group of people (ultimately like the play within the play as established by Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and serves a similar type of commenting function). An example of this is a TV-special about the family as part of the in-series-universe program Scandal Makers, employing one of the family members as an actor. Parts of it as well as its production are being presented, thus turning into an inherently self-referential text: a show within a show within a show. The fictitious texts within the series Arrested Development are often also called Arrested Development, which can cause some confusion – misunderstandings, confusions and double meaning of word or phrases are however a mayor theme of the series, making the
naming choice valid. The main difference in the two series approach to the meaning of the documentary style is thus that *The Office* becomes a byproduct of a production whilst *Arrested Development* is the final product. Thus the mediation is not as strongly communicated and disparities between mediation and reality (as in the cameras presence impact on behavior) are not highlighted or even made visible.

In the case of *Arrested Development* the documentary conventions used are signifying the series aim to seem like a finished product. The most strongly employed devices to signify the series being a final product, and not as *The Office* in the making, are cut-away jokes that most often are flashbacks, extra-diegetic music, bleeping out of curse words, and the voice over in which (producer) Ron Howard frequently uses self-referential phrases. He makes allusions both to himself and the show, such as commenting on the shows cancellation by FOX during the third season or happily exclaiming “Hey! That’s the name of the show!” when Michael utters the phrase “arrested development” in episode 303 “Forget-Me-Now.”

“The self-mocking word play breaks the virtual forth wall and acknowledges the viewer and television as television – a frequent component of televisuality.”

The spoken text is inherently self-referential to the (process of) mediation. Even though the characters cannot hear the voice-over, certain remarks let a personality shine through and with the text of the voice-over often interacting with or tying into the dialogue in the diegesis the narrator becomes a functioning character for the audience instead of just a disembodied objective voice: “some narrators may be viewed as diegetic, existing in the story-world but not emerging directly from the on-screen action.”

The other dominant signifier for the text being a final product are the “previously/next time on” segments (even though they aren’t in every episode): these segments are not referring backwards or forwards as they are originally meant to in their initial inception for TV series, but actually carry the story forward instead of repeating it thus being part of this series continuity. Both these segments and the voice-over are simultaneously outside the diegesis and part of the story (world). But the acknowledgement of the mediation is quite different from *The Office*: acknowledgement of the camera, as Thompson also notes, only happens actively once, about halfway into the first season as the camera is verbally prohibited from following into a courtroom. What Thompson does not acknowledge is that the camera is not actively addressed by a mayor character. Thus I think that he gives this instance too much relevance and power in his argument. It is actually more of an exception from the rules of this universe and it does barely concern the social actors in it. However, this episode, 113 “Beef Consomme,” is still a special case overall, as it

---

is the only episode employing a truly hidden camera angle: showing only Lindsay and Tobias’ feet. Other, equally private, scenes, such as in the conjugal trailer at the prison, are not filmed from a hidden angle. Instead the camera stands unacknowledged next to the characters, until the action starts to heat up and the camera pans away.

*Arrested Development* sets itself apart from *The Office* by adding a voice over, which acknowledges the mediation, and by taking away the characters interactions with the camera. The characters don’t look or even glance at the camera and there are no interviews – these interactions are the defining trait of *The Office*. Instead the voice-over narrator becomes a combination of an all knowing Voice of God type (not seen, authoritative and informative) and a Voice of Authority (despite not being seen, he is basically a social actor).\(^{139}\) The narrator illustrates the story by leading over between the scenes and establishing the scenes temporal relationship to each other ("soon…", “at the same time…”), as well as explaining the motivations or emotions behind some of the characters actions. The soundtrack furthermore differs from *The Office* as a lot of extra-diegetic music is employed, which once again indicates *Arrested Development* to be a final product. Also, where *The Office* captures private moments from hidden angels and never intrudes on truly private moments, *Arrested Development* follows the characters into therapy sessions, boardroom meetings, into prison and confidential discussions with the attorney, into the shower (primarily David Cross’ Tobias Fünke in his jeans cutoffs), on dates and sometimes into the bedroom, but cutting away before the act. Consequently defying the claim on “reality” by entering spaces that are generally seen as too private. The sequences most efficiently speaking against the “reality” of the series by entering an inaccessible space are found in 205 “Sad Sack,” as a picture from the case file against the Bluth’ is followed travelling through the halls and to the command central in the Pentagon, the most inaccessible place imaginable. Even when entering private spaces, the camera never hides, which once again distances the style from *The Office*, where the obscured shot is a key stylistic as well as narrative device.

The device that most actively works against the observational style in *Arrested Development* is the use of flashbacks, often enough to the Bluth’ siblings youth thus clearly predating the presence of the cameras in their lives and yet not earmarked as home videos or reenacted memories. Thus *Arrested Development* asks for a greater amount of suspension of disbelief from the audience to be perceived as any type of documentary. Unless one chooses to see the entire series as a reenactment just like the TV-special within it, which would further complicate the self-referential nature of the text, as well as completely destroy Thompson’s

argument. Furthermore, contrary to The Office the editing style of Arrested Development, whilst also filmed with handheld cameras, consists of less panning and more reaction cuts thus employing continuity editing more vividly. This places Arrested Development further away from Cinéma Vérité and closer to Direct Cinema, as the story is build in editing. The continuity editing is aided by the fact that the characters never look at the camera. A noticeable and unique trait of the series visual compilation is also that instead of the classic fade to black, the blank screens between scenes (often surrounding commercial breaks) are white.

All in all, whilst employing stylistic devices from documentary film, Arrested Development does not aim to be realistic, but rather lets characters and situations, as well as the story and settings be unrealistic or improbable. Additionally the doubtful nature of the cameras existence within the diegesis leads away from the defining factor of Cinéma Vérité. Thus I do not agree with Thompson that Arrested Development fits the by Mills establish “comedy verite” term, as it does not fulfill the demands of Cinéma Vérité which also define “comedy verite.” In fact, considering the characters general obliviousness to their situation (of being filmed), the style of this series is much closer to the Direct Cinema approach of the filmed people forgetting the camera. (My critique of Thompson’s application of the “comedy verite” term to the Americans series will be continued in chapter 5-2 “& Comedy Verite” due to it needing a critical exploration of the core definition). But there is an instance where the persuasive power of the camera as claimed by Cinéma Vérité is being used in Arrested Development. In 201 “The one where Michael leaves,” Lucille is forced by the presence of an outside (!) documentary camera to volunteer Buster (Tony Hale) for the army. There is one mayor point in which Arrested Development fulfills one of “comedy verites” demands as establish by Mills’ analysis of The Office: the utilization of differences in perception as a catalyst for humour (but not dependent on the mediation). As previously described, The Office’s David Brent does perceive himself quite differently from the way he is actually seen by his coworkers and the audience. In Arrested Development this is taken to a new height as all the grown-up characters lack self insight. The only one that in rare circumstances realizes that his perception of himself differs from the reality is Michael Bluth, the son trying to save the company. In fact, his brother Gob (Will Arnett) goes so far as to, when in risk of or after a brief moment of self insight, roofy himself to prevent consciousness of realizations that could damage his inflated ego (for example, 303 “Forget-Me-Now”). Or Tobias Fünke who even after listening to a recording of his speech patterns in episode 210 “Ready, Aim, Marry Me” doesn’t realize the constant double innuendos he uses. Similar situations can be found in the
other series employing documentary style. In *Parks and Recreation* several characters differ slightly in their perception of self compared to how the audience or others within the diegesis see them. Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), for example, is not the player he’d like to be, whereas Andy Dwyers (Chris Pratt) misperceptions could be accredited to stupidity rather than obliviousness or ignorance. Misperceptions are used for humour in several series, albeit none to the degree of David Brent, the Bluth’ or Brents equivalent in the American *The Office*, Michael Scott (Steve Carrell). Due to their wealth and social status, the Bluth’ do occupy a position of power in their story-universe, similarly do David Brent and Michael Scott as they are the boss of *The Office*. The greater extend of their lack of self insight seems thus to be tied to their power over other characters. The other series do not have as clearly drawn structures of power. Here toned down versions of the perception difference are instead found in those characters with less power than the characters around them, for example does *Modern Family*’s Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell) perceive himself to be “the coolest Dad” (101 “Pilot”) whilst his kids – and the viewer – will have a different opinion. In *The Michael J. Fox Show*, the main characters sister Leigh (Katie Finneran) is a quite cartoonish person who constantly seems to look at herself in a much more positive light than warranted. Albeit here it seems to be more of a coping strategy for her not to get depressed about her situation – thus she does not lack self insight as those other characters but fights it for the benefit of keeping her hope and positive spirit. Difference in perception and lack of self insight seem to have become devices of humour in a wide variety of American contemporary TV comedy series beyond the documentary style: for example Jackie (Michaela Watkins) on *Trophy Wife* (ABC 2013-), Schmidt (Max Greenfield) on *New Girl* or the entire group of *It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia* (FX 2005-). This suggests that this trait or trope is not necessarily specific to “comedy verite” or documentary style comedy series.

3-3 NEW COMEDY AND THE OFFICE (US)

In his book *Beyond Sitcom - New Directions in American Television Comedy* Antonio Savorelli explores the possible evolution of televisual comedy from traditional sitcom towards a more mature stage which he dubs New Comedy, a group of series from the past decade (starting at about 2000) that is defined through separation from the “traditional sitcom archetype and shows increased awareness of the comic genre.” He explores comedy series that differ from classic sitcom through employment of metatextual communication on four levels of enunciation, thus he is investigating the series levels of awareness through

---

141 Ibid
measuring their metatextual communication with help of structural semiotics. Savorelli states that “an evolution is under way. American televisual comedy has reached a more mature, complex stage of its existence, and the same can be said, more generally, about television as a narrative medium.”

This evolution does not mean that classic TV comedy (meaning traditional sitcom) doesn’t also have metatextual tendencies; instead the series that are to be placed in New Comedy use metatextuality as one of their main discursive elements, metatextuality is a (or the) defining ingredient/trait of the text. Whilst in classic comedy “metatextual tendencies […] are usually expressed as intertextual references, aimed at mutual confirmation and validation among texts of the same genre; a second, important function of metatextual tendencies in classic comedy is to strengthen, starting from a single utterance, the communication strategies of a television network.” These are generally just isolated occurrences and do not constitute the core of these series strategies or structures, meaning that they do not alter the original model as they are not existential to the story, universe or aesthetic of the series. In those series intertextual references become an occasional form of play, which reinforces the texts’ comic foundations without that play becoming their main source. The type of metatextual enunciation most commonly found in classic sitcom is defined in the first level of New Comedy - Quotations and Citations. This refers to quotations and citations usually made verbally through the characters. These become necessary references “for the construction of the shows’ identities and the consolidation of a collective imagery.” Being widespread through all media and art forms quoting is nothing new, but becomes “an integral part of new comedy’s metatextual system.” One such example is Ben Wyatt (Adam Scott) on Parks and Recreation, as a true “fanboy” he often references other pop culture texts such as the TV-series Game of Thrones (HBO 2011-).

The second level, is an intertextual quotation that uses the characters’ thematic construction, refering particularly to the choice of actors who play certain roles, meaning that some actors’ professional as well as personal histories become not only important for indication of genre but also grounds for narrative elaboration, i.e. driving story or character development through similarities with for instance previous roles. A prime example of this can be found in Parks and Recreation where several actors lives and careers influence their characters. The life of actor Nick Offerman ultimatly had a lot of influence on the character specifics of his Ron Swanson such as his love for red meats and scotch as well as his talent for

143 ibid., p.14f
144 ibid., p.15
145 ibid., p.15
saxophone and carpentry (the series also frequently refers to capentry projects he actually performed). Similarly, Aziz Ansari shapes his character Tom Haverford through both providing him with a similar family background (parents from India but himself born and raised in a small town in South Carolina) and reusing jokes from his standup act, overall his character is very similar to the persona he plays in his standup shows. Amy Poehler’s character Leslie Knope has the ambitions to become a high ranking politician, which fits with Poehler's profile of often having played political figures such as Hilary Clinton on Saturday Night Live (NBC 1975-). As will be described in chapter 4-3 “The Michael J. Fox Show”, the series The Michael J Fox Show takes the dependence on an actor even further as it is dependent on the lead actors personal life and illness for the entire setup of the story, as well as giving Fox a role quite similar to the easygoing, even-tempered nice-guy characters he is known for.

The third kind of metatextual performance is the insertion of other fictional texts into the primary text. These fictional texts can be real (as in existing outside of the primary text) or only existant within the universe of that text, but they become functional to the existence of the primary text. Here too, the documentary style series deliver several examples. In the previous chapter the reality-show and film within Arrested Development were already mentioned: the Bluth TV-special episode of the equally fictional program Scandal Makers, which presents an exaggerated version of the story we’ve already seen. An additional example is the fictional in-story-universe series Wrench, essential to the story of Arrested Development as the lead actor almost starts dating Lindsay Bluth (Portia de Rossi). In Parks and Recreation a major storyline concerns Leslie (Amy Poehler) having written a book about the city Pawnee. This book then gets not only a space within the story universe but is also released in the real world, i.e. the viewers universe. The released book is made to seem as real as possible even though it is a fictional text about a fictional city that stems from another fictional text, therfore the author is proclaimed to be Leslie Knope. Overall there are only two indicators that the book Pawnee – The Greatest Town In America is part of the NBC series, on the backcover and the titlepage inlay. As a so-called Television Tie-In the book is fictiously attributed to the character. This book is expanding the reality of the series, creating its realism not only through the style but also outside of the original medium as the reality of the story world expands into the viewers’ real world (a second example of this type of expansion of reality through transmedia is the homepage www.knope2012.com from Leslie’s city council campaign). But more importantly than the real-world expansion, the book acts as an important

146 The Writers’ Room (Sundance TV, 2013-), 102 “Parks and Recreation”
148 DiMeco, Nate, and the creative team of Parks and Recreation: Pawnee The Greatest Town in America - Written, Compiled, Researched, Typed, Collated, Proofread, and Run Through Spell Check by Leslie Knope Deputy Director, Department of Parks and Recreation (New York: Hyperion, 2001)
plotpoint in-universe. Here it is once again addressing questions of the real as the plot of episode 403 “Born & Raised” actually concerns the group having to fact-check the entire book as Leslies competence and Pawnee-knowledge is doubted by one of Pawnee’s influential talk shows. These talk shows are also fictional texts inserted into the fictional text Parks and Recreation. Both Pawnee Today and Ya Heard? With Perd as well as the radio program Crazy Ira and the Douche are essential parts of the story universe and make several repeated appearences. Additionally, The Hapley Group was introduced in episode 616 “New Slogan” and serves as a parallel webseries spinoff. The series Parks and Recreation also connects with The Office (US) through minor details, such as referencing the other show by placing a box of paper in the background with the Dunder-Mifflin logo on it. This opens up the possibility of them existing in the same universe, or one of the characters being a fan as there was much merchendise released.

The forth level, is concerned with the application of a different semiotic system used to produce the main text:

If intertextuality is a reference to texts that actually exist outside the main text’s boundaries, and pure metatextuality is the existence, in different forms, of fictional yet embedded texts, a metasemiotic function is achieved when a discourse is explicitly built about the semiotic system used to produce the main text.149

Meaning that the texts style differs from similar texts, and instead makes use of another group of texts’ look. So, the use of the semiotic system lend from documentary is ultimately the metasemiotic function defining the text, and a style to which all the series explored here adhere to. This look is essentially defining them beyond characters, stories and narrative structure. Whilst their style is what primarily sets them apart from other television texts, it is not only the metasemiotic level that connects the here explored group of series to New Comedy. As exemplified above, all defining metatextual levels are being served and are an essential part of the series, thus firmly placing this group of texts within New Comedy. For the purpose of this text it is unnecessary to further than done above investigate the first three levels, as it is the metasemiotic level that is of interest here.

Savorelli uses four example texts to investigate the possibility and terms of New Comedy: The Comeback (HBO 2005), Ugly Betty (ABC 2006-2010), Scrubs and The Office. These series are stylistically very different, but both The Comeback and The Office are employing documentary style. My exploration into the contemporary comedy genre is in this sense much narrower than Savorellis, my focus is solely on the group defined through their use of documentary style. In the chapter on The Office Savorelli references the British

program but focuses on the American version. Similarly as in the British original, the employees of a stationary suppliers company - here Dunder Mifflin - are being followed and interviewed by a documentary film crew, letting the series act as a collection of material before the creation of the final product, with the same devices of handheld camera, interviews, characters addressing the camera and no music or other extra diegetic additive. Additionally, the key types of sequences are very similar. The four most common types of shots are, exactly as in the preceding version of the series: wide shots of the office landscape (Still4), half to close ups of the people in action in this office landscape, close ups of the face of the person being interviewed (Still5) and the obscured shot (Still6 and 7).

![Still4: The Office, 101Pilot 7min44sec](image) ![Still5: The Office, 101Pilot 2min29sec](image) ![Still 6: The Office, 101Pilot 15min56sec](image) ![Still 7: The Office, 103 Health Care 4min38sec](image)

The series is very similar to the British version. The pilot episodes, for instance, are obviously based on the same script. Not only is the storyline the same, but many jokes are reused: for example the important fax being thrown away by Brent respectively Michael Scott (Steve Carell) or the desk barrier and stapler-in-jelly incidents between Tim and Gareth (Mackenzie Crook) respectively Jim (John Krasinski) and Dwight (Rainn Wilson). Their personality, jokes and performance style are very similar. But the American boss Michael Scott takes the performing for the camera often even further, and dares to take much longer glances at the camera. In the here explored series, they are the only character that actively works for the attention of the camera, and strive to maintain it even beyond the potential end of shooting. Much of their behavior would not be possible in the absence of the camera. Part of what makes this possible is that The Office also is the only series which might have an end date for shooting, as the cameras are there to collect material for a specific piece. Once again, the actions of Brent/Scott prove the series’ connection to Cinéma Vérité: “Rouch discovered the power of the camera to provoke people to behavior that was not typical of their everyday lives, and he saw in what he termed cinéma vérité a means of liberating people from their limited selves.” Brent/Scott clearly make use of this premise, as their highest aim is to amuse the audience and impress the producers to such an extent that they would be granted a spinoff, which would elevate their celebrity status. As the viewer is often confronted with their private versus their public (or rather camera-ready) persona through the hidden camera

---

angles, the audience is also very aware of the characters performance. Again, their performance of the self triggers the connection to Cinéma Vérité: “a different kind of cinema emerges, conceived of as neither documentary truth, for the participants are always performing, taking on roles, nor theatrical fiction, for the role they adopt is conceived of as more real than the real.”

Both pilots are almost over-didactic in their aim, actually physically employing a character to introduce the setting and important characters, with the new employee standing in for the audience. Overall, the characters are very similar as well, at least in their role within the workplace and to each other, if not completely in personality and skill. But the overall tone in the American version is lighter and brighter, starting at the theme melody and continuing in the picture (colors and lighting). The US version will soon employ a bigger cast. The size of the cast stands of course also in relation to the fact that more episodes were produced. This demand for more stories also means that the further the series moves along the more the characters leave the office, although the private space is never entered. Aside from the difference in picture brightness/quality, the style of the two versions of the series is essentially the same. A slight stylistic difference is found in the interview sequences where the UK version generally uses tighter framed shots, but in both the camera is static, only rarely zooming (see stills 9 and 10 below; they also showcase the difference in picture quality and brightness as well as how similar the pilot episodes are by showcasing how the same sequence is remade and how similar the characters are even in looks and positioning). Most interview sequences are broken up with intercut location shots, establishing either the interviewed characters normal activities or something happening simultaneously or referencing what is talked about in the interview sequence. The difference in framing between the two versions is not restrained to the interview sequences, but true for the entire style, as the British version generally allows the camera to be even closer to the actors than the American.

![Still 9: The Office (US) 101 Pilot (Jim) 2min54sec](image)

![Still 10: The Office (UK) 101 Pilot (Tim) 5min04sec](image)

But the actual differences between the two versions are not in the style, narrative structure or setup, but in the textual details of the narrative through culturally specific differences in the portrayal of different stereotypes. Additionally, the US version starts later to

---

break the forth wall even more through for instance making a boom operator a named character, Brian (Chris Diamantopoulos). He appears in front of the camera and interacts with primarily Pam and Jim. Another difference occurs beyond the first season, as the US series moves forward, it starts to imitate rather the dramaturgical setup of American sitcom series than strictly that of its namesake predecessor. The British version always starts with the theme sequence whilst the American version employs a cold open from the second season onward. A cold open in this case means that a story sequence precedes the opening theme; this can either be a stand-alone joke or a setup for the episodes story. The opening theme in itself also sets the series’ apart, as the British version only showcases the urban setting by cutting together shots from around the fictional city of Slough where the office is situated, whilst the American series opening theme not only presents similar shots from around Scranton but in addition shots of the main cast which also fits better with the American sitcom tradition. But, overall, these differences between the two versions are only marginal.
In this chapter the sitcom series produced from 2009 forward will be explored for their relation to documentary. The aim is to explore what defines their style. Does their approach to utilizing of the documentary devices differ from earlier series?

4-1 PARKS AND RECREATION AND BROOKLYN NINE-NINE

Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, both producers and writers on The Office (US), continued employing the documentary style in their next series for NBC: Parks and Recreation (NBC 2009-). Just as The Office, Parks and Recreation is a workplace comedy. But here the private sector is replaced with the official, making ideological and political discussions part of the series. This is personified in Leslie’s firm believe in the government and her boss Ron’s inherent distrust of the government, making their ability to work so well together surprising and their clashing beliefs often grounds for amusement. Illustrating current ideological conflicts in this manner is a staple of sitcom.152

Parks and Recreation follows the absurd antics of the employees of its namesake government department in the small fictional city of Pawnee, Indiana, as they pursue various projects to make their city a better place. Leslie Knope is the hub, she is what unites all characters beyond their work, employing a similar position as Michael on Arrested Development: not being the central character per se but the focus through which we enter the story. The series sets itself apart from other workplace sitcoms by giving near equal space to relationship development as to occupation specific storylines, such as the many open forum meetings, raccoon hunts, building sites of parks and Leslies campaign for city council.

Similarly to The Office (US) the theme sequence of Parks and Recreation introduces the main characters in for them typical poses or activities as well as the setting, in this case a rural area and the most important sites of the town Pawnee such as the city hall building and indicators for it being located in Indiana. The theme music is a happy melody, taking the opening theme even further from the British The Office and its butter realism. At least one of two shots of the city hall building is featured in every episode, either the close up of the sign above the entrance or a crane shot moving towards the building, and many episodes open with one of these shots. In a sense this mirrors the shot of the photocopier that is featured in every episode of The Office. Contrary to Schur and Daniels’ previous project, Parks and Recreation follows the typical dramaturgy of sitcom from the beginning. The cold open or teaser is followed by two acts (building the conflict and solving the problem), and the episode ends on a short tag scene which often stands free of the story. The tag scene of episode 101 “Pilot”

features Ron Swanson explaining the purposes of the items in his office and asking the film crew if they receive a grant for their work – thus also addressing style and mediation. Whilst the cameras in this way are addressed as existing in the story universe/diegesis, the reason as to why they are there is never mentioned. In a sense it is not visually but through verbal address made clear that the cameras exist in the diegesis. Ann and Mark respectively ask for the camerapersons’ opinion in 102 “Canvassing” and 222 “Telethon.” Ben asks for, but does not receive, the film crews’ help in 609 “The Cones of Dunshire.” However, some of these remarks could be perceived as meant rhetorically, questions to the self. The important detail is that even though they are asked to, the crew never intervenes. The crews’ ignorance of the characters pleas disproves the idea of the style coming with deliberate interaction – as based in Cinéma Vérité the “comedy verite” term would demand that the people making the documentary would interact and take influence which they never do. Contrary to The Office, the addressed cameras are never visible and the camera crew never intervenes in the action; the viewer is supposed to accept the idea that the events are unfolding in front of cameras that the characters can see and talk to. Whilst also using the handheld camera as a strong stylistic device, Parks and Recreation does not rely as heavily on pans and zooms to capture the action. They are part of the handheld aesthetic whilst reaction shots and continuity editing are used to capture the action and conversations, thus lines of dialogue do only come from outside the frame if so intended for the narrative. For example does episode 101 “Pilot” feature in a discussion between Leslie and Ron a shot-reverse-shot sequence consisting of two angles, slightly from above and slightly sideways on Leslie (Still 11) and over Leslie’s shoulder onto Ron in a downward angle that still shows Leslie’s shoulder in the frame (Still 12). Even though this would demand two cameras simultaneously in a very narrow space none of them becomes visible. This sequence is implausible were this a real documentary, which demands the audience to suspend disbelief to accept the style. However, the observational documentary style is reinforced by the fact that often in similar sequences the shot-reverse-shot reaction editing is combined with rapid panning. The handheld camera style is also aided by many zooms. Even though continuity editing is more frequently employed, when characters look at the camera they are looking at the actual camera and not an implied other character. Reaction shots and shot-reverse-shot sequences are clearly emphasized by a part of the other person still being in the shot, such as Leslie’s shoulder in the example.
Interview sequences in this series are also very different from *The Office*, they are not always cutaways but can be explanations directly to the camera from within the scene (the camera always anticipates who is going to speak next), thus spontaneously addressing the camera to further explain something that everybody else in the room already knows or understands. Conversations about emotions do in *The Office* often take place in these interview sequences, as internal reflection instigated through the presence of the camera and thus in coherence with the “comedy verite” idea. But in *Parks and Recreation* most conversations about emotions are shared with another character, such as Leslie calling Ann for support during a potential date with Ben (314 “Roadtrip”). This makes the interview sequences more often informational than emotional. But they can at times also be a sharing of secrets that cannot (yet) be revealed to other characters. In *The Office* interview sequences are always filmed with the character sitting down in a secluded area. On *Parks and Recreation* they are being taped in many different spots (although every mayor character has one often repeated “home”-spot, such as Leslie or Ron in their respective office). The interviewed person can also be standing up and people in the background can on rare occasions react to what is being said, as for example Andy shushing Ann in 102 “Canvassing.” Whilst these sequences can be similarly to *The Office* intercut with silent shots from something happening simultaneously or relevant to the comment, they are not as static. Interview sequences in *The Office* are close-up shots that on rare occasions can be combined with a zoom. On *Parks and Recreation* the interview sequence can also be edited with shots from different angles, as for example the Ron Swanson interview at 15 minutes in the pilot switching angles between a frontal half-shot of Ron (Still 13) and a close-up of his face from the side (Still 14).

These angels, once again, demand the same type of suspension of disbelieve as previously mentioned. This also happens sometimes when shots from obscured angles are combined with
shots where the character must know that the camera is there – thus making the obscured shots irrelevant. This is evident in a sequence in 101 which features Mark (Paul Schneider) receiving an email with unflattering pictures of Leslie. Inside his office, the camera shows from a slightly downward angle Mark from the side sitting at his desk looking at similar pictures he previously confiscated (Still 15) and then cuts to a shot from behind his back onto his screen. These shots clearly implicate that a camera is in the same room, and yet they are merged with shots from outside, filming through the window into his office as he contemplates the situation (Still 16). There is no reason or need for this obscured angle other than emphasis of the style, in concurrence with the metasemiotic, forth level of New Comedy.

Obscured angles are frequently used. In The Office these obscured shots do more often come from a cameraman hiding behind another desk and not quite as frequently through a window as in Parks and Recreation. Also they always have a narrative reason in The Office, for instance, as earlier mentioned, to reveal a different type of behavior (Michael Scott) or a private moment (Jim and Pam). But in both series the audio quality of the dialogue is never impacted, even if the camera is on the other side of a window, as for example in Parks and Recreation episode 101 when Leslie goes out into the courtyard to convince Mark to help her whilst he is eating lunch (Still 16). They are being filmed from inside the Parks’ office and yet their words are heard as clearly as when the camera is next to them in the same room.

As the examples above illustrate, the series is also brighter and sharper in picture quality than the predecessor. The chipper theme melody, brightly lit rooms, sunny weather and crisp colors, fit well with the happy and hopeful tone of the narrative. In summary, the style of Parks and Recreation draws on conventions of documentary, such as handheld camera (including zoom and pan), interviews and similar obscured angles as in The Office, but does not constantly acknowledge the format. Beyond the main characters, no one acknowledges the camera. Supporting or background roles seem unaware of the cameras presence. Whilst some of the main characters occasionally can exchange glances with the camera, characters often seem unaware of the camera outside of interviews or short explanations, enabling private moments to be filmed without the camera having to hide. This
is especially true for the more private moments during Leslie and Ben (Adam Scott) secretly dating at the end of season three. Even though they are supposed to keep it a secret, they never hide from the camera and never notice or acknowledge it. But even though the narrative follows more private moments than *The Office,* such as on dates, the camera never imposes on truly private moments. There are no direct references to the idea that the characters are being filmed for a documentary (series or film). *Parks and Recreation* is neither portrayed as the collecting of material (as *The Office*) nor as a finished program (as *Arrested Development*). But similarly to *Arrested Development* curse words are bleeped out and even covered up with blurs. The reason for filming Leslie, her friends and colleagues is never revealed. But some remarks make it clear that the cameras after a certain point are an inherent part of the characters life, such as Ann no longer being slightly nervous in her interview segments as well as Ben and Leslie revealing that they practiced a certain line for an interview sequence in 612 “Farmers Market.” Whilst the cameras are part of their world, the characters actions overall would not differ if the camera were not present.

Whilst making use of several devices of documentary filmmaking, *Parks and Recreation* also bears similarities to the classic sitcom, for instance are the episodes built after the same dramaturgical model as sitcom series, with the teaser and tag scene often being free standing of the episodes’ story:

> In a half-hour television comedy series, the scripts can have a *teaser* of 30 to 60 seconds. Act One is about 10 to 12 minutes; Act Two is about 10 to 12 minutes a *tag* or *wraparound* closes out the action in less than one minute. A half-hour show can be written in two acts or three acts, with each act about the same length.\(^{153}\)

These sequences standing free from the episodes’ story are a unique dramaturgical trait of the sitcom genre. Episodes of *Parks and Recreation* generally feature a main storyline and at least one supporting or secondary. Making room for parallel stories is something that all the series explored here have in common to varying degrees, most visible in *Modern Family* as will be presented in chapter 4-2 “*Modern Family.*” Comparable to the conventions of the sitcom genre, the characters on *Parks and Recreation* do not really evolve; change comes only slowly and mainly only in the form of bonding with other characters. Ron Swanson is the best example, he always remains Ron and neither wants nor needs to change, which he frequently voices. So even when he acquires a new wife and kids, he still fundamentally remains Ron and has no need to go anywhere or do anything else. Even Leslie, who is the most ambitious character and chases her dreams with at least a certain degree of success (such as becoming a city councilwoman), does not change in her essence as she even in 616 “New Slogan” still has

---

the same love for paperwork and hands on labor in the parks: “Leslie’s love for her job and bottomless optimism are virtually unmatched on TV; only Sponge-Bob SquarePants out-enthuses Leslie Knope.”\textsuperscript{154} The actual families of the characters are rarely or never addressed and similarly as in the urban sitcoms in which the cast is connected only through friendship, many characters become a surrogate family to each other. The location is of major importance as Pawnee becomes almost a character of its own (which becomes especially clear in the war between and later merger of Eagleton and Pawnee in season six); most stories are dependent on the specific place of Pawnee and different parks in it. Time however, as in sitcom in general, is of lesser importance. The episodes contain different, undefined number of hours or days. As in classic sitcom as well as in the other here explored series, the narrative framework of \textit{Parks and Recreation} is closed. This refers both to “actions developed in each episode hardly condition[ing] other episodes,”\textsuperscript{155} meaning that storylines are closed within the span of one episode, but maintaining “a long-run time progression, which allows for the characters to grow beyond their original design.” Thus “episodes […] seem temporally disengaged from one another,”\textsuperscript{156} but are connected in a grander structure which however is not conditioned by a specific time. Progression of time does generally not matter, time only becomes important when specifying some dates to sync the order of the episodes to the audiences’ calendar, meaning that certain episodes have special holiday themes and are aired roughly around the same time as the actual holidays occur. This is unique to the TV medium and generally only employed in comedy series. The narrative progression is slow moving. The overarching premise of the series is set up by Leslie promising Ann to build a new park on an abandoned lot next to her house, has by season six still not come further than filling up the giant pit with sand. Still, the series is not as narratively static as classic sitcom series and does not employ the reset-button approach but does have story development and narrative continuity. This richly, thought through story world and well planned continuity is also proven by the 240 page book that in detail and with many pictures not shown in the series describes Pawnees history and present.

Again, in \textit{Parks and Recreation} change is possible, but mainly on a personal relationship level (for example 409 “The Trial of Leslie Knope”). Careers are contained within city hall and Pawnee. Even though some characters leave for a short time such as Leslies husband Ben working in Washington, Andy working in London for a short while or Tom trying to start his own business, they all return rather fast. Contrary to \textit{The Office}, the


\textsuperscript{156} ibid, p.17
humor in *Parks and Recreation* does not particularly come from the style or from mayor problems of self perception, but there is also only very little physical humour and it is reserved for specific characters such as Andy and Jerry (Jim O’Heir). Often the humor stems from differences between personalities (Ron vs. Leslie, April vs. Tom and Donna, Chris vs. Ben, etc.), verbal and often also political references, misunderstandings or the inherent absurdity of a situation. The humor that connects to the documentary style is mostly present in the revelations that are being made through the interview sequences.

The Cinéma Vérité aim to use the camera as catalyst is not employed and neither is the impact of the camera on the situation ever made clear, as no one acts differently when filmed from a hidden angle such as in *The Office*. As earlier exemplified, the obscured camera angles can disprove themselves. Additionally, the obscured angles can at times follow a characters point of view, such as in the pilot episode when Leslie looks at Mark through the window over the courtyard. In a sense some of the choices in style seem to be a natural development from the style of *The Office*, as the series’ producers no longer have to follow the rules of the original, but can define their own. In *Parks and Recreation* the format is not constantly acknowledged but becomes an organic part of the story. The action in front of the camera is clearly separated from the observers behind the camera. Thus the story cannot suddenly, and retrospectively, change due to revelations that the operators actually have been active the whole time such as through the storyarc of the triangle drama between Pam, Jim and the boom operator in *The Office*. The progression of Ann’s self-confidence in front of the camera is more evident of the Direct Cinema believe that eventually the subject will forget the camera. But, there is also a certain inconsistency to the style, as the cameras can be both acknowledged and yet ignored if it is more beneficial to the story, as for instance in the romance arc between Ben and Leslie. Thus acknowledgement of the mediation is contrary to “comedy verite” not of great importance. This development does stand in contrast to the by Mills’ defined “comedy verite” as constantly and consciously acknowledging the specific format.

Michael Schur would draw again upon the conventions of documentary for his next co-created series, also a workplace comedy. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (NBC 2013-) is about a police station in New York, making the squad room the main location of the series. The series starts out with the main story arc being about precinct bad-boy Jake Peralta (Andy Samberg) having to come to terms with the new Captain (Andre Braugher) forcing him to grow up. Whilst drawing on the same basic conventions as the previous two series that the creator was involved with, this show differs greatly from both. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* takes another step
further away from *The Office*’s Cinéma Vérité adjacent approach of acknowledging the mediation, and reduces the documentary style to handheld cameras – no more interviews, no acknowledgement of the camera, no hidden camera angles. Thus being purely observational and without comment. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* adds instead non-diegetic elements such as digitally inserted texts indicating place and time generally coming in with sound effects over an outside shot of the locations (Still 17 and 18). Sometimes music is added. Flashbacks are used as cut-away jokes, disturbing the plausible continuity of the observational documentary style, in a manner similar to the flashbacks in *Arrested Development*. Thus being more of a finished product like *Arrested Development* than *The Office*’s collection process, yet not providing a reason for the style or clearing up whether the cameras actually exist within the diegesis.

Whilst at first seeming to unite the observational documentary style sitcom with criminal investigation plots, this workplace sitcom does only rarely concern itself with actually handling the cases. Instead the work is used as base for jokes or to place certain characters together to develop their personality and relationships. Whilst the handheld camera is the series most important visual style feature, it does move much less than in the other three series. Zooms are more subtle, pans are rare and slower, continuity editing with shot-reverse-shot sequences are employed, the number of camera angles is not restrained by the style. Thus not missing any line or action but always being on the right person – taking away even more from the documentary aspect. As it is the only device from Cinéma Vérité employed – and in fact, the way it is used is much more reminiscent of Direct Cinema as the camera is never actually acknowledged as existing in the diegesis and does not influence the action – this series represents an additional reduction of the style established by *The Office*, and moves even further away from the “comedy verite” theory. Through the lack of interviews and voice over it does also differ from the other series explored here, to an extent that it can be placed on the fringes of what has started to come forth as the conventions of this group of series.
The series Modern Family is clearly to be placed alongside domestic sitcom, presenting several different types of family constellations. Modern Family circles around the bonds of family, the different shapes that this type of community can take and the relationships forged within it. And yet, despite its claim to portray modern constellations, all family groupings we meet are essentially traditional white upper middle class American families: monogamous and through the bonds of marriage committed couples, good jobs, stay-at-home moms/parents, children, houses with (literal) white picket fences. Thus “family” is very strictly defined, and the series does paint a picture of this certain demographic at this certain point in time.

The pilot episode starts out with an exterior shot of a nice house (Still 19). This type of establishing shot will always be shown before entering any home-setting, thus every new sequence and section of a story starts with establishing the location. Over the image of the house a woman is heard loudly calling her kids to breakfast, this will also become typical for the series. At Phil (Ty Burrell) and Claire’s (Julie Bowen) house the couple is dealing with the everyday chaos of having three children. This first sequence, revolving around them making breakfast and preparing to send the kids off to school, introduces all the members of this family unit with their inner hierarchies and typical behaviors. The pilot successfully sets up both the mood and structure of the entire series, as well as introducing the visual style of the show: a handheld camera, changing camera angles, the camera also moves a lot both with zooming and panning thus instantly distinguishing the show from other sitcom series with their stable camera. Just as in The Office, this places the viewer closer to the action, a stylistic and technical trait that influences emotion. As the viewer gets to come closer into the presented space s/he can more easily feel as part of the family. This is hard to establish with the classic sitcom setup where the mode of production creates a static distance. The movement of the camera also aids the hectic mood of this situation, in which the narrative is carried verbally and the humour in this instant is heavily carried by physical comedy. The shots come from three different camera positions (Still 20 and 21, 22), instantly demanding a suspension of disbelief from the audience regarding the style as the different cameras never become visible, just as in Parks and Recreation.
It takes less than a minute until the next visual and narrative pillar of the series is introduced: the interview sequence. Phil and Clair are sitting on their sofa, holding hands, addressing the camera. Claire is talking about her aims in how to raise the children and why she is so controlling. These interview sequences do not employ handheld cameras, they differ again from both the interview sequences on *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*, as they neither apply zoom nor shots from different angles nor are taped on the fly. Also different is that the characters wear different clothes than in the story they’re commentting, but the same clothes throughout the interviews. Thus placing the interview sequences temporally after the events of the episode, which fits well with every episode ending on an interview sequence summarizing what was learned. They are deliberately staged, only the people concerned are in the room. Interview sequences feature either one person or a married couple. The children can at times also share a sequence with each other but never with a grown up. Whilst remaining at always the same angle and everybody having a certain spot in which they will be filmed, such as the sofa in Phil and Claire’s house, most interview sequences will cut between two frames, a wider one that also presents the surrounding room (Still 23) and a half-close up on the person speaking (Still 24). On rare occasions panning between the characters or zooming in on one.

The next scene shows a woman, Gloria (Sofía Vergara), yelling at a kids soccer game. Cutting between her and her son Manny (Rico Rodriguez), the camera does not necessarily capture the person in their entirety but actually cuts off for instance Gloria’s head at one point – as if the shot was not planned but uncontrolled (of her movement). This is however the only instance where this happens. Seemingly accidentally unfocused images are in fact only employed in *The Office*. After shortly showing an older man, Jay (Ed O’Neill), sitting in a chair trying to calm Gloria down, a cut is made to the couple sitting on their couch at home, close together with Gloria’s hands draped on one of Jay’s shoulders telling the camera about their relationship. This places them in a similar interview style situation as Claire and Phil during their segment. The change in location highlights again the deliberate and planned nature of the interview. Back at the soccer game Jay has to jump in and introduce himself as the husband to a guy flirting with his young, gorgeous Colombian wife.
A jump cut to an airplane is made, still standing at the gate. Once again, the location/setting is always introduced before entering the scene. Starting the dialogue extra diegetic to move into the scene is typical for the soundscape of the series. Inside the plane, a man, Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), is coddling a baby and explaining to other passengers that the baby is newly adopted from Vietnam. In a slightly awkward situation, due to Mitchell misreading the other passengers’ reactions, it is revealed that he did not adopt baby Lily (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons) with a wife, but his boyfriend Cameron (Eric Stonestreet). During their interview sequence the couple is unlike the others not shown sitting on a sofa, touching each other, but sitting on two separate chairs next to each other, and will remain so in their interview segments throughout the series. Thus being the only couple for whom furniture has to be moved before filming the interview sequences. Whilst they do not share the same piece of furniture, they do get moved much closer to each other as the series moves forward. Filming the interview in a different location than where the action takes place, combined with the difference in clothing, signifies the planned nature of the sequence.

Whilst the camera movements and framings on the airplane are similar to those in the house and at the soccer game, due to the restricted space of the airplane they are more obviously unreasonable – the amount of camera angels not only means that at least four camera men would have to be on board but also that they at times replace passengers we’ve already seen. Ultimately these improbabilities are a constant reoccurrence, too many camera angles are being employed for the format and yet the cameras are never revealed in the shot. In this series too, continuity editing is fused with the observational style. In Modern Family the film crew does never take part in the situations and is in fact never even considered as an existing resource – so does for instance one storyarc in episode 302 “When good kids go bad” revolve around Claire obtaining security footage of an event that the series’ cameras had captured but she never asks for the film crews help. Neither do Luke (Nolan Gould) and Phil when trying to recreate a YouTube-worthy basketball trick in 304 “Door to Door.” Nonetheless is the documentary style very explicit through the camera panning, zooming and at times being slightly unsteady as well as the talking heads aimed directly at the camera/viewer (they aren’t actually interviews because no asking of questions is indicated, instead characters are commenting or giving background or emotional information).

Modern Family has a very distinct and formulaic dramaturgy, neatly structured as typical for sitcom. Similarly to the sitcom dramaturgy also employed in The Office (US), Arrested Development, Parks and Recreation and Brooklyn Nine-Nine, this series also starts with a cold open followed by the theme sequence. But the theme sequence in Modern Family
can come much later than traditional for this dramaturgical setup; in the pilot for instance it does not play until four minutes into the episode. As this series is solely concerned with families and the city is of no importance beyond the houses they live in, the theme sequences presents the three family units connected to their respective houses. Which perfectly aligns with the houses always being introduced before a scene is entered. The longer setup scenes at the beginning of the episodes are only employed if they are meant to, as in the pilot, set up several storylines; if the sequence however is meant to introduce the theme or mood of the episode it is much shorter. Often the different stories are united by a common moral theme, such as that snooping is bad in 514 “iSpy.” In the pilot episode the three introduced storylines proceed separately from each other only to merge in the final act, the conclusion of all three conflicts is thus being acted out in the same scene. At the end of the pilot it is revealed that all three families are related as they all meet at Mitchell and Cameron’s house to be surprised by the introduction of Lily. In the chaos surrounding the event all conflicts reach their climax and conclusion. This sets up the general form of the episodes: several storylines climaxing and being resolved simultaneously, often through collecting all family members in the same place. The different storylines will generally be connected by a common theme which aids the synchronized resolution. Also, all families are of equal narrative value and there is no single main character. The episodes conclude on a last talking-head sequence, generally not a couple shot but a solitary character whose lines will start as an extradiegetic soundtrack and then cut to the shot of the speaker. This last monologue will refer back to the episode and summarize or comment on its morale.

With its style and narration Modern Family excellently presents the difference between a story being told documentary style and pretending to be a documentary, as The Office does. The Office provides a reason for the style, the aim of producing a documentary film, which Modern Family does not. In The Office, characters and camera crew interact and additionally the obscured angles present behavior which the characters wish to hide from a wider audience. Thus the influence of the camera on the situation is noted on several levels. In Modern Family the cameras influence is only noted in interview sequences – the characters expectancy and planning of the sequences is exemplified in scenes such as Cameron noting that he should have told his story first in 516 “Spring-A-Ding-Fling.” or Mitchell telling Cameron that certain jokes can only be made in private in 301 “Dude Ranch.” But their behavior in the interviews does not differ from other scenes. Additionally there is never any indication of their actions or behavior being influenced by the presence of the camera in their daily lives. Also, the obscured camera angle is never employed. Instead, increasingly private
places are entered: offices, hospitals, parties, bedrooms, hotel rooms. Yet when such a space is entered, the camera always aids the suspension of disbelieve as to the possibility of entering the space by either following a character in or first peering around something before actually entering the scene. The style does not, as in *The Office*, restrict what stories can be told. What is most noticeable is that even though some characters, such as most frequently Phil, look right at the camera, characters outside the family never acknowledge its presence. The one exception is Phils new friend Andre (Kevin Hart), first introduced in 307 “Treehouse,” who almost over acknowledges it by sometimes nervously looking over to the camera and being tense in the interview sequence with Phil. All family members are always confident around the camera. Thus it is inconclusive whether the cameras actually do or do not exist, making for slightly fuzzy rules within the story universe. But, through the separation of which type of character gets to look at the camera, the question of whether the camera exist does become less important – instead the style is clearly aimed at including the viewer in the lives of the characters, letting the audience become part of the family by directly addressing them but not including outside characters in this clique. Obeying the rules of the documentary format only loosely, *Modern Family* is lifting the narrative restrictions of the format, and simultaneously through applying the documentary style circumventing the restrictions of the sitcom style. Also, the documentary form, specifically the interviews, allow the story to progress faster and add pacing as well as exposition and intimacy. *Modern Family* moves away from the hard drawn lines of stylistic differences employed in *The Office*, opening up to a new ideal of the style – aiding the story but not restricting or defining it.

4-3 THE MICHAEL J FOX SHOW

In the previous chapters, series have been explored that represent sitcom subgenres defined through their setting: domestic and workplace. These are the most dominant subcategories of sitcom. As described in chapter 2-5 “Television History and Sitcom” the two were often entwined within the domestic or marriage sitcom before the workplace became a narratively sufficient setting in its own right. The fusion of them is still popular. *The Michael J Fox Show* (NBC 2013-) follows this fusion of domestic family life and the husbands work life. Additionally following the tradition of such shows as *I Love Lucy*, *The Cosby Show* and *Seinfeld*, the husband is a kind of celebrity outside of and within the story and also falls into the tradition of sitcoms dependent on the main star clearly indicated by their title. Here it is the leads previous career as a comedian and their specific performance abilities that become important to the stories and themes. This places the *The Michael J Fox Show* as a noteworthy example within the parameters of this thesis and legitimizes its analysis, as it adheres to
several traits that are historically very significant to the sitcom genre and its inception. “Sitcom could put seriously funny actors in fictional situations […] where the situation in the sitcom was a vehicle for the comedic genius of a given actor, without whose services the show would be hard to imagine.”157 On the other side of the spectrum of sitcom production practices is the situation-based inception featuring “an ensemble of less well-known actors to bring out the comedic potential in a given situation.”158 The ultimate goal from the production side is for a sitcom to develop a combination of the two, of situation and star comic together, which then also makes stars out of all its performers. With this last example for the documentary style category of TV comedy explored here, it also becomes apparent that the most dominant settings and narrative themes of the sitcom have been covered by the documentary style. The main exception being that there is not yet an obvious example of an urban ensemble sitcom which makes use of this style.

For the narrative of The Michael J Fox Show, knowledge of Michael J Fox’s career and life is a key ingredient of the audiences’ pleasure in the stories. Very clearly adhering to the third level of metatextual enunciation of New Comedy. Similarly as his character Mike in the series, Fox has a great career to look back upon: whilst Mike was a highly regarded and popular news reporter, Fox already was a successful and popular comedy actor in both film and TV. Both had to take a step back from their career due to Parkinson disease. But using his disease as part of the performance is nothing new to Michael J Fox who already in the 90s made the sudden shakiness of his hands part of his acting on for instance the workplace-sitcom Spin City (ABC 1997-2001) – in which his character was also conveniently named Mike. To hide his Parkinson’s disease Fox would often hide his left hand in his pocket or move objects around in short quick movements, thus constantly keeping his hands in motion. After the fourth season however, Fox left Spin City to spend more time with his family (and work for the furthering of Parkinson research), which is exactly what his character did on The Michael J Fox Show. At the beginning of the series, both the actor and the character are ready to re-enter work life. Fox acting performance here differs from previous performances as he no longer has to hide his shakiness but rather accentuate and overplay it. Presumably many gags play of the actors own experiences, especially regarding physical comedy. The narrative fuses the settings of workplace and home; following Mike at work and at home, as well as some of the antics of his family consisting of his wife Annie (Betsy Brandt), the eldest son Ian (Conor Romero), daughter Eve (Juliette Goglia), their little brother Graham (Jack Gore) (roughly the same age as Fox’ real life children) as well as Mike’s sister Leigh (Katie

158 ibid, p.78
The only person from the office that is allowed to cross the boundaries into the domestic space is Mike’s boss and best friend Harris (Wendell Pierce). Whilst Mike’s assistant and his work-nemesis as well as some other minor colleagues are introduced, they are contained to the workplace and their actions are not followed outside their direct interaction with Mike. But all of the family members have stories independent of Mike, albeit connected to other family members, such as Leigh and Harris meddling in Ian’s relationship in 103 “Art.” Which means that we never follow Annie to work or Ian job-hunting, since no other family members can be involved in these stories.

Despite taking place in a city, New York, that is notorious for having become a character-like place in many TV-series, place is less important than setting (home and work), and setting less important than characters (family). The importance of the characters relationships is highlighted by the opening theme showing them all one after one surrounding Mike – the central character being swarmed by what is important for his story. Comparing all opening theme sequences of the here analyzed series it becomes clear that for the American market it is important to present the mayor characters of a comedy series in the theme sequence, and if possible already establish their connections.

Adhering to sitcom dramaturgy the first episode begins with a cold open. The series starts out with a frontal half close-up of Mike sitting in an armchair with the apartment opening up behind him (Still 25). Very didactically he introduces himself with name, occupation and the fact that he had to leave work and instead got to spend time with his family. Off-screen and from behind the camera his daughter Eve is heard complaining about him moving too much. Setting it up to in a first instance seem as if she is the instigator of the story and the camera person behind it. But already the first image betrays this story, since Eve claims to be filming with a cell phone but the picture we see is high quality and well lit – obviously made with a professional camera – as well as will not differ in size from others following it. Thus what is verbally indicated is not reflected in the visual. The camera being handheld and thus slightly moving does however affirm the production claimed by the verbal exchange. Even though the verbal and visual slightly contradict each other, this very first sequence instantly establishes not only prominent features of the style, but opens also up for the series possibility to be either a finished product (like Arrested Development) or the process of the collection of material (like The Office). In both cases the author would be Eve and thus, contrary to the other series, found within the diegesis as an active character. Eve as the author is however a complicated concept since she also shows up on screen, and thus physically cannot be the one taking all the footage (Still 26). In fact, the second scene does
already feature all the family members and therefore the camera needs to be operated from outside, and there is no reason given for these other camera operators’ existence. Neither are the cameras being directly addressed outside of interviews/talking head sequences. Also, the cameras cannot actually exist within the diegesis as this is made impossible through placing a camera behind Mike’s shoulder which isn’t seen from the other angles, just as in the example scene from *Parks and Recreation* (Still 11 and 12, page 55). Letting the shoulder be visible in the frame reveals the cameras placement.

As it turns out, the setup of the initial interview scene was dependent on Eve as an instigator because she is making a video for a school assignment instead of a book report on *The Grapes of Wrath*, thus this first scene is actually setting up part of the episodes’ story and not primarily the style. Each interview sequence during this episode is made to be as filmed by Eve. These other interviews are not as professionally set up as the first one or the ones that will follow in other episodes, as evident in the slightly poorer picture quality in the interview with mother Annie (Still 27). Throughout the series these interviews will be filmed in different locations within the apartment, mainly the living room or each character’s bedroom, with the exception of a few sequences with Leigh in her own apartment. The only interview sequences not filmed with a handheld device are featuring Eve, providing continuity for the story of her instigating and filming these sequences. However, her actions are soon taken away completely as the reason for the style when the iPhone with which Eve is filming herself is revealed in a cut from a close up talking head to a slightly wider shot of the same scene (Still 28). This makes later interview sequences inconclusive. After revealing the phone camera, Eve is seen several times filming her family with the phone, such as Mike trying to open a jar (still 29 and 30) or being interviewed on live television. This is always presented as being taped by an outside camera and the actual footage is not revealed to the viewer until a few exceptions being featured during her class presentation (Still 31). After she gets a failing grade, her brother Ian advises her to continue with the project. She says that she will contemplate this, but that it would demand her filming much more of the family. The issue is never picked up again. Paired with the increasing quality of the interview sequences it is unlikely that anything beyond the scenes from the pilot episode are filmed by Eve.
Beyond this first episodes story about Eve’s school assignment there is no reason for the style given in the narrative, and even this cause is only very marginally applicable. Ultimately the camera is only acknowledged to a marginal degree. It is never assured to exist within the diegesis, as it is in The Office. Outside of the interview sequences the camera is never acknowledged, not even glanced at – which places those scenes more en par with Brooklyn Nine Nine and a completely observational Direct Cinema style. But, The Michael J Fox Show, despite also using handheld cameras, does display the most “static” filming technique of the series explored here in the sense that panning and zooming are only very rarely used and instead a classic continuity editing lets the handheld camera almost disappear. Interview sequences do thus become less and less of an official interview and more as if the characters are speaking directly to the audience, furthering the argument that the style is meant to incorporate the viewer into these characters lives. Sharing secrets, thoughts, emotions and truth with only the viewer gives the audience a privileged position of knowledge and confidence. This connects The Michael J Fox Show with the style functions in Modern Family, where the cameras existence within the story universe is also never confirmed, even though the characters look at it. In both series, characters outside the main group do not acknowledge the camera; which is also true for Parks and Recreation. Another similarity to Modern Family is that the two series are very much alike in their dramaturgy: the episodes adhere to the sitcom dramaturgy, but instead of the disconnected tagscene they end on a summary of the lesson learned. Thus the ending of every episode is summarized through addressing its moral theme or what the characters have learned about life, in a combination of extra diegetic voice over often replacing the diegetic sounds of harmonious family life and the talking head sequence from which the voice over is taken. Whilst in Modern Family this will be done by different characters virtually each episode with no one taking dominance over the others (except grownups over children), on The Michael J Fox Show it is predominantly Mike that sums up the lesson with the exception of two episodes being summarized by Eve (101 “Pilot” and 114 “Couples”, the first of which has a narratively logic reason which the second does not). Otherwise, the episodes do also follow the dramaturgical model of sitcom whilst having a vaster narrative progression and character growth, just like all the series explored here. Additionally, just as Modern Family, every episode features three different yet slightly
connected storylines featuring different constellations of characters. They are however not as entwined as the parallel stories of *Modern Family* and instead of *Modern Family*’s general approach of equal narrative value, one story will always be the main thread. Most often that will be the story featuring Fox the most.

Stylistically *The Michael J Fox Show* is very similar to *Modern Family* with handheld camera and several camera positions per scene. But even more cuts than zooms and pans. *The Michael J Fox Show* is predominantly contained to inside locations, whereas *Modern Family* moves about so freely that entire episodes such as 301 “Dude Ranch” can be set primarily outside. The interview sequences in the two series’ are very similar: dominated by frontal half close-ups, never from the side, shot within the home in comfortable furniture/positions, but without zooms or cuts as they retain the same framing throughout. Whilst they primarily are single person interviews instead of the many couple sequences in *Modern Family*, there are also some with Mike and his wife together as well as Eve and Ian sharing sequences. A mayor difference is that the interviews are not entirely separated from the surroundings as in *Modern Family*, but more like in *Parks and Recreation*, open to be entered by others. Thus other characters can interact with the character being interviewed. These interactions can take up much more space than in *Parks and Recreation*. In *The Michael J Fox Show* at times someone walks into the shot and starts interacting with the person being interviewed such as Annie in the pilot (Still 32) or Graham in 115 “Sochi” (Still 33). The latter episode also displays the series aim for actuality by placing Mike on a work assignment that perfectly aligns with real world events as he is sent to report on the Winter Olympics in Russia.

The interview sequences share another similarity with the ones in *Modern Family* as the characters wear different clothes than throughout the action of the episode, but they are wearing the same cloth throughout the interview sequences which connects them temporally. Combined with the fact that many of the comments are analytical conclusions as well as the summary of the lesson learned at the end, it seems that these sequences are basically filmed “at the end of the week.” Meaning taped after the events and thus reflecting back on them. Whilst time generally is irrelevant, it seems that most episodes summarize a couple of days. Since TV scheduling plans for an episode per week, it is reasonable to assume that each episode is supposed to summarize the mayor events and life lesson of a week. This is also the layout of *Modern Family*. 
5 CONCLUSIONS: A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A...?

This final chapter shall conclude the thesis by relating the results of the (stylistic) analysis to three generic concepts: the sitcom, “comedy verite” and Reality TV. This is to sum up and concisely voice my conclusion stemming from the previous (style) analysis as well as to indicate where further research has to be implemented.

5-1 & SITCOM?

As visible through the analysis in the previous chapters, the group of series’ investigated here do follow the classic sitcom dramaturgy. They also adhere to most of the genres general rules of narrative, albeit with slight alterations. The main narrative difference being the continuity of the series universe and stories: whilst episodes not necessarily directly connect to each other story wise and generally are temporally disengaged, they do tie into a greater, connected time progression. The re-set button is not employed as strictly, as characters are allowed to retain memory of previous events. Thus they are not as strictly episodic as traditional sitcom, this is however a narrative trait from which the traditional sitcom has started to move away since the 90s and the increasingly serial narrative of Friends. Noteworthy instead is that in both types the order (or equilibrium) as established in the pilot is maintained throughout the series: “What matters, in the end, is maintaining a certain order that was established at the beginning of the series, often in the pilot episode.”¹⁵⁹ Very important for the genre definition is that “sitcom maintains a certain degree of fixity – thematic, figurative and, ultimately, axiological in order to keep its narrative structure working.”¹⁶⁰ As Savorelli concludes, and I agree, this is also maintained in New Comedy (especially the here explored series).¹⁶¹ This fixity also transfers over into the stability of the characters (traits). As in classic sitcom the characters are highly stereotyped and stay essentially the same. They can grow and develop but will retain their main defining features.

Thanks to the fact that all series explored here essentially are concerned with interpersonal relationships, just as the traditional sitcom, all series can also make use of the conflict tropes of sitcom: “The higher the number of characters, the more evident and combinable the conflict, not only as an opposition between polarized thematic investments, but also as a modulation of similar investments.”¹⁶² The sitcom is a good format for displaying ideological conflicts, which has become a narrative device to build entire series around such as The Beverly Hillbillies (CBS 1962-1971), Family Ties (NBC 1982-1989) or

¹⁶⁰ ibid., p.28
¹⁶¹ ibid., p.28
¹⁶² ibid., p.26
Dharma and Greg (ABC 1997-2002). Ideological conflict defines in these the plots of the entire series. Throughout the run of a series then a certain ideological flexibility will be achieved, such as Dharma and Greg trying out each other’s traits, for instance when Greg leaves the law to become a free spirit and Dharma becoming increasingly materialistic. Ideological flexibility is then primarily obtained by watering down the conflict, for example through letting the two main characters come closer to each other’s point of view whilst their parents as secondary characters instead take on the function of highlighting differences. Some version of this can be found in virtually every sitcom. Gerald Mast has defined eight different forms of comedic plot (in TV and film), of which the forth is the most common in sitcom series. This plot structure consists of representing the structures of a certain society or social group. These structures will be confronted with the actions of another individual social group, to present how they will react to the same events in a different manner. Thus also legitimizing ideological conflict as more than just a trope, and rather a complete basis for plot structure, and indeed a defining trait of sitcom. This is also visible in the documentary style programs. On Parks and Recreation the driving factor of most plots is Leslies stern believe in the government and the processes of her work, she is met by obstacles through both the opposition of the public, her direct superior Ron and the bureaucracy that comes with trying to achieve change. Her eagerness stands in direct opposition to virtually all the other Pawnee city government employees, thus she is constantly at odds with her surroundings. The ideological conflicts between Ron and Leslie are so vast that they should make it impossible to work together, just as Dharma Greg should not be able to have a well functioning marriage. But instead of letting them fight throughout every episode, their conflict is only employed strategically and for certain storylines so instead they accept each other’s points of view. In this way the new types of comedy carry on the torch of teaching possibilities of co-existence and merging, staying true to the aim of comedy to not only be representative of its time but to also represent their eras (preferred) role models. Sitcom not only reflects the kinds of relationships and values which the broader society finds normal, but does also show different types of interaction between conflicting minds or groups in a humoristic and therefore less aggressively or didactic confrontational manner. Or as John Hartley puts it: “[Sitcom is] gently and amusingly teaching two important skills: how to watch television (media literacy); and how to live in families with tolerant mutual accommodation, talking not fighting (life

165 Mikos, Lothar: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Konstanz: UTB, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008), p.148
What other shows teach for domestic life, *Parks and Recreation* does for a national and political stage: “Celebrating the virtues of local government and staking a claim for the value of civic engagement and the possibility of collaboration -or at least peaceful coexistence- between different political camps, *Parks and Recreation* offers a liberal pluralist response to the fragmented post-cultural forum environment.”

As opposed to the balanced approach of the network era, “when a conservative character would be countered by the presence of a liberal character,” and equally as opposed to the post-network eras approach of serving up something for everyone, *Parks and Recreation* does not use Ron and Leslie as opposing ends of the spectrum. Instead, “it shows how opposing factions can communicate and collaborate.” Therefore aiming undoubtedly higher in its educational purpose than the vast majority of its generic predecessors.

Ideological conflicts are also found in the other series of the here explored group, for example Michael and his son with their high work ethics against the rest of the Bluth family on *Arrested Development*, Jake versus the Captain on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, or daughters Haley and Alex on *Modern Family*. All of those conflicts however are generally of a more individual based nature, and do not come from or are aided by the difference in socio-economic class such as on *Dharma and Greg*. In fact, even the series all together do present fairly similar socio-economic groups, predominantly white middle class. Portrayal of ideological conflict and/or flexibility is an easily employed plot device in sitcom, due to the fixity of the characters basic features. Plot in sitcom is generally defined through a lack of development, meaning that even if the story progresses and characters learn and grow, the general set-up (or status quo) stays the same; “if we look at the sitcom in terms of what might be called plot, we find little development or innovation. The situation has always been a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manner of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy and ideological conflicts.”

This is more obvious in a classic sitcom style series such as *Married... with Children* (FOX 1987-1997) where the situation in which all characters feel miserable never changes, and in fact often the plot will revolve around this issue. The static nature of the plot in the here explored series is less obvious as more changes occur. Since all the series employ a rather large ensemble cast, characters can be taken away or added, as for instance on *Parks and Recreation* where Mark leaves and later Ben gets added and so forth. But the initial setup of the situation always stays the same, and the

---

168 ibid, p.208
169 ibid, p.208
characters stay stable. With Mark, the romantic interest for Leslie and Ann disappears, but gets replaced with Ben and Chris (Rob Lowe) respectively. Narration, characters, place and situation remain recognizable throughout the series compared to the pilot. Development is marginal, and no one truly leaves the status quo. This is most obvious in Michael Bluth who several times actively tries to leave his family and their troubles behind but always gets pulled back. His wanting to leave but not being able to (emotionally and morally) turns into a running gag on * Arrested Development* and perfectly illustrates the entrapment of the characters in a cage that exists only within themselves. He could just leave, he has employment offers in different cities, but always returns back to basically the same situation in which he has to bail out his entire family. “This sense of entrapment is vital to the continuing narrative of the series, as it ensures a return to the original equilibrium despite the conflicts that occur.”171 Therefore both types of series, independent of style, have to place the central characters in a situation from which they are not able to escape. Due to the geographically based union of the characters the story could otherwise not continue, making characters trapped in both a place and a repetitive pattern of narrative – “a continuous cycle of disrupted equilibrium, conflict, and return to the status quo.”172

This does also mean that the characters and stories physically remain in the same location. Whilst location does not have to be important in the sense of which exact city, its consistency is important because most shows define their social universe geographically. This means that the characters are physically in the same space and that their connection is dependent on it. If a character leaves the location, as for instance Mark leaving Pawnee on * Parks and Recreation*, they also completely disappear from the story and will not be mentioned again. This place is most commonly a workplace (an office or any place of business) or a house which the characters share. Regardless of other social or moral reasons, it is essentially this spatial connection which leads to the social connection, and interpersonal relationships stand at the core of situation comedy. A clear example is the progression of Leslie and Ben’s relationship on * Parks and Recreation*. Through sharing the space of the offices in Pawnee City Hall they go from coworkers to friends to romantic interest to married. This is only possible through Ben’s decision to stay in Pawnee despite a better job offer in 309 “Fancy Party,” thus enabling their relationship through continued sharing of space. Their relationship also enables them to move beyond the borders of the initial location and share an additional, private, space. Partially such spaces in which the characters meet are plot devices that are important for the audiences understanding of why this group of people is interacting

172 ibid
so intensely. They also allow the audience to understand choices of inclusion and exclusion, especially considering not featured family members. This is particularly important for a workplace based series such as *Parks and Recreation*, where most characters family members are either completely ignored or make just a guest appearance in one or a few episodes but then are never or rarely mentioned. Therefore, family consists of the group of people that the situation has thrown together. Anyone outside this group does not matter. Social insularity is accepted as essential to the sitcom universe. The consistency of the style and repetition of the address of the receiver make the audience important. As will be further addressed later, the documentary style allows the audience more clearly to be part of the family as they are not isolated but directly addressed.

Besides geographically uniting the characters and through that creating their social universe, space has further importance in sitcom. Despite the now mobile camera this group of series does also employ the for sitcom essential spatial hierarchies. Not to the expansive degree as in a stylistically traditional sitcom such as *Friends*, but still to a degree that it becomes important in the comparison of the categories. For traditional sitcom the spatial hierarchies and their consistency are of similar importance as the stability of the characters: “Space, as well as the characters’ defining traits, works as a grid within which the sitcom genre develops its (almost) infinite possibilities. But instead of being a limitation, this grid becomes a condition of existence.”173 Spatial hierarchies are not only aimed at locations as discussed above, but are in classic sitcom partially dependent on the theatrical setup of the space: the studio set is aimed at an open forth wall towards which all action is directed. Therefore the space has to be fashioned in a manner that aids the direction of the action. A central part of sitcom, and in fact a much academically explored device, is the sofa. The placement and employment of this specific piece of furniture is generally aimed at letting as many characters as possible face the audience. For example do we find one single sofa in the Central Perk Café on *Friends*. This piece of furniture is placed in the foreground of the setting and thus made important through the placement. It enables three to four characters to seemingly naturally face the same way even during a conversation with each other. The action and humour in this part of the setting is carried mainly verbally, physical movement is restrained. Behind the sofa are to the right the main entrance into the setting as well as a door to a bathroom, to the left are the counter and a further away exit into the kitchen. Physical action can be carried out in the space behind the sofa, but will predominantly consist of entering and exiting. The space behind the sofa is filled by nameless extras that are part of the

---

setting but never or only marginally of the story. The characters which we are supposed to care about get a privileged position through their choice of seating arrangement. In 301 “The one with the Princess Leia Fantasy” the gangs’ obsession with this particular piece of furniture goes so far that they rather leave the Café than sit elsewhere when the couch is occupied by strangers. For the documentary style series this is predominantly transferable into the interview situations and their repetitive, almost static setting. So even whilst the camera moves about freely in the space and thus the space doesn’t need to be laid out to account for the open forth wall, certain images are privileged through repetition and thus also privileging the space and its build up/conception. When several characters share an interview sequence they both face the camera, therefore their bodily placement resembles that of the classic sitcom characters on a sofa. Additionally, in those few scenes where another character enters the interview sequences or interacts with the interviewee, the other character will either remain outside the frame or is restrained to the further away space behind the interviewee.

In the interview sequences the difference in genre through location becomes evident. Domestically themed (or combined) series such as Modern Family and The Michael J Fox Show privilege certain portions of the home, predominantly the sofa or a bedroom. Here nothing stands in between character and audience, the view is free and the character sits comfortably. In the workplace setting however the character will be either behind a desk or on the go. Thus the spatial distance to the viewer is increased in the workplace setting. In The Office the interviews are taking place in a locked room that is disconnected from the narrative entirely and places the character in a setting that would be unfamiliar to them outside of the interview – meaning they are not at their desk, thus not in their “home” setting and take therefore a position that is not as natural to them as the setting would be to a character placed on their sofa or bed or behind their own desk. This differs from Parks and Recreation where characters despite the workplace setting are often interviewed in places that they are very familiar with and spend a lot of time in even outside of the interview, such as their own desk or favorite lunch spot. In the workplace setting a certain distance to the characters is build by the setting which reflects the difference between our public and private selves. Though the documentary style reveals some of the private selves of the characters in The Office they are still restrained and often performing, which becomes obvious through the need of employing obscured camera angles to reveal the characters actual selves. Leslie standing up or being behind her desk on Park and Recreation during interviews does also create a distance, albeit not as noticeable as we do partake in much more of their private life than in those of The Office characters. In all series but The Office, we experience the characters private and public
self through their interactions with other characters and their presentation in the interviews, but they do not perform a public self for the camera/viewers. This is the most essential difference between the series, as it also speaks about the importance, or lack thereof, of the clear existence of the camera within the story universe.

The main unifying stylistic device of the group of series in focus here is the hand-held camera and its ability to move closer into the space and to the action. This is to different degrees expanded on by ways of addressing or not addressing the camera. This awareness of observation is on one hand in stark contrast to the oblivious sitcom characters, but on the other also brings one of classic sitcoms most important devices into the new style by translating it for the new style. One of the prominent expressive elements of classic sitcom is the laugh track, which essentially is a signifier of the “presence of a receiver inscribed in the text itself.”

174 This is mirrored by the, for the new style adapted device of a present camera (*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is the only exception here), whether it is physically present in the series universe or implied: once the camera is directly addressed a receiver is acknowledged. Alternatively, once the receiver is verbally addressed through for instance the voice over, as in *Arrested Development*. Thus both styles present a much alike attitude towards the receiving audience. This also acknowledges the historical significance for the genre of acknowledging the receiver, in a way honoring the roots of the genre by not only acknowledging the presence of the audience as a defining trait for the genre but by updating how this will be signified. The live and canned laughter are always acknowledging sitcoms theatrical roots, this heritage is now being expanded on by acknowledging that the genre can move from a primarily theatrical to a more televisual form without losing its defining features – much like the modern characters grow and evolve without ever losing their essential features.

The (personal) address of the receiver also serves the function of allowing the viewer more clearly into the (familial) space. Sitcom is in a sense realistic, meaning that it does not portray a fantasy world or any other uncommon and unknown structure. The essence of the situation is its recognition value. “The sitcom seems to require the presence of a quasi-familial structure in order to satisfy the needs of the viewer. The TV viewer is always addressed by the sitcom as a member of a family.”

175 Jane Feuers observation, paired with her notion that the term “‘family sitcom’ is redundant since all sitcoms involve some kind of domestic unit,”

176 does respond well with my conclusion of the sitcoms general emphasis on interpersonal relationships and the stylistic aims of the documentary style sitcom to incorporate the viewer

---


176 Ibid, p.83
into these family substituting relationships. No character is alone in a situation and most of the comedy stems from the interaction. Additionally, just as characters in the traditional sitcom style are never alone because the audience laughter is also heard when they are alone in a room, so are the characters in the documentary style series not alone because their actions will either be commented on by a voice over or they will comment on themselves by directly addressing the recipient behind the camera (verbally or with a glance at the camera). Outside of that, every situation is based on a family-type structure between the characters. This familiarity is instant if the character is meant to stay, so is for example the new employee in the Pilot episode of *The Office* instantly allowed to use the same jargon as the senior employees. The documentary style manages to highlight this goal of addressing the sitcom audience as a member of the family through the direct address, as well as through the implications of the handheld camera. The shakiness and general movement of a handheld camera signifies the existence of the person holding it—and acknowledges mediation which in other forms is aimed to be hidden through for instance continuity editing, often referred to as “zero degree style.” Beyond that it also signifies a “home-made” type of media. Home videos are made with handheld cameras, applying the style to especially a domestic comedy does thus invoke this type of media and therefore signifies once again the viewers place within the characters world. The style then implicates the acceptance of the viewer into the space and emotions of the on-screen “family.” The direct address of the audience through especially the interview sequences elevates TV’s aim to invite the world into our living room. It also drags the viewer into the situation, and as previously mentioned: everyone that is in the situation is part of the “family.”

Consequently it has become clear that whilst the documentary style does instantly distinguish the series from classic sitcom style, the two share many elements as they have been translated over into the different style. Similarly one of the classic sitcom styles’ functions is to signify liveness. Live equals really happening in the moment, equally does the documentary style function to signify the real. Signifying liveness is an ability exclusive to television style, as is the creation of a collective experience through liveness. As this is a quality that sets the medium apart from others, it is important that this is clearly signified to the viewers. Liveness creates a collective experience despite geographical distance, for example through the simultaneous experience of a big event such as the Super Bowl. Indicators for liveness function to recreate the collective experience even in programs that aren’t being broadcast live. It is important to note that live not only stands for something that is being received simultaneously with others but actually happening right that moment, thus
the signifiers of the live are also stating that an event is actually really happening. The sitcom started out as being aired live and continued to be filmed in a similar manner (live-on-tape) to continue being perceived as live – a shared experience similar to the theater, vaudeville or stand-up comedy act. The documentary style enables the comedy series with a new type of liveness, as the events in the series can, through the style, be coded as spontaneous without actually employing modes of production that are live or live-on-tape. This is only possible because the stylistic signifiers of “live” and “real” have become familiar to the audience to such a degree that even texts that are not actually live can be read as such. Therefore the most essential function of the documentary style is the advancement of the narrative and a replacement of “live” for “real” in which the two are essentially the same, and thus the essential functions of the previous style are retained.

In relation to sitcom then, I can conclude that despite the change in style and the higher complexity of stories and characters, the group of series acting as a frame of reference for the possible genre category here, do still adhere to most of the essential points of sitcom in regards to dramaturgy, narrative, characters, tropes, humor (verbal, physical, actuality, etc.) and themes (stories are essentially contained by interpersonal relationships and the morals of everyday life). But the heightened complexity of story, world building and character evolution fused with the not only application, but essential application of several levels of metatextual enunciation, do merit these series place in New Comedy. A comedy that takes its genre more seriously, especially by evolving it on so many levels and yet acknowledging its roots and making use of them in a modern and nevertheless equally essential manner. In effect, all of the documentary styles’ devices employed seem to function predominantly towards opening up the space for the audience to enter into it and to become part of the on-screen action, to create a stronger bond between characters and audience. What we have then are sitcom series with a documentary mode. Instead of the long time rigid and static nature of the sitcom it now is a genre with stylistic variety: starting at the traditional multi-camera, animation, multicam-hybrids and continuing in different single-camera styles such as the documentary or “comedy verite” style. The next chapter shall be concerned with the in this thesis explored series’ connection to the term “comedy verite.”
5-2 & COMEDY VERITE?

The evolution of the sitcom genre has, for much longer than in other TV genres, been contained to the setting – from the domestic space to the workplace, from the biological family to the chosen family. Similarly as all the different settings still are used with equal success, it is also reasonable that the now emerging different styles will be able to co-exist with the traditional – and not predict the death of traditional sitcoms (as in Mills’s). The employment of documentary styles in sitcom series is frequent enough to conclusively state that a new visual style has entered the genre, bringing its own rules and moving away from the traditional sitcom style. The dominant ingredients of this style are the hand-held camera and its ability to move closer into the space and to the action, as well as the direct address of the viewer. But it is not sufficient to simply state that these series employ an indistinct “documentary” style. It is not a conclusive description of the style to loosely indicate that a text adheres to the (stylistic) conventions of a factual program or documentary film, as there are a myriad of differently looking programs contained within these terms, and many of these have very different aims. In continuation of exploring how the American documentary style sitcom series look, the aim of this thesis is to explore a fitting term to describe the category.

Firstly, it has to be stated that documentary is in itself a rich and varied genre. A definition of documentary film in general, formulated by one of the most influential documentary film scholars Bill Nichols, describes it as “a form of cinema that speaks to us about actual situations and events. It involves real people (social actors) who present themselves to us in stories that convey a plausible proposal about or perspective on the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a proposal or perspective on the historical world directly, adhering to known facts rather than creating a fictional allegory.” With this definition as a starting point, Nichols distinguishes different types of documentary, dividing the genre into different modes that account for the films stylistic features and relation to portraying the real.

When it comes to sitcoms employing documentary style, the in academia most commonly used term is “comedy verite.” The term was devised by Brett Mills through analysis of The Office (UK). He describes this as a style in which “the visual characteristics of [cinema] verite have been adopted by sitcom for comedic purposes.” After Mills’ conception of the term “comedy verite” it has been accepted into the academic vocabulary without any further investigation or critique of the term. It is often mentioned in passing or

applied in analysis and has not been challenged, but merely accepted. To my knowledge there have neither been any further investigations into the term itself than those originally made during its inception by Mills and then later expanded on for the US context by Ethan Thompson. Nor have I found any critique of the term in itself. It seems to have been absorbed into the academic terminology without having been sufficiently challenged or sufficiently investigated. So does, for instance, Trisha Dunleavy describe “comedy verite” as a label that acknowledges a hybrid form which has fused the conventions of traditional sitcom with those of the ‘reality’ TV sub-genre docuseries.

But in fact the term refers not to a connection with Reality TV, as she presumes, but the specific documentary film tradition Cinéma Vérité. For expansion on the definition of Cinéma Vérité and “comedy verite,” see chapters 3-1 “The Office and comedy verite” and 3-2 “Arrested Development and comedy verite,” in which I have described and exemplified the term according to the articles defining it: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” by Brett Mills and “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” by Ethan Thompson. It does however become apparent through other texts by Mills that he has slightly developed the concept throughout his work directly following the article in Screen. Without clearly voicing doubt in his (original) theory he does later address some issues, but without articulating any concluding consequences. I agree with Mills’ conception of the term insofar as when he is referring to the British (and Australian) programs, as well as the American remake of The Office. Partially also because my own research here has focused on the American series and there is a clear difference between them and The Office. Whilst Mills in the original text defining the term does not draw a clear distinction between national differences, only stating that there is not yet a popular enough example text in the US, it becomes apparent through reading several of his texts that he only refers to British (and Australian) series with “comedy verite.” In the book Television Sitcom he suggests that there are different versions: “While some of these series […] use documentary and docuseries techniques to comedically examine the consequences of such products, others […] merely adopt them.” In the anthology The Television Genre Book Mills notes a difference between the British and the then few American programs with a similar aesthetic: “In the fluid, chaotic camerawork of these series, there’s a surface parallel with the ‘comedy vérité’ programmes of the UK. However, what’s significant about these American series is that none of them adopts the mock-documentary

---

180 Dunleavy, Trisha: Hybridity in TV Sitcom: The Case of Comedy Vérité; FlowTV; 2008-12-11; http://flowtv.org/2008/12/hybridity-in-tv-sitcom-the-case-of-comedy-verite%C2%A0%C2%A0trisha-dunleavy%C2%A0%C2%A0victoria-university-of-wellington%C2%A0/read-2014-04-17
181 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (Screen 45, Spring 1, 2004)
182 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007)
format, for in none of them do the characters behave as if they know they are being filmed."184 It is central to the British series’ characters to be aware of the “camera crew, and how they might be seen by viewers at home, meaning that comedy is created in the gap between the ‘real’ person and how they attempt to portray themselves for the viewing public, “and the whole of comedy vérité rests on finding comedy in the ways in which people start performing once a camera is turned on them.”185 Contrary to this, in my observation of the US documentary style sitcom series they acknowledge the mediation from within the diegesis less and less throughout the historical progression of the category. Documentary style in contemporary American TV is not employed with a specific purpose or audience in mind, i.e. the production and presence of the cameras are not explained and often their existence within the story universe remains unproven. Do not aim to be (or seem like) actual documentaries. Thus these series are turning the documentary device into more of a surface style and not necessarily an inherent part of the story, i.e. the story and characters actions would not differ if the cameras were not there (as they seemingly aren’t there in the character’s universe). Therefore the documentary style in the US series stands in opposition to the documentary style in those from the UK. For me this does essentially present a softening of the style both nationally and with time. Mills acknowledges the national differences by concluding that “the only noticeable sitcom using the mock-documentary format is the American remake of The Office: An American Workplace.”186 I have throughout this research tried to avoid the term mockumentary. This is due to the terms intonations of parody and mocking of a genre. The term mockumentary refers to texts “in which documentary devices are imitated and/or parodied for comic effect.”188 The comedy in the series explored does not stem from parodying the genre(s), but it is the narrative content that is responsible for the comedy. The subjects are matter of comic evaluation. The Office does here provide a slight difference as part of its comic comes from the existence of the style. The term mockumentary can thus be applied to a program such as The Office. Therefore presenting yet another difference between the two forms of documentary sitcom. I do thus wholeheartedly agree with Mills’ differentiation, especially as it has become clear during my analysis of the different series that the other US series in a comparison are organically placed opposite The Office. With its diegetic acknowledgement of the style, The Office becomes the odd duck out, even in comparison to other, chronologically preceding HBO shows such as Curb Your Enthusiasm.

185 Ibid, p.91
The national difference also refers to the fact that historically, US series have done well in syndication abroad whilst foreign series in the US have not. This points towards global impacts of the long running dominion of the American TV-industry and its weight in implanting the own cultural values and cues in the receiver culture. This is an interesting issue which should be further discussed in the appropriate context, and perhaps even with a reception focus. Especially because the issue is reinforced by the fact that other countries own sitcoms “rarely compete successfully with [US and even UK] imports, and the genre as a whole does not have the social or industrial position it occupies in the UK and America. The sitcom remains an Anglo-American product,”¹⁸⁹ and yet it also is a thriving export product and globally part of the popular-culture discourse. At any rate, the national difference in the application of documentary style has proven important. The redefinition of the term to the US-market has been attempted by Ethan Thompson, but before moving on to his conception there is one more issue in Mills’ definition of “comedy verite” I have to address.

In his account of contemporary sitcom (overall Mills puts too much emphasis on documentary style series as contemporary sitcom; as has been shown by Savorelli and Butler there are several different stylistic types of contemporary sitcom and the documentary style is not necessarily the most dominant one) and “comedy verite” Mills states that “the conventions which have traditionally defined the genre [sitcom]”¹⁹⁰ have been abandoned for the benefit of the “adoption of the characteristics of other normally quite separate, kinds of programming.”¹⁹¹ He does not acknowledge the translation between the styles. In chapter 5-1 “& Sitcom” I have made an effort to highlight the ways in which traditional sitcom has been translated into the documentary style. It is important to acknowledge that how the documentary style has been employed is crucially dependent on its abilities to signify what the now replaced devices had signified. The translations keep the viewer from disassociating from the genre and instead allows the audience through their media literacy to read the new style based on the same terms. Simultaneously the combination of the genres is only possible due to the audiences having acquired literacy in hybrid forms throughout the recent decades, predominately since the 90s. As shown in chapter 5-1 “& Sitcom,” most abandoned devices do have a counterpart in the new style. Thus “abandonment” of stylistic features might be too harsh, which has instead lead me to call it translation. This is particularly apparent in the US series.

¹⁹¹ ibid, p.89
When relating the American documentary style sitcom series to Cinéma Vérité Ethan Thompson falls prey to a common misconception, a basic misuse of the term Cinéma Vérité. He claims that Nichols’ observational mode of documentary includes both Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema.192 (For further definition of the two traditions see chapter 3-1 “The Office and comedy verite.”) "Direct Cinema has often been mistakenly confused with other genres […]; even more frequently, there has been an equation of its approaches and achievements with cinema vérité. On the contrary, direct cinema is a distinct genre.”193 Whilst both Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité were developed based on the same premises and have similar goals, they are not formally alike and do not belong to the same mode. The Direct Cinema movement is part of the observational mode, essentially defined by the films “observe[ing] lived experience spontaneously”194 and “look[ing] on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers.”195 But Cinéma Vérité is at home in the participatory mode. Based on the idea of “filmtruth” stemming from Dziga Vertov, the French Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin termed this particular style of filmmaking Cinéma Vérité: “the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than absolute or untampered truth. We see how the filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter. Cinéma vérité reveals the reality of what happens when people interact in the presence of a camera.”196 In fact, Nichols directly expands on the difference of the modes through Cinéma Vérité: “If there is a truth here it is the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera. In this sense it is the opposite of the observational premise that what we see is what we would have seen had we been there. In a participatory documentary, what we see is what we can see only when a camera, or filmmaker, is there instead of ourselves.”197 So Thompson’s analyses take place under the (faulty) premise that Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema are equal under the observational mode. Which then does the term “comedy verite” relate too, if both opposing modes are referenced at once?

In the beginning of the analysis in “Comedy Vérité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom”198 Thompson directly compares the series Blowin’ Up (MTV 2006-) with the documentary style of D.A. Pennebaker, a member of the group Drew

---

192 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Vérité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007), p.64
195 ibid, p.174
196 ibid, p.184
197 ibid, p.184f
198 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Vérité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007), p.63

85
Associates which pioneered the American Direct Cinema movement. Their vision had the explicit aim, in direct opposition to Cinéma Vérité, to film as if they were absent – the infamous fly-on-the-wall idea. Continuously throughout his analysis, Thompson links the American series to the observational mode. This does also fit with my reading of the US series as following characters that are being observed but not influenced. The events of *Modern Family, Arrested Development, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, The Michael J Fox Show* or *Parks and Recreation* would progress in the same manner were the camera not there. Their “reality” relates therefore to the observational mode or Direct Cinema, which “found its truth in events available to the camera.” Whilst many of the events in The Office would also happen without the camera, a significant amount of them is altered by the cameras presence and especially by Scott/Brent performing for it. So, even though he often performs for the physical audience of his coworkers, more often he aims to amuse the unidentified audience at home – which he only knows about thanks to the cameras. Therefore, the “reality” of the people presiding within the office is clearly changed through the presence of the camera. This relates to the same paradox to which Cinéma Vérité was committed: “artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface.” The cameras presence pushes the characters to comment and reflect on their situation. Jim/Tim is here the clearest example, as he through the interviews is pushed to voice his doubts about his choice of workplace and to reflect over his feelings both in regards to the work and Pam/Dawn (Lucy Davis). In the other series employing interview/talking head sequences, the characters do not actively reflect on the situation or their actions but comment on their behavior or emotions when they are not presenting the viewer with contextual knowledge.

A reading of Thompson’s conception of the term “comedy verite” is problematic. He does give insightful accounts about the historical, economical as well as cultural conditioning of the development. He also sees the same parallel as I want to highlight here in the context of documentary style sitcom series in the US, namely the parallel development of the styles and the national differences: “Just as direct cinema traded the interactive component of cinema verité for a more observational approach, American comedy verité seems less interested in interrogating media forms.” But due to his falling into the trap of a common misunderstanding and mixing up the mode terms and traditions, Thompson does not draw the conclusion from his statement that the differences between the series’ are too vast to be

---

200 ibid, p.178
202 ibid, p.304
203 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verite? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (*Velvet Light Trap* 60, Fall 2007), p.68
contained under the same term, at least if that term is supposed to be “comedy verite.” As Thompson perceives the Cinéma Vérité tradition as an observational mode when in fact it is a participatory, he does not reflect on the connotative origin and purpose of the term “comedy verite” but simply lets the (observational rather than interactive) American series be swallowed by it. Thus, he does not reflect over the fact that “verité” actually might not be the best word to define these series. So, even though he lists the differences between the British and American series, due to his assumption that Cinéma Vérité is equally an observational mode as Direct Cinema, and his lack of accounting for the difference in production and stylistics, he does not draw the consequent conclusion from his observation. He is right that, in a sense, it can be claimed that all the American sitcom series employing documentary style can be (loosely) associated with the mode of observational documentary as defined by Bill Nichols, but then they can no longer be “verité.” Under consideration of the actual and distinct differences between Cinéma Vérité, and the observational documentary mode or Direct Cinema, I see the national differences between the series as too vast and fundamental to apply the “comedy verite” term to the American series. They do not adhere to “comedy verites” most essentially defining trait of an “insistence on engaging with the tension between the camera as objective record and the effects of filming,” i.e. they do not clearly acknowledge the mediation (process) as well as the presence of the camera (in the diegesis). Thus, Thompson’s premise of Arrested Development as “comedy verite” cannot function, for it is based on flawed theoretical ground. Additionally, in claiming that American series, such as Arrested Development and later also Modern Family, are observational (comedy verite), he disregards that defining features of the series consist of voice over narration or interview sequences, and that characters can acknowledge the camera. All of which stands in opposition to the observational mode. On the whole, I think a text should not be called “verité” if it doesn’t fulfill the promises of the mother term Cinéma Vérité (or should not be called observational if it does).

I understand the appeal of the term “comedy verite,” but also think that it is important to reflect over its exact implications, especially because the application of the term to the American documentary style sitcoms as made by Thompson, and then followed by other scholars such as Butler and Trisha Dunleavy, does not account for the term’s most defining features. The acceptance of the term goes hand in hand with what Tzvetan Todorov

204 Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (Screen 45, Spring 1, 2004), p.74
205 Thompson, Ethan: http://swigzine.blogspot.se/2011/01/205
has designated to be academically created genres. Todorov observes that genre definition can be twofold: on one side, primarily based upon mediacommunication, meaning a definition based in the communication of terms between industries and audiences; and on the other side genre as (purely) theoretical, i.e. the classification is constructed afterwards by researchers and theoreticians. These classifications are not part of the mentioned communication. Theoretical doesn’t mean that codes are constructed but rather defining then existing codes that the producers were not aware of (a commonly employed example is Film Noir). This does not apply to the creators of the documentary style series, as all of them have consciously chosen to employ them for different reasons ranging from economic to creative. Also, “comedy verite,” like Cinéma Vérité, is not a “household” term, thus not useful as a general term of product identification also applicable for audiences. Whilst sitcom is a widespread, popular and well-known term, Cinéma Vérité as a term is more for the initiated, and increasingly turning away from being a term of production and towards being a term of academia. It demands interest and knowledge that go beyond the everyday application of genre terms. Additionally, the Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema movements are today less relevant because viewers have a different relationship to “the real” – the mediated truth – and to audiovisual media at large than in the 60s when the traditions came about to counter the then dominant expository mode and its rhetorical content. As Mittell explained, “changing cultural circumstances bring about generic shifts.” Also, the term is almost too harshly invoking the dominance of film style onto a genre that so uniquely signifies its medium: sitcom can only be found in TV. Being that reapplying genre terms to a new medium always brings with confusion, due to the audiences earlier experiences with them, I do not see it as necessarily fruitful to try to wash out boundaries between film and serialized TV. Lothar Mikos emphaizes in his textbook *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* that despite approximately 90 percent of the films produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century were made for TV, film and TV need to be seen as different media which are differently structured. In genre studies of TV, generally there is a difference made between journalistic and news programs as against documentary films as well as against Reality TV. Thus there exists precedence to separating documentary films, even those produced specifically for TV, from other factual TV formats. For instance, does The Television Genre Book distinguish between “News,” “Documentary,” “Reality TV,” and additionally formats such as quiz and talk shows are in

---

209 ibid, p.157
210 *The Writers’ Room* (Sundance TV, 2013–), 102 “Parks and Recreation”; & The Arrested Development Documentary Project (Jeff Smith, 2013)
212 Mikos, Lothar: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz: UTB, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008), p.15
this book placed under “Popular Entertainment.” What Mills and Thompson do in trying to apply the ideals of Cinéma Vérité to documentary style sitcom series is forcing a merger between two medium specific genres. As earlier referenced in my description of genre theory (chapter 2-3 “Genre and Genre Thoery”), an important point of critique against genre terms is that the same term can, or at times, must differ between different forms of texts – what is obvious for one medium might not be applicable to another. Not everything from film studies is re-applicable to TV studies. The sitcom especially is unique to TV, its narrative and dramaturgical build are dependent on the practices of the medium. A medium that is inherently easily accessible and widespread; the epitome of popular culture. Cinéma Vérité is in stark contrast. Using a French word also places a certain intonation, signifying a certain kind of “quality” and “fine arts,” giving more power to what already has power. Instead, I think the term should come from the sitcom, as it is the genre of these series (see chapter 5-1 “& Sitcom”) whilst the documentary is their (stylistic) mode. Additionally, when using the specific traditions Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema to define a scripted production, the reapplication goes against the intentions of the terms creators: Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité were meant to show truth of the lived situation, sitcom is scripted to imitate life. Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema are hard to keep apart as there are so many similarities. Applying these terms to the stylistic choices of fiction programs becomes then even more complicated. Especially as ones claim on unscripted (or non-intervened) representation stands in direct opposition to the others minutely scripted content. Whilst many of Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérités traits fit with the documentary style series, many do not, and overall the application seems thus at times forced.

Thompson does make another interesting observation when he connects Brian Winston’s term “verite” (without the accent over the é) to “comedy verite.” He describes verite as essentially the watered down version of both Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, developed by television industries both sides of the Atlantic as a quicker produced format than the fully observational mode by employing a combination of “direct-cinema-style material, […] commentary, interviews, graphics, reconstruction and the rest of the realist documentary repertoire.” But, without having read Winston outside of Thompson, I see here too a complication in choosing a term signifying the Cinéma Vérité, when meaning to signify a more Direct Cinema inspired form (the mediation and its creators are only rarely acknowledged in the types of films and programs referred to). However, it is helpful to think

214 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007), p.66
215 ibid, p.66
along these lines, as such arguments align the explored texts with an approach to definition within their own medium.

In conclusion, “comedy verite” makes sense for the British series such as *The Office*, which actively comment on mediation, authenticity and veracity of the forms. Here “comedy verities” demand of acknowledgment of the camera in the situation is accounted for and an essential staple of the series, thus clearly confirming the heritage in Cinéma Vérité as claimed by Mills. This does not, at least not to a defining degree, happen in the US series. Why should this difference not be reflected in the term assumed to define them? “Comedy verite” does seem like a premature conclusion based on too little material, and partially even on a faulty theoretical base, thus being a kind of “scientific sound bite” (a term devised by Konstantin Economou and Per Anders Forstorp to describe precisely this overeager choice of words to define a term rather because it sounds good than because it is the most informed choice of words). Similarly to the quickly abandoned term “gamedoc.” Gamedoc turned out to be an academic category too abstract and too removed “from the contexts in which the programs circulate: the term did not appear to have currency in either press or industry circles, and there also seemed to be little academic discussion regarding the justification for, or implications of, this move.”216 But, concluding that “comedy verite” does not entirely fit the US documentary style sitcom series is not definitely helpful in answering the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. If stating that these sitcom series employ a documentary style is not descriptive enough and yet the most commonly used term “comedy verite” does not fit either, where should we look for answers? As I indicated above, TV itself features a myriad of televisual documentary formats, from which there possibly can come a helpful way to determine the documentary style series place within their own medium with a terminology more closely connected to their own medium. A further investigation of the term “comedy verite” is warranted, or rather, an investigation into other forms that more concisely can define the hybridity of the documentary style sitcom. Essentially, the questions that I set out with at the beginning of this thesis have led me to see that this section of TV links to further developments of the medium and is an important link in these developments. The next, and final, chapter shall give further winks at where the research on the medium needs to continue through my attempt to place the documentary style sitcom series in a different, more clearly intra-medial, context than above.

5-3 & REALITY TV?

The American documentary style sitcoms are defined by a) the mode of production employing handheld camera to a visible degree, and b) the direct address of the viewer, as well as c) the characters lack of knowledge of the mediation or the irrelevance of the cameras actual existence in the diegesis. So the main difference of the American series to the British series and specifically *The Office*, is a reduced acknowledgement of the mediation from within the diegesis. Thus the documentary style is in the American series defining the way the story is told, but not essentially changing the story. Whilst many of the character’s actions on *The Office* are dependent on the presence of the camera, the events of *Parks and Recreation*, *Modern Family* and so forth take place despite the (implied) presence of cameras. In terming these series as coming from the observational mode (Thompson), or from Cinéma Vérité (Thompson through Mills), the use of interview or talking head sequences or use of voice over is not being accounted for. As well as their scripted nature not being sufficiently acknowledged, *Arrested Development* for example is so detailed scripted that even many pauses and clearing of throats and so on are accounted for in the script. Instead the most dominant elements of their style and relation to the camera can be directly compared to the way a certain category of American Reality TV series look and are structured. Let’s take *Modern Family* as an example, it’s most stylistically defining traits when it comes to the documentary conventions are the talking head sequences commenting on the actions and events captured in an observational mode where the camera is largely ignored. This can be directly connected to the style of such (equally family centered) Reality TV series as *Gypsy Sisters* (TLC 2013-) or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC 2012-); here too the camera is ignored within the action and then comments are supplemented through frequent talking heads temporally separated through the characters clothing and location. Similarly can the “on the run” or “in the moment” interviews in *Parks and Recreation* be directly related to the structure of such series as *Gold Rush: Alaska* (Discovery Channel 2010-), which too focuses on a type of workplace (but *Gold Rush* is narratively led by a voice over narrator). A voice over narrator similar to *Arrested Development* is found on *Welcome to Myrtle Manner* (TLC 2013-). Jeana, a family member of the trailer park managers, serves as the viewer’s way into the space as she moves back into the trailer park and takes the audience with her in. She only rarely appears on screen. Thus she isn’t the disconnected narrator of other Reality TV series such as *Gold Rush*, but more akin to the highly involved narrator of *Arrested Development*. Additionally, many of these series are known not to be fully authentic, as for instance the

---

217 *The Arrested Development Documentary Project* (Jeff Smith, 2013)
recent controversy around *Duck Dynasty* (A&E 2012-) exemplifies (regarding one of the characters expressing different types of opinions in interviews than on the series). Whilst the people, relationships and circumstances are real, often they will be asked to partake in a situation, thus portraying or playing themselves in semi-real situations. The amount of catchphrases on for instance *Duck Dynasty* does also imply a certain amount of scripting, or at least repetition asked for by the production.

But Reality TV is a very broad term and needs to first be defined further. “Reality TV is a container for a variety of hybrid genres – particularly factual entertainment content. It is a useful term that instantly says this television programme is a hybrid of non-fiction and entertainment elements.”

Sometimes also called infotainment television or popular factual, but Reality TV is the dominant term. It “has become the description used by both popular and academic critics to describe some of the most high-impact examples of the new factual television.” Under the term a variety of formats are contained such as for example talk shows, docusoaps, trauma TV, life-style- and make-over-shows, talent and event shows as well as reality hoax. “The different kinds of programme described as ‘reality TV’ are unified by the attempt to package particular aspects of everyday life as entertainment.”

This form of TV was born out of programs based on presenting crime, accident and health stories such as *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC 1987-2002) and other networks imitations of it such as *Rescue 911* (CBS 1989-19996) and *Cops* (Fox 1989-), which made surveillance type footage an accepted part of the television landscape. Since the late 80s surveillance style programs (or CCTV) have been an inherent part of the TV landscape thanks to a myriad of Reality TV programs. In a sense, Reality TV has also roots in the observational documentary, which is explained by the fact that “notable examples of observational documentary [films] have been made for television.”

Most notably, the PBS documentary *An American Family* (PBS 1973) has influenced the genres inception not only in the US but other countries as well. It is often regarded as the first (non-formatted) Reality series. Thus today’s Reality TV programs come from a combination of the observational documentary and surveillance style footage, with an added component of commentary mainly coming from the subjects i.e. the people in the text. “Reality TV is a compelling mix of apparently ‘raw’, ‘authentic’ material with the gravitas of the news magazine package or informational programme, combining the commercial success

---

222 Ibid, p. 136
of tabloid content within a public service mode of address."224 The different elements are spun into a slow moving narrative and “the ‘public service’ utility of the programme is often awkwardly at odds with the entertainment-based drive of the narrative structure.”225 Additionally, Reality TV is the format that has the most direct form of interaction with its audience: “Reality TV also includes television programmes with interactive elements, such as voting, and related websites or mobile content.”226 This interactive component is mainly contained to talent and event shows, or more generally speaking to the constructed or formatted programs.227 Within Reality TV two broad distinctions have to be made. Formatted or constructed refers to the programs which create the situation for the purposes of the program itself, the entire reason d’être of the portrayed actions is the production of the TV show. The other type of Reality TV, which is relevant to this thesis, is defined by being based on situations already taking place. “A distinctive feature of observational [i.e. non-formatted] reality programmes is that they rely on filming people in their normal environment, and any changes that occur would mainly have happened if the cameras were not there.”228

In the non-formatted type of Reality TV the narrative is generally situation-, character- and/or location-driven (at times vocation as in the emergency service series). Often they display a certain part of society and their day-to-day life rather than a specific story. This is very similar to the sitcom and the documentary style sitcom especially. Series within these are “lacking a serious subject of documentary inquiry,”229 and instead revolve around a certain state of affairs. A further commonality is the repetitive nature: stable characters in a stable situation with repetitive storylines and no real learning curve or resolution. This is the type of Reality TV programming, to which also the docusoap belongs, with which the documentary style sitcoms can best be compared or related to. All in the previous comparison at the beginning of the chapter mentioned Reality TV programs belong to this category. Additionally to the features mentioned in this exemplifying of the stylistic similarities between some American documentary style sitcom series and Reality TV series, it has to be mentioned that it is uncommon to address the mediation in these Reality TV series therefore presenting a further parallel. From this resemblance, an added point of likeness between the genres exists: the voyeuristic nature of the programs.

The similarities do however also flow from sitcom over to Reality TV series, as has been described, characters chosen for these series are very similarly to sitcom characters stuck

---

226 Ibid, p.138
227 Ibid, p. 138
228 Ibid, p.139
229 Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (Velvet Light Trap 60, Fall 2007), p.68
in a certain situation and do not evolve throughout the series. Often enough even the dramaturgy is presented in a sitcom like manner. Commonly, Reality TV series, especially the British variety, are compared to soap opera. But especially those series following a specific family are more based on sitcom parameters. This is more common in the US Reality series. One of the first celebrity Reality series, and also one of the most influential for the genre, was The Osbournes (MTV 2002–2005). Laura R. Linder even defines The Osbournes as a “reality sitcom” (short reality-com or real-com) in her comparison of it with The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (ABC 1952-1966). They show many similarities both in structure, themes and “offer reassurance that the formula for presenting families on television has not changed much over the decades.”

Considering Mills argument on the emergence of the “comedy verite” series in the UK through their connection with the docusoap, it is also obvious that the American documentary style sitcom series are closely connected with their counterpart in American Reality TV. Meaning that a similar historical connection as Mills showed between British docusoap and “comedy verite” is visible between American Reality TV and the American documentary style sitcom. Even though there are so many similarities between docusoap or Reality TV and the documentary style sitcom series, the reasoning of Mills and Thompson to instead use documentary film theory is understandable. As Hißnauer explains in the book Fernseh Dokumentarismus, documentary film theory is already established, but there does not yet exist a theory of documentary TV forms. Theories of documentary film can however not be simply reapplied to TV documentary, as production, distribution and reception happen under different general conditions. But Hißnauer does not aim to build a self-sufficient theory of “Fernsehdokumentarismus,” merely to prepare for it by defining and describing the different types of documentary texts found in TV. Whilst these different forms are plausible and extensively described, I see a need to further expand on what the term contains which is why I have chosen not to translate it. The closest translation should be (TV) documentarity, however, I think this term is better reserved for a model including more than just the texts, but also the practices surrounding them especially by further building on the in Hißnauer glimpsed position of the active recipient. As a descriptive term of the “new diversity of [...] popular uses of recorded reality,” and documentaries “relocation as a set of practices, forms

---

231 Crisell, Andrew: A Study of Modern Television Thinking Inside the Box (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.89
and functions in the contemporary television environment,” there already exists John Corners influential term “Post-documentary (culture).” Additionally, the by John Caldwell devised term “docu-real” refers to those episodes in entertainment programs that self-consciously showcase documentary units as part of their narrative and plot/or documentary imaging as part of their mise-en-scène. Caldwell does not restrict his analysis to the sitcom but rather considers the docu-real as an emerging technique within episodic television in general.”

Documentarity can and should thus be expanded on as a broader cultural praxis. What can be fruitfully added are the broader cultural practices of these forms – en par with such terms as “to music” which describes all praxis of producing and consuming music. I see a need for this due to the fact that TV has become an integral part of our culture to a degree where it even influences language and shapes everyday schedules of consumers as well as dictates dialogues and brings about interactions. Similarly, TV documentarity shapes the dominant amount of on air time, as well as influences consumer practices through interactive content also seeping over into scripted programming, such as through the utilization of twitter hashtags made up from catchphrases and aimed to shape an interaction between the single TV viewer, the text and the audience as a whole. Additionally transmedia is aimed at reinforcing the reality of the story-universe, such as the book on Pawnee (see chapter 3-3 “New Comedy and The Office (US)”). The productive processes of the audience are also influenced, as visible in social media accounts pretending to be part of a story-universe or more stylistically as visible in for instance vlogs. “The movement of documentary forms into mainstream primetime broadcasting, followed by its hybridization with other genres and mutation into ‘reality TV’, has meant that documentary and factual television now exist in a space that is neither wholly fictional nor wholly factual, both yet neither.”

Exploring the utilization of documentary style conventions in contemporary American sitcom TV series has pointed towards a larger development. This is both the latest evolution of the sitcom genre and a further development towards blending of fiction and real; an interaction between public and private as much as between fiction and real that stretches through the entirety of TV culture and needs to be explored further for its specific practices and influence on society at large. “One of the main reasons for analyzing the sitcom is to attempt to come to terms with the reasons why the genre maintained its popular cultural position.” For as much as Reality TV has influenced the recent documentary style sitcoms, so too has sitcom for much longer influenced character choices and narrative/narration of

236 Williamson, Lisa: “Challenging sitcom conventions – From The Larry Sanders Show to The Comeback”, in Leverette, Marc; Lott, Brian; Buckley, Cara Louise (eds.): It's not TV - Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.100f
237 Jon Dovey in Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (Screen 45, Spring 1, 2004), p.78
Reality TV, as well as dramaturgy to a certain degree. In order to understand contemporary TV evolution it is necessary to further explore the combination of the two genres, in which valuable cultural discussion is found. The merger of the two popular forms showcases not only their impact on TV but on TV culture at large, and both forms impact on cultural dialogue. Additionally, as Mikos states, through presenting different frames of interpretation, hybrid formats encourage the viewer to find ways to ensure their interpretation within their own environment, thus these formats are continued in the social communication of the audience.\(^{239}\) Thompson has expressed ways in which sitcom matters and once stated: “I’m a comedy person, and so I look to comedy to be more innovative because I think it is ultimately the more successful forum for cultural dialogue [than drama]. But I do think there is something especially powerful about narrative, and about characters that viewers can emphasize with.”\(^{240}\) I agree and would like to add that this would be a good point to continue the research on the documentary style of sitcom possibly making it easier to create this impact as it enables a direct viewer-character relationship through the direct address. Similarly, Reality TV has rapidly become the dominant form on TV and is assumed to have the audience’s attention and impact it through offering up characters that are easy to love or hate. Any assumptions about the audiences’ actual reading of any form of TV that can be given the “docu” prefix does however lack empiric examination.\(^{241}\) So, before getting lost in research for the future, I have to track back to the aim of this thesis: How can the documentary style sitcom series be described and what is their place in genre. Firstly, they definitely are sitcom series as shown in chapter 5-1 “& Sitcom.” They are sitcom series with a documentary mode. So maybe it is sufficient to define/term documentary style sitcoms through the TV popular prefix “docu,” en par with such terms as docusoap or Caldwell’s “docu-real fiction” or similar to the in German journalistic television criticism used “dokumödie”: docu-com or docusitcom? In any case, the series’ documentary mode is strongly related to the most dominant form of documentary surrounding them: Reality TV and docusoap. In relaying the term documentary film, Hißnauer notes a similar confusion of the Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité terms as can be found in those conceptions around “comedy verite.” I agree with Hißnauer’s conclusion here and see it as directly re-applicable to the case of documentary style (or mode) sitcom series: Accrediting the aesthetic to Cinéma Vérité or Direct Cinema is a too generalizing and limiting assessment, fake- or mock-umentaries do usually instead adapt the

\(^{239}\) Mikos, Lothar: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz: UTB, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008), p.336


dominant documentary aesthetics.242 Hißnauers argument of dominant documentary style defining the look of mocumentary films is equally as important for the documentary style sitcom. Perhaps more so considering that the majority of TV content is somehow “docu.” It will be interesting to see how the two genres continue to develop their style together further.

---

6 Epilogue

Within sitcom a strong category is developing that consists of series which tell their stories in a documentary style. Themes and structures of narration are similar within them and clearly linked to the sitcom genre. But this category is not fully formed yet and is constantly developing. The themes of those series in the late 90s were concerned with the “behind-the-scenes-of-semi-celebrity-life,” which also was quite meta-humorous and based on meta-narrative as those series would be follow (former, sometimes made-up) TV-personalities and thus comment on their own industry. The British series of the early 2000s then influenced also the American series, stories shifting to depict a more monotonous workplace and then also to family life. Stylistically, too, there have been different ideals shining through and different features of documentary are employed. Most prominently featured are the hand held camera interviews and voice overs and the absence of an extradiegetic soundtrack. It has become clear that the more recent documentary style sitcom series follow the most prominent stylistic ingredients of the currently most dominant type of television documentary: Reality TV. Whilst its definition as documentary might be challengeable, Reality TV's place in the medium is strong and now it becomes more and more apparent that its dominion over the schedule also has impacted other forms and genres.
Bibliography

Books


Bignell, Jonathan; Fickers, Andreas (ed.): A European Television History (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008)

Binder, Nora Annika: Kurzweilige Neurosen Zum Fascinationspotenzial von Ally McBeal und Monk (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2009)


Butler, Jeremy: Television Style (Routledge, 2010, New York)


Crisell, Andrew: A Study of Modern Television Thinking Inside the Box (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

Corrigan, Timothy: A Short Guide to Writing About Film (Pearson Education, 7th edition 2012)


DiMeo, Nate, and the creative team of Parks and Recreation: Pawnee The Greatest Town in America - Written, Compiled, Researched, Typed, Collated, Proofread, and Run Through Spell Check by Leslie Knope Deputy Director, Department of Parks and Recreation (New York: Hyperion, 2001)

Elsasser, Thomas; Hagener, Malte: Film Theory - An Introduction through the Senses (New York: Routledge, 2010)

Eschke, Gunther; Bohne, Rudolf: Bleiben Sie dran! Dramaturgie von TV-Serien. (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2010)


Hickethier, Knut: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B.Metzler, 2007)

Hill, John; Gibson, Pamela Church (ed.): The Oxford Guide to Film Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Hills, Matt: How to do things with Cultural Theory (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005)

Hißnauer, Christian: Fernsehdokumentarismus (Konstanz: UKV, 2011)

King, Geoff: Film Comedy (London: Wallflower Press, 2002)

Leverette, Marc; Lott, Brian; Buckley, Cara Louise (eds.): It's not TV - Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era (New York: Routledge, 2008)

Mikos, Lothar: Film- und Fernsehanalyse (Konstanz: UTB, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008)


Mittell, Jason: Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13)

Mittell, Jason: Genre and Television - From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004)

Mittell, Jason: Television and American Culture (Oxford, 2009)

Mittell, Jason; Thompson, Ethan (eds.): How to watch Television (New York: New York University Press, 2013)

Monaco, James: Film verstehen: Kunst, Technik, Sprache, Geschichte und Theorie des Films und der Medien, Mit einer Einführung in Multimedia; Übersetzung Brigitte Westermeier und Robert Wohlleben (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000)


**Academic Articles**


Mills, Brett: “Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form” (*Screen* 45, Spring 1, 2004)

Thompson, Ethan: “Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom” (*Velvet Light Trap* 60, Fall 2007)


**Online**


Dunleavy, Trisha: *Hybridity in TV Sitcom: The Case of Comedy Verité*; FlowTV; 2008-12-11; http://flowtv.org/2008/12/hybridity-in-tv-sitcom-the-case-of-comedy-verite%20%0%2C%A0%20%2C%A0trisha-dunleavy%20%0%2C%A0victoria-university-of-wellington%20%0%2C%A0/ (read 2014-04-17)


Nussbaum, Emily: *When TV Became Art: Good-bye boob tube, hello brain food*; Published December 4th 2009; New York Magazine; http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/ (read 2012-05-22)

Schneider, Michael: *NBC Boss Why We’re Tweaking or Comedy Brand*; TV Guide; 2013-11-14; http://www.tvguide.com/News/NBC-Comedy-Changes-Office-Spinoff-Up-All-Night-1056218.aspx (read 2013-11-14)


**Audiovisual: Film and TV**

*Arrested Development* (FOX 2003-2006; Netflix 2013-); complete Seasons 1-3 as aired between 2003 and 2006, as well as complete Season 4 as aired in 2013

*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (NBC 2013-); complete Season 1

*Modern Family* (ABC 2009-); complete Seasons 1-6 as aired between 2009 and 2014

*Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009-); complete Seasons 1-6 as aired between 2009 and 2014

*The Arrested Development Documentary Project* (Jeff Smith, 2013)

*The Michael J. Fox Show* (NBC 2013-); Season 1 episode 1-15, as aired fall season 2013/14

*The Office* (UK BBC 2001-2003); complete seasons 1-2 as aired between 2001 and 2003

*The Office* (US NBC 2005-2013); complete Seasons 1-9 as aired between 2005 and 2013

*The Writers’ Room* (Sundance TV, 2013-); episode 102 “Parks and Recreation”
ISKR-Institutionen för studier av samhällsutveckling och kultur

ISRN: LIU-ISAK/KSM-A -- 14/03 -- SE

Handledare:

Konstantin Economou

Nyckelord:

TV; television; TV studies; series; sitcom; comedy; documentary style; contemporary; New Comedy; Antonio Savorelli; style; descriptive stylistics; analytical stylistics; Jeremy Butler; documentary; comedy verite; Brett Mills; Ethan Thompson; Reality TV; Modern Family; The Office; Parks and Recreation; Arrested Development; Brooklyn Nine Nine; The Michael J Fox Show