

This is the Legacy of Garry's Show: Restoring *It's Garry Shandling's Show* to the American Sitcom Canon

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by Emily Hoffman

ABSTRACT

Though largely forgotten, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* is a pivotal sitcom text that reclaims the self-reflexive, meta-narrative style of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Shandling births the contemporary sitcom by de-centering the idealized nuclear family; using Brechtian direct address that fuses the sitcom with stand-up comedy; and parodying specific genres, films, and television shows. These destabilizing features turn the calcified genre into the television equivalent of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival.

Keywords: Garry Shandling, sitcom, direct address, parody

Este es el legado del show de Garry: Restaurando *It's Garry Shandling's Show* al canon de las comedias de situación estadounidenses

RESUMEN

Aunque en gran medida olvidado, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* es un texto fundamental de comedia de situación que recupera el estilo metanarrativo autorreflexivo de *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Shandling da origen a la comedia de situación contemporánea al descentrar la familia nuclear idealizada; utilizando la dirección directa brechtiana que fusiona la comedia con el stand-up; y parodiar géneros, películas y programas de televisión específicos. Estas características desestabilizadoras convierten el género calcificado

en el equivalente televisivo del carnaval de Mikhail Bakhtin.

Palabras clave: Garry Shandling, comedia de situación, dirección directa, parodia

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这是盖瑞·山德林节目的遗产：将《这是盖瑞·山德林的节目》恢复为美国情景喜剧经典

摘要

虽然《这是盖瑞·山德林的节目》在很大程度上被遗忘了，但它是一部关键的情景喜剧文本，再现了《乔治·伯恩斯与格雷西·艾伦的节目》的自我反思和元叙事风格。山德林通过对理想化的小家庭进行去中心化，创造了当代情景喜剧；使用布莱希特式的（面向观众）直接陈述，将情景喜剧与单口喜剧融为一体；戏仿特定类型、电影和电视节目。这些不稳定的特征将僵化的流派变成了电视版的米哈伊尔·巴赫金的狂欢节。

关键词：盖瑞·山德林，情景喜剧，（面对观众）直接陈述，戏仿

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The *Larry Sanders Show* (1992–1998) enjoyed widespread critical acclaim during its six-season run on HBO, which translated into three Emmy awards and a spot in *TV Guide's* 2013 list of 60 Greatest TV Shows of All Time (Fretts and Rousch). Set behind the scenes of a late-night talk show, it starred Garry Shandling, a stand-up comedian who gained fame in the 1980s, as the titular Larry Sanders, a man defined by his vanity and neuroses. It gave Shandling the chance to satirize the corner of the entertainment industry he identified with his greatest dream: taking over *The Tonight Show* from Johnny Carson. (Although Shandling filled in for Carson 39 times during the mid-1980s, Jay Leno would eventually become his permanent replacement.) Conversely, Shandling's first foray into a scripted TV comedy series, Showtime's *It's Garry Shandling's Show* (1986–1990), enjoyed only a modest cult following in a time when traditional family sitcoms, like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, attracted huge ratings on America's broadcast networks. Judd Apatow's four-and-a-half-hour documentary, *The Zen Diaries of Garry Shandling* (2018) and its companion, *It's Garry Shandling's Book*, briefly renewed interest in Shandling's life, stand-up comedy, late-night talk show hosting, and two TV series. Nevertheless, Shandling's contributions to the sitcom form remain under-appreciated. When it is acknowledged, *The Larry Sanders Show* garners nearly all the attention. A lengthy appreciation of it in *The Independent* to mark its thirtieth anniversary hails it as the show that birthed the modern sitcom. The article celebrates the fact that "it changed the genre for good" but laments that it "remains more obscure to modern audiences ... than the many sitcoms it influenced" because "it never crossed over into the mainstream" (Chilton). *The Larry Sanders Show* so seismically shifted the genre because "it completely dispensed with the artifice of the tra-

ditional sitcom.” The article devotes just one sentence to *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show*. Despite spending decades on the outermost fringes of television history, *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* is itself a pivotal sitcom text that reclaims the self-reflexive, meta-narrative style pioneered on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950–1958). In doing so, Shandling indeed becomes the father of the modern American sitcom through his affinity for (1) decentering the idealized nuclear sitcom family and its competent patriarch; (2) direct address that fuses the sitcom narrative with stand-up comedy; and (3) elaborate parody of specific genres, films, and television shows. He inaugurated the genre’s self-referential “baroque” phase (Schatz 38). Combined, these destabilizing features turn a largely calcified form—the multi-camera situation comedy filmed before a live studio audience—into the television equivalent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival. In fact, its carnivalesque indulgences rupture the genre, exposing the trite, utopian, didactic wholesomeness so inextricably bound to its artifice. They aid him in both furthering his transgressive upper-class-fool persona and pursuing greater truth through his comedy.

DECENTERING THE SITCOM FAMILY

“Carnival,” Bakhtin says in *Rabelais and His World*, “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order” (10). “Carnival was ... the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (10). At the time it aired, *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* was, indeed, the “temporary liberation” from the genre’s entrenched status quo. According to Shandling, “The theme itself was the structure of the show, which was breaking conventions” (Apatow 169). Its original viewers who sought out other sitcoms would have had

to settle for formally unadventurous series, like *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), *Family Ties* (1982–1989), *Growing Pains* (1985–1992), *Who's the Boss* (1984–1992), *227* (1985–1990), and *Kate & Allie* (1984–1989), all of which were family sitcoms in the Nielsen Top 20 for the 1986–87 television season, the season *It's Garry Shandling's Show* premiered. And yet, this is just a partial list of those airing on the three major American broadcast networks. Family sitcoms so saturated network schedules that in 1985 family sitcoms aired every night of the week (Leppert 1). Shandling knew how the genre worked, and that, from the perspective of his co-creator, Alan Zweibel, made him the ideal person to undermine them: “Garry, knowing the form of situation comedies given his background of [writing scripts for] *Welcome Back Kotter*, had a certain love/hate relationship with what was the norm. We grew up on the norm, but it was time to put it on its ear just a bit” (Apatow 158).

During the 1980s, American television industry insiders also recognized that the sitcom had reached a creative crossroads. Brandon Tartikoff, while trying to reinvigorate last-place NBC, thought it had reached the same state of generic decline as the western, and Norman Lear, creator of the 1970s “relevancy sitcoms,” negatively compared television comedies of the 1980s to those of the 1950s (Leppert 10). All the broadcast networks were hoping to reverse ratings declines, and all of them arrived at the same strategy: embracing the aspirational figure of the working mother who they hoped would attract female viewers. They produced “sitcoms featuring ... successful career women who were *emotionally* supported by domesticated dads” (11). It is the woman who is both mother and professional that differentiates these sitcoms from those of the 1950s. However, these characters still strongly resembled their 1950s counterparts because they

“maintained many elements of the homemaker image” (11). Although these sitcoms normalized two-income households, parents, including the often-harried working moms, like Maggie Seaver (Joanna Kerns) on *Growing Pains*, remained attentive and involved and unblemished by flaws that could negatively impact their children. Like their 1950s predecessors, their wisdom, insight, and instincts were unerring, making them ideal role models for their children. These mothers and fathers represent a return to Glennon and Butsch’s characterization of fifties and sixties sitcom parents as “superpeople always able to successfully deal with any problems that arise, always rational and wise” and “in harmonious agreement” (268). American TV’s throwback family sitcoms from the 1980s were mirrored on cable by the actual shows they recalled from the 1950s and 1960s when cable network Nickelodeon started Nick-at-Nite, its popular, long-running primetime block of classic TV reruns in 1984, coincidentally the same year as Reagan’s landslide re-election. During the campaign, he spoke frequently about family, including in his Father’s Day weekend radio address: “I think we can and should preserve family values—values of faith, honesty, responsibility, tolerance, kindness and love.” Sitcoms, then, reflected the majority of Americans’ attitude toward family during the decade, one that had tacked considerably to the right since the counterculture’s 1960s heyday.

While the networks tweaked the sitcom family’s power dynamics and gender roles, they preserved the overall form. Meanwhile, Shandling “flipped the idea of the sitcom inside out” (Apatow 155). To understand how Shandling, in cooperation with Zweibel, led the sitcom to a carnivalesque space for “becoming” that would illustrate its capacity for “change and renewal,” it is first useful to chart how it initially follows a genre’s typical evolution and how it reverses course. It is

the reversal that positions it as ripe for an infusion of the carnivalesque anarchy *It's Garry Shandling's Show* supplies. Drawing extensively on Henri Fouillon's *The Life of Forms in Art*, Thomas Schatz outlines the stages of a genre's development:

[A form] passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work. (37-38)

Schatz's "baroque" stage perfectly matches Shandling's claim that his show's theme was its convention-busting form.

The sitcom's experimental stage would include programs like *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956) and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* that establish conventions like a domestic setting anchored by a married couple and plots devoted to humorous, low-stakes everyday problems, mishaps, and misunderstandings. These early sitcoms, adapted from radio programs, also normalize live audience reactions, especially laughter. The sitcom's classic stage would surely encompass the likes of *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966). In these iconic sitcoms, parents and young

children receive approximately equal screen time. The mother manages the home and maintains order until the father returns from the office to dispense practical wisdom, and, if necessary, mild disciplinary action that returns peace and harmony to the family while assuring the viewer of character growth. In short, the “superperson,” or the more specific “super parent,” as Butsch later says, is born. Refinement emerges in a show like *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) that embellishes the form, blending two families together through remarriage that expands the number of children from the typical two or three to an almost unwieldy six. The gothic horror elements serving shared themes of alienation and prejudice on *The Munsters* (1964–1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964–1966) provide a different type of embellishment achieved through *mise-en-scene* and a reversion to black and white.

The sitcom appears to enter its baroque phase in the 1970s as some shows begin to question the primacy of the patriarchal nuclear family. *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970–1977) never waivers from its belief that a woman can live a fulfilling life without a husband or children. *All in the Family* (1971–1979) interrogated the unerring wisdom of the sitcom father through Archie Bunker’s often racist, sexist rhetoric. He and flustered Edith are anything but super parents. The skepticism and questioning built into the premise of these sitcoms shows the genre reaching Schatz’s concept of opacity. These shows’ writers, creators, and audiences no longer look through the form (or perhaps into the mirror) to glimpse an idealized self-image; rather we look at the form itself to examine and appreciate its cultural appeal (38). In other words, the sitcom moved “from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism” (38).

On the one hand, *The Cosby Show* may be read as the apex of this phase as it refutes the assumption that the telegenic,

upper-middle class family must be white, yet in doing so, it ironically validates Norman Lear's opinion. It sends the sitcom backward, ushering in a revival of the classic phase that temporarily forecloses a further advance into the still more radical variations of the self-reflexive baroque. Cliff and Claire Huxtable are the ultimate sitcom super parents. Although Claire is a formidable and affectionate presence, Cliff is the head of the household, and the show's presentation of him can be summarized using the words of President Reagan's 1984 Father's Day Proclamation: "The love fathers express ... can never be separated from character, from devotion, from good humor, and from every tender virtue. Fathers also provide that discipline that begins with concern and commitment and example." The Huxtables, like other 1980s sitcom families, reverse 1970s trends in which "family members opted out" (55). According to Schatz, a genre's reversion to an earlier, seemingly completed stage, like the sitcom's 1980s return to its classic stage, is not unprecedented. He cites the gangster genre as an example because its conventions prompted resistance from religious groups and made it the target of censorship.

Rather than privilege the family in any form, *It's Garry Shandling Show* relegates it to the background. This is exceptionally subversive because, as Richard Butsch claims, three-fourths of all sitcoms on American TV have been about families while many of the remaining one-fourth have been about those alternative "artificial families" (111). Typically, the sitcom foregrounds a family's daily struggles, and those struggles are regularly complicated or interrupted by the "wacky" neighbor or friend who generates laughs through unannounced, drop-in appearances in most episodes. Steve Urkel on *Family Matters* is among the quintessential examples, but his forebearers include the likes of Ed Norton (Art Carney) on *The*

Honeymooners, Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond) on *Leave it to Beaver*, and the Fonz (Henry Winkler) on *Happy Days*. *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, by contrast, takes the “wacky” neighbor, neurotic Garry, and makes him the centerpiece of the show. The show's nuclear family, the Schumakers—father Pete (Michael Tucci), mother Jackie (Bernadette Birkett), and pre-teen son Grant (Scott Nemes)—are displaced, relegated to drop-in status. Moreover, the characterization of the Schumakers is far from the idealized treatment expected during the resurgence of the “superparent” tradition seen in the 50s and early 1960s (Butsch 117). Pete, eager to vicariously experience the single life again, persistently asks Garry for details about his dates. He even goes so far as to have an affair. Rather than doing so themselves, Pete and Jackie ask “Uncle Garry” to chaperone Grant's first date, making them expendable in a plot line that is tailor-made for the parent-child tensions and teachable moments sitcoms mine for plots.

Overall, Pete and Grant Schumaker's screentime far outpaces Jackie's. They appear in seventy-one episodes each, while Jackie appears in just forty-two. Marginalizing the sitcom mom is especially subversive because she was the nurturing heart of the genre. Further, the sitcom has historically been marketed to adult women who, in the genre's early days, could see and then purchase the latest appliances found in the kitchens of their TV counterparts. Jackie Schumaker's irrelevance is highly unorthodox given the networks' desire to connect with the growing demographic of professional women in the 1980s. It would not be unreasonable to link Jackie's marginalization to the obsessive drive toward honesty and authenticity that shaped Shandling's career goals and choices. The handwritten journal entries Apatow reproduces in *It's Garry Shandling's Book* repeatedly return to this concern. The sitcom mom in no way matched his experience with his

own mother, Muriel. The defining moment of his life was the death of his brother, Barry, from cystic fibrosis at age 13 when he was 10 (Apatow 15). From that point forward, he felt smothered by Muriel. In a 2009 journal entry, he writes, “your habit growing up was to escape . . . [b]ecause you were trapped in the room (house) by your mother” (Apatow 21). For him, the sitcom family living in a nurturing home was a fraud, a fact many viewers could identify with. Thoughts of his childhood home provoked a harsh reaction in 2010: “I’m still choking, suffocated by it.” Things—including Barry’s death—were not discussed in affirming, teachable moments. Instead, the adults were secretive, remembers Garry’s cousin Mike: “All through my childhood, when there was serious stuff to talk about, we didn’t really know what was going on” (Apatow 16). During a 1983 interview with the teenaged Apatow, Shandling gave a broad but revealing answer to the clichéd question of where he hoped to be in five years, saying, “I hope that it’ll be even more honest than it is now, more personal” (150). Using his own sitcom to deny the central place of a happy American every-family reflects that push for the honest and personal.

By making the “wacky” neighbor the protagonist, the show focuses on another sitcom rarity: the upper-middle-class man as fool. “[T]he most memorable sitcoms,” Butsch contends, “have been built around a Fool.” The fool is “someone of inferior status” (112). The fool’s inferiority derives from gender, class, age, and/or race. Therefore, women and African Americans have often fulfilled the stereotype. When a white man, though, gets identified as a fool through a show’s comedic situation that gets recapitulated episode after episode, that man’s inferiority almost invariably resides in class and related assumptions about his intelligence, or lack thereof:

One of the most striking patterns in the fifty years of television situation comedy is the consistency in devaluing working-class men's masculinity and thus confirming that class as a deserved lower status ... Working-class men have been persistently represented as fools, middle-class men seldom so ... [The working-class man] is more or less a buffoon, dumb, incompetent, irresponsible, immature, lacking good sense ... Humor was built around some variant of his inadequacy as a man. (112, 115-16)

The sitcom character "Garry Shandling" is, though, the rare upper-middle-class man portrayed as a fool. Viewers never see him performing stand-up anywhere other than in his condo set, yet no one doubts that he is successful. The show's extreme self-referentiality and meta-narrativity likely makes this unnecessary because the show goes to great lengths to ensure viewers understand they are watching a stand-up comedian with enough name recognition, renown, and talent to star in a sitcom about a thinly fictionalized version of himself. Garry Shandling and "Garry Shandling" intentionally coexist in a liminal state between reality and scripted situation comedy. The success of the two gets reinforced through occasional celebrity cameos, like Gilda Radner and Rob Reiner. They appear in the sitcom's diegesis as friends of "Garry Shandling" because they are, no doubt, friends of the real Garry Shandling. If Garry was not at least middle class, such celebrity friends would be unbelievable. To borrow Butsch's words and call "Garry" dumb or incompetent seems too harsh, yet he certainly qualifies as immature when he enthusiastically greets the delivery of Sea Monkeys he has ordered and immediately places them in water and begins

talking to them. In another episode, he and Nancy (Molly Cheek), who Shandling identifies as his "platonic friend," a likely acknowledgment of the kind of will they/won't they tension popularized by *Cheers* (1982–1993) and *Moonlighting* (1985–1989), end up in a childish slap-fight over a children's boxing game. He becomes jealous when the studio audience whoops, hollers, and applauds at the entrance of Gilda Radner, making her first television appearance since her cancer treatment. He can also lack good sense, as he does when he continues to be ruled by his desire for the *femme fatale* in the episode "Dial L for Laundry" despite witnessing her husband's violent behavior and hearing the threats leveled directly at him. Garry's "inadequacy as a man" serves as a consistent source of comedy on *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. It is the core of his character, and it gets reiterated constantly in the pilot episode. Rather than absorb the mockery of other characters through a reliance on insult humor, Garry willingly volunteers the details of his inadequacy. He often draws negative attention to his appearance, especially his hair, the size of his head, and his weight. He reveals his insecurities in the pilot by showing off the portable generator he has for his hairdryer because, he explains, it is important to try to look good even in an emergency. Later, he laments that "television adds three to five pounds to your lips." In the show's more successful early seasons, he struggles to find dates and never sustains a relationship beyond a single episode. In the pilot, he admits to Nancy, "I've never gone out four nights in a row." He lacks confidence and conviction and is easily dominated by women. Off-camera he has seemingly divulged all of his relationship woes to the officer investigating his condo burglary because the officer, on his way out, says, "I wouldn't call the cable girl until you're feeling a little better about yourself." He does not know what to do when he is sexually attracted

to the cable girl but immediately realizes their interests are incompatible. He calls a Dr. Ruth-style radio show, and the host diagnoses him as impotent before he can even explain his situation. Traditional sitcom dads have their potency tacitly affirmed in series' first episodes through the presence of pre-existing children and often reaffirmed through the mother's clichéd late-series surprise pregnancy plot. In Garry's case, marriage, children, and the traditional role of provider seem unattainable if not outright impossibilities. This unconventional situation that produces *It's Garry Shandling's Show's* comedy illustrates its embrace of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin says, "The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance" (10). A "shifting from top to bottom" (11) results. The sitcom's hierarchy that historically privileges a functioning, well-adjusted biological family headed by a virile, competent, confident father has been inverted, replaced by single, upper-middle-class fool with no prospects for achieving the genre's domestic ideal.

The thinly fictionalized Garry Shandling gives way to more middle-class and upper middle-class sitcom fools in the 1990s through the present. Many of them anchor series uninterested in family narratives. They range from the now obscure Mayor Randall Winston (Barry Bostwick) on *Spin City* to the problematic Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase) on *Community* to the truly iconic. The iconic middle-class and upper-middle-class fools include George Costanza (Jason Alexander) on *Seinfeld*, Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell) on *Modern Family*, and Michael Scott (Steve Carrell) on *The Office*.

DIRECT ADDRESS: GOING BACK TO THE FUTURE

It's Garry Shandling's Show uses frequent direct address to skewer the sitcom family and characterize Garry as an up-

per-middle-class fool. It jettisons the super parents from the center of the narrative to mock the sober preaching and conveniently-timed epiphanies of the “very special episode,” a uniquely 1980s contribution to the sitcom that brings a show’s family into contact with controversial topics. These episodes trade laughs for a heightened didacticism and more serious tone. They highlight the unimpeachable authority of sitcom superparents. They make complex issues (like racism) understandable and put risky behaviors (like drug use and eating disorders) in proper perspective, usually in a stern but loving manner. By episode’s end, characters have learned a lesson and their preconceived notions have been challenged and corrected, and, in many cases, viewers have been given a hotline number to call for help or more information. Take, for instance, “Wesley’s Friend,” the episode of *Mr. Belvedere* (1985–1990) in which Wesley’s (Brice Beckham) elementary school classmate contracts AIDS through a blood transfusion, and the Owens family must learn that AIDS is not communicable in the same way as the common cold. Mr. Belvedere (Christopher Hewitt), the family’s live-in housekeeper, even calls the CDC to have this information confirmed.

During carnival, “civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools ... mimicked serious rituals” (Bakhtin 5). Shandling-as-fool mimics—and mocks—the serious rituals of the sitcom: the wise parent guiding an adolescent through the milestones on the path to adulthood, its simplistic character growth achieved through an episode’s concluding teachable moment and subsequent reflection, and the return to the comforting status quo at episode’s end. These elements reach melodramatic critical mass in “very special episodes.”

Multiple episodes of *It's Garry Shandling's Show* end with

Garry giving an impractical lesson in direct address, in essence mocking the “super parent” wisdom of the genre. “Dial ‘L’ for Laundry” ends with him concluding that “I guess we’ve learned a lesson tonight. If your jokes are good enough, you don’t need to resort to violence.” The so-called lesson is itself a joke. The mockery of “very special episodes” returns in “Grant’s Date.” At its conclusion, Garry takes a break from reassuring Grant Schumaker he will have better dates in the future to address the audience: “I hope you enjoyed tonight’s show because the explosive issue was chaperoning, and the lesson we learned was I’m no good at it. Next week’s explosive issue is pen pals. Do we really need to know what they look like?” Here, too, the lesson is a joke. Chaperoning and pen pals are anything but explosive issues, especially compared to the hot-button, ripped-from-the-headlines topics very special episodes trafficked in. While he is busy counseling Grant and speaking to viewers, Pete and Jackie, the potential super parents, are nowhere to be found.

The show’s refusal to treat the family and the genre’s dual goals of entertainment plus education with reverence suits its initial home, Showtime, a pay cable network that could take creative risks. Without advertisers’ and the FCC’s constraints, it, too, with its programming of provocative stand-up comedy, R-rated movies, and risqué adult programming, reflected the overall carnivalesque appeal of cable that lured consumers to subscribe in the 1980s. Showtime provided *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* a space where it could audaciously foreshadow the sitcom’s shifting attitude toward the family. With the “super parent” hit sitcoms dominating ratings, Shandling and Zweibel understood that this nostalgic return to genre tropes of the 50s and 60s had an imminent expiration date. Perhaps not coincidentally, 1987 marks the debut of *Married ... with Children* about the unrefined and

cartoonish Bundys. Then, in 1988, *Roseanne* would premiere, and the idealized white-collar family would be replaced with blue collar parents who brutally mocked and insulted not only each other but their children. Fifteen years later, in 2003, *Arrested Development* introduced the Bluths, the anti-sitcom family, a group of unloving, yet lovable, misfits who can't seem to learn from their mistakes. And they would do so in a form equally steeped in self-reflexivity, parody, and allusion. Other sitcoms, notably *Seinfeld* with its "no hugging, no learning" ethos, abandoned family and its attendant sentimentality altogether. *The Office* pushed back against the workplace family trope. Part of Michael Scott's foolishness resides in his whole-hearted commitment to the delusion that his Dunder-Mifflin coworkers are his family.

It's Garry Shandling's Show propels the sitcom forward not just by using direct address to challenge the primacy of the family but by looking backward to *Burns and Allen*. In fact, Shandling made Zweibel read the book *Say Goodnight, Gracie! The Story of Burns & Allen* before they started developing scripts (Zweibel). By restoring the self-reflexive playfulness of the *Burns and Allen* show, Shandling re-establishes the merging of sitcom narrative with stand-up comedy. The *Burns and Allen* show features the pair playing slightly fictionalized versions of themselves who are also starring in a television show. Following their example, a handful of other early sitcoms, like *The Danny Thomas Show*, *The Morey Amsterdam Show*, and later seasons of *The Red Buttons Show* used a similar premise. Over time, family sitcoms from the genre's classic phase largely overshadowed them. Shandling, though, resurrects the loosely autobiographical premise of comedian-as-protagonist, which would soon be adopted by Jerry Seinfeld for his "show about nothing." *Seinfeld* episodes often begin with Jerry doing a brief stand-up bit on a topic related

to the plot. These segments take place on a low-lit set resembling a comedy club, and the camera cuts to reaction shots of laughing audience members after each punchline. Years later, Louis C.K. would also incorporate stand-up comedy vignettes in his own semi-autobiographical sitcom, only these were filmed in actual New York City comedy clubs.

On *The Burns and Allen Show*, however, George Burns regularly separates himself from the unfolding action to comment on it in direct address monologues that digress into stand-up riffs on topics related to the plot. In early seasons he does so against a stage backdrop or traverses the set to stand just beyond it to deliver his monologue. In later seasons, these stand-up commentaries take place on the set resembling his real-life house or on the patio. Gracie and the other characters conveniently disappear so that George can speak confidentially to the audience about what has been happening. The monologues and other moments of direct address establish George as the voice of reason, as the opposite of the fool. By using this method to place himself on the intellectual high ground, he introduces a formal tension into the sitcom. Stand-up comedy and the situation comedy are “aesthetically at odds” because the former is “a surviving bastion of individual expression” (Marc 10) while the latter “is the technology of the assembly line brought to art” (11) that Shandling revisits and lays bare.

Shandling opens episodes by entering his condo’s main living area from the unseen bedroom to deliver a brief stand-up monologue. Before beginning, he acknowledges the applauding studio audience with sheepish “thank yous,” which function both as displays of gratitude and coded entreaties to be quiet, so he can tell his first joke. This resembles the familiar ritualized structure of the late-night talk show, where

Shandling first gained widespread notoriety, and asserts the show's affinity for genre hybridity at the start of each episode. Like Burns, Shandling's direct address also slips into each episode's narrative as he pauses to offer cheeky, confessional asides in the middle of scenes. In the first episode of his show, Shandling's new condo is robbed by the men who just helped him move in because he failed to change the locks. He tells the audience, "I've been robbed. First my girlfriend moves in with another guy. Now my stuff moves in with another guy." This is a bit adapted directly from Shandling's stand-up routines. Male inadequacy is the bread and butter of his stand-up material as his five-minute set on the July 29, 1983 episode of *The Tonight Show* proves:

I think I've heard every excuse for a woman not going to bed with me. I remember this one girl actually said, "Look, not with this Falkland Islands thing." I said, "That's over a year ago." She said, "I haven't gotten over it yet." I said, "Well, I can understand that, Mrs. Thatcher." So, actually, I'm great in bed. I never fall out. I have guardrails. I have a hospital bed, basically. I have a mirror above my bed and on it, it says, "Objects are larger than they appear."

Stand-up comedy's direct address is, then, the genesis of Garry-as-upper-middle-class-fool. If the stand-up comic achieves a "heroic quality" (11) because he goes before an audience "[w]ithout the protection of the formal mask of a narrative drama," then Shandling sews further tension into the sitcom. Revealing his foolishness through standup performed within a sitcom helps him achieve an unlikely measure of heroism by being anything but traditionally heroic or masculine.

On *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, direct address does more than undermine the sitcom family and establish Garry as a middle-class fool. Shandling uses it to mimic Burns's penchant for acknowledging realities of TV production and amplify the show's baroque self-referentiality. *The Burns and Allen Show* "denies the gap between art and life" (Marc16), using its stand-up and vaudeville interludes to create a "dislocated, absurdist tone" (18). Burns once interrupted an episode to introduce the audience and cast to Larry Keating, the new actor taking over the part of Harry Morton. Shandling embraces the absurd when he draws attention to the need to use an ellipsis to condense time, saying, "All right, here's where we are now in the story ... My stuff has been stolen. It was great stuff ... Now it's 20 minutes later, and I've got to do this scene where I deal with the cop." Other characters don't acknowledge Burns's temporary departure from the storyline, but Garry's friends know they are part of his television show. Nancy answers his phone, "*It's Garry Shandling's Show.*" She also expresses frustration with the show's meta-theme song, which she hates. His nemesis, condo board president Leonard Smith (Paul Wilson), tries to suggest new scenes so that he can be on camera more. Even pre-adolescent Grant Schumaker participates in the self-reflexivity, sarcastically saying, "Thanks for giving me a big part in this week's show, Uncle Garry," when he appears in only one scene.

The prominence of direct address draws the viewer into Shandling's playful, unpredictable story-world and cements the show's identity as a herald of the sitcom's baroque phase. Intimacy between character and audience is one of direct address's most obvious outcomes. It is done "for the sake of encouraging our sympathy or some other kind of special connection with a character" (13). Direct address, then, seems to encourage the carnival experience as Bakhtin describes

it: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" (7). In the case of *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, "everyone" encompasses Shandling, the cast, the crew who also appear on camera, the studio audience, and, thanks to direct address, the viewing audience at home. Everyone is participating in the show's baroque self-referentiality.

David Marc contends that sitting in a sitcom's live studio audience "is to witness the preparation of a drama, not its performance" (23) because audience members likely endure multiple takes while having their view obstructed by the crew, cameras, teleprompters, and other equipment. Conversely, the home audience experiences a given episode as polished performance. Because the *It's Garry Shandling's Show's* home audience has greater access to the production as a production (or at least the simulacrum of a production as opposed to a finished product), they, too, experience some sense of preparation rather than a polished performance like one would expect when attending, says, a Broadway play or even local repertory theatre. Everyone—whether a member of the studio or home audience—recognizes they are witnessing successful stand-up comic Garry Shandling attempt to succeed as a sitcom star, a logical progression for someone ascending in the field. *It's Garry Shandling's Show* brings the two audiences into alignment in relation to one another and the staged narrative. Both are subject to the "stand-up's refusal to respect sharp distinctions between the 'play' world and the 'real' world [that] results in a violation of a primary convention of western theater" (Marc 14). Shandling's stand-up monologue at the top of each episode, in tandem with the meta-theme song that follows, signals this departure and the invitation to read the show not as his effort to legitimately take up acting through the performance of a distinct char-

acter but to approach it as a documentary of his efforts to elevate his career through an attempt at fusing stand-up comedy with the situation comedy so that he does not have to “act” before a camera in a traditionally performative way that denies its presence. (This aligns the show with Shandling’s goal of pursuing greater honesty through his comedy.) The studio audience has never been a sitcom episode’s intended audience. At-home viewers take precedence because advertisers need them to buy the products during commercial breaks. Or, for a cable network like Showtime, they need to attract viewers who will continue their subscriptions. In carnivalesque style, the show dismantles the accepted hierarchy. The privileged home audience is denied the opportunity to suspend disbelief and are instead presented with something closer, though not identical to, the spectacle playing out before the live studio audience. It has the look of a production in the state of becoming, not completion.

Historically, direct address had played a limited role in the sitcom. *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* bridges the gap from Burns and Allen to 1990s sitcoms like *Saved By the Bell* (1989–1993) and Zack Morris’s (Mark-Paul Gosselaar) trademark “time outs” that temporarily freeze the action for brief commentary or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), when Will (Will Smith) says “gotcha” to the camera and sends a tricked Carlton (Alfonso Ribeiro) running from set to set and into the studio audience screaming. Viewers would not have been unfamiliar with direct address in 1986, when *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* debuted. It briefly re-emerged in the sitcom through Sally Field on *Gidget* (1965–1966) and occasional usage on *Green Acres* (1965–1971). However, direct address had become increasingly prevalent in 1970s film comedies. Mel Brooks used it in his genre parody films, like *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and Woody Allen educated moviegoers on

the theories of Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall* (1977). Shandling's motivation for using it is the same as those New Hollywood-era directors who deployed it to signal a kind of "counter-cinema' resistant to the manipulative mainstream" (Brown 6). He, too, is protesting "conservative structures of conventional ... representation." Without direct address fueling self-reflexivity, the sitcom is "repressive because it leaves the viewer in a passive, inert position, merely indulged in their escapist voyeurism" (7). Shandling helps to reintroduce what was, for the sitcom, a largely dormant technique. Using it to expose the artifice, predictability, and industrial realities of television and its genres, direct address is an indispensable tool for him to achieve the truth and authenticity he wanted to share with audiences.

Direct address has since become a defining trait of mockumentary sitcoms like *The Office* (2005–2013). Its documentary conceit is so loosely maintained and seldom acknowledged that when characters retreat to the Dunder-Mifflin breakroom for their talking head confessionals, it is easy to feel as if they are talking directly to viewers rather than the film crew that functions as an intermediary. In addition, non-verbal moments of true direct address recur frequently, most often thanks to Jim Halpert (John Krasinski), who, along with Pam Beasley (Jenna Fischer), is one of the audience's surrogates inside the ridiculous world of Dunder Mifflin. Their expressions convey astonishment, realization, bemusement, and disbelief. When confronted with an unexpected piece of information or an inappropriate comment, Jim's gaze meets that of the camera, and he mugs for it, raising his eyebrows or sticking out his bottom lip. *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015) adopts the same conceits, and direct address has become so commonplace in television comedy as to no longer qualify as transgressive. It features in contemporaneous shows like

Modern Family (2009–2020), which brought it fully into the mainstream through its popularity with viewers, critics, and Emmy voters. Its prominence in American TV has continued in recent niche comedies, like *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019–present) and *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law* (2022). The most acclaimed use of direct address in a recent TV comedy, though, belongs to BBC's *Fleabag* (2016–2019). Already the subject of mainstream entertainment media criticism as well as a growing body of scholarly inquiry, the similarities and differences between Phoebe Waller-Bridge's "ability to fuse form and content" (Wilson 427) through it and Shandling's merits consideration but exceeds the parameters of this article as it requires attention to the unique aspects of TV comedy's development in the UK. Similarly worthy of exploration is how both Waller-Bridge and Shandling used live stage performance to carefully calibrate "comic abjection" (422) that they then adapt to explicitly postmodern television storytelling.

YOU'VE ENTERED THE PARODY ZONE

Bakhtin identifies parody as an integral ingredient of the carnivalesque. *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, through direct address to both the at-home and studio audiences, invites them to live in "second world" (Bakhtin 11) of carnivalesque parody that operates as "creative criticism" (Gehring 4). In the mid-1970s through early 1980s, television aggressively parodied its other popular genres regularly. It happened on a near-weekly basis on sketch comedy programs like *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present) and the Canadian SCTV (1976–1984). The short-lived *Fernwood 2 Night* (1977) parodied late-night local talk shows. *Not Necessarily the News* aired its parody newscasts on HBO from 1983–1990. *Late Night with David Letterman* (1982–1993) staged an episode-long parody of a morning talk show, complete with perky female

cohost, in February 1985. Prior to *It's Garry Shandling's Show* the most formally subversive sitcom may have been Susan Harris's *Soap* (1977–1981), a primetime parody of daytime soap operas that combines defining characteristics of the American daytime drama (a large cast of characters, outrageous plot twists, high-stakes scenarios like infidelity and murder, serialized storytelling) with the sitcom (thirty-minute timeslot, live studio audience, medium and medium long shots rather than soap opera's medium closeups and close-ups). The sitcom, though, had largely evaded similar comedic scrutiny. Even *Saturday Night Live* rarely engaged with the sitcom. One exception is the epic, *tour de force* "compound parody" (Gehring 13) of *The Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* starring host Ricky Nelson, who sends up his own sitcom past as he is trapped in a *Groundhog Day* scenario that finds him unable to get home. He repeatedly thinks he is walking into his family's kitchen only to discover it is the home of another 1950s sitcom family. He is easily fooled because the settings (a suburban, middle-class kitchen) and the people (namely Jane Curtain as sitcom mom in various wigs), and situations (mom offering kids after-school brownies) are nearly identical each time. It is an unmistakable skewering of the family sitcom's homogeneity. Judy Kutulas uses the sketch to support her discussion of the 1960s's youth counterculture's continued assault on the nuclear family into the 1970s (24). However, she undersells its iconoclastic brilliance as it parodies not only those anthology series but five sitcoms: *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Danny Thomas Show*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Given the dearth of sitcom parodies, the creatively moribund genre was ripe for both parody of itself by the mid-1980s and, as *Soap* demonstrated, for it to be a site for parodying other genres to revitalize itself.

Saul Austerlitz's book *Sitcom* unsurprisingly omits *It's Garry Shandling's Show* from its history of the genre. It concludes with NBC's *Community*. He identifies it as the moment when the sitcom truly understood itself after spending "its first sixty years slowly discovering its contours, its traditions, its clichés, its ideals" (369). He calls it "dazzling metafiction," a watershed moment when "the sitcom fully comprehends its debts to television past" (370) with no hint at anything similar preceding it. *Community* became a pop culture sensation with its acclaimed Season 1 episode "Modern Warfare" that depicts a Darwinian, campus-wide paintball fight for priority registration using nearly every recognizable action movie trope of both form and content, including many moments of overt homage to specific movies. From this point forward, *Community* repackages itself as largely a series of one-off parody episodes. Several parody other TV genres and specific shows. "Cooperative Calligraphy" is a bottle episode in which Jeff Winger (Joel McHale) and friends never leave their library study room. "Basic Lupine Urology" is a meticulous recreation of a *Law & Order* episode. "Pillows and Blankets" parodies the documentary style of Ken Burns, and "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas" resurrects Rankin/Bass stop-motion animation. While these episodes are hilarious and thrilling in their attention to detail, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* has never been credited for its own set of elaborate parody episodes that pre-date *Community* by 23 years.

Austerlitz's assertion that *Community* "embraces its own self-awareness, refracting the predictable genre exercises of mediocre movies and television through its warped lens" could equally apply to *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. Shandling certainly parodied sitcoms' "very special episodes" through his direct address. In addition, the episode "Laffie" parodies the classic sitcom *Lassie* (1954–1971), complete with

the non-diegetic whistling synonymous with the show and a brief black-and-white title sequence as Garry slips all too easily into the role of the eager and affectionate Timmy when an exceptionally perceptive collie appears outside his patio doors. He immediately recognizes the dog's similarities to Lassie and calls it Laffie because "we couldn't get the rights to use that name." Like Timmy, he can instantly interpret the dog's urgent barks, which helps when Laffie "tells" Garry that Leonard has gotten his foot caught in nearby railroad tracks. With the earnest wholesomeness of *Lassie* hyperbolically amplified, and, therefore, rendered ridiculous, Garry, Nancy, and Laffie reach Leonard and save him just as a miniature model train comes puffing down the tracks that have inexplicably appeared behind Garry's condo. *Lassie's* star, June Lockhart, dressed in the prim shirt dress and apron of the 1950s homemaker, even makes a heartwarming appearance as Laffie's real owner at the episode's conclusion.

In "Dial L for Laundry," Garry gets sucked into the *film noir*-style web of a mysterious, alluring, and blond *femme fatale* he meets in the condo complex's laundry room. When they meet, the laundry room fills with a blanket of fog reminiscent of the iconic image from *The Big Combo*. A non-diegetic saxophone begins to play a sultry version of George Gershwin's "Summertime." The woman, named Sylvia, bears a passing resemblance to Lauren Bacall, and she talks in the clipped, no-nonsense way of a hardboiled detective's voiceover. She is a predatory female, the whore of *noir*, juggling multiple men: thoroughly bewitched Garry, her thuggish ex who threatens to kill Garry if he ever sees Sylvia again, and Johnny, who has just been released from prison.

And the episode "The Graduate" is, naturally, a skewering of the New Hollywood classic starring Dustin Hoffman. Now

Garry finds himself aggressively pursued by his mother's seductive friend Mrs. Robertson, when he just wants to go out with her daughter, Elaine, who is rarely around because she is away at college in Berkeley. When Mrs. Robertson first flirts with him, Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence" suddenly begins to play, and during the opening credits Garry stares into an aquarium filled with plastic fish. As in the "Laffie" episode, Garry is wise to what is going on, telling the audience, "Well, it was weird with that woman, huh? It was like *The Graduate*." Even before the obvious signifiers pile up, the episode lays the foundation for a truly thorough parody. Garry announces that he has "the blahs" and may be experiencing a "mid-series crisis" that leaves him unmotivated to do a monologue. He is becoming the lackadaisical Benjamin Braddock. The easy to miss irony of the episode, which also recreates the shot of Braddock framed by Mrs. Robinson's bent leg, is that a network executive has just announced that the show has been renewed for twelve more episodes. Garry rejects the idea of doing movies now that the show is a success. The episode's script, however, has other ideas as he finds himself starring in a parody of a groundbreaking movie.

Like direct address, parody reflects an anti-establishment sensibility (Gehring 21) that further helps Shandling advance goals of truth and authenticity because it is "an educational tool" (Gehring 4) that uses laughter to jolt audiences out of their passivity and into awareness of narrative conventions. For this reason, parody also allows Shandling to jolt the genre out of complacency, to make "its target part of its own structure, in order to somehow refunction it." Part of that refunctioning is the fact that Shandling is not just parodying other genres, film, and television shows but his own stand-up persona as episodes like "The Graduate" and "Dial L for Laundry" exaggerate his obsessions with his physical

appearance and dating failures and mock his middle-class fool persona.

It's Garry Shandling's Show's high-concept, self-aware sensibility, which had been largely dormant for decades, has become the norm in American television, so that viewers today all but expect sitcoms to incorporate the postmodern techniques Shandling weaves into each episode. Now, viewers can be charmed by, rather than befuddled by *WandaVision's* (2021) mystery presented through the meticulous recreation of classic sitcoms' *mise-en-scene*, narrative structure, production strategies, and soundtrack. *WandaVision* is not parody because it never rises to "creative criticism." The layers of homage are in service of the standard MCU superhero climactic set pieces, not pop culture critique. Regardless, it can trace its lineage back through *Community* and *It's Garry Shandling's Show* as well as the classic sitcoms it painstakingly recreates. Austerlitz describes viewers' reaction to *Community's* self-referentiality as "joyous" (382) yet wonders if it "is a dead end, a trap that the sitcom had stumbled into and could never profitably escape" (383). Even if that was true—and Austerlitz does not think that it is—that would not change the fact that *Community's* self-referentiality is blended with the "heartfelt" (382) and "emotional" (382) to achieve something "more realistic" (382). Shandling could thread that needle, too. To see how, one only needs to watch the episode "Mr. Smith Goes to 'Nam" that poignantly confronts trauma and mortality through Leonard's war experience—a likely nod to 1980s Vietnam movies like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*—and Gilda Radner's cancer. The sitcom has become a genre perpetually at odds with itself, straining to separate itself from trite artifice, banal plots, and facile emotions. Like Shandling, it continues to pursue realism and honesty so that a series such as *The Bear* can pack moments of emotional

devastation and astounding character revelation into thirty-minute episodes shot on location yet also provide enough laugh-out-loud moments to merit Emmy Award recognition as a comedy. This is the legacy of Garry's show.

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