

A State of Arrested Development: Critical Essays

- State of Arrested Development : Critical Essays on the Innovative Television Comedy, edited by Kristin M. Barton, McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, "The Monstrous and the Comedic" by Jonah Ford
 - "In November of 2003, when Arrested Development first aired, the infamous Enron scandal had been uncovered two years prior, a scandal that made white-collar fraud front page news and had disastrous consequences for the investors victimized by Enron's duplicitousness."
 - Why do we laugh at the monstrosity of various jokes? (i.e. Buster's lost hand and subsequent accidents, George Sr. committing horrific fraud in a context where that wound is still fresh to the nation, GOB and Franklin race relations, Tobias confused sexuality)
 - Compares the Bluths to Dracula another monstrous elite (which came out in 1931, right after the stock market crash)
 - The liminal (liminality?) - the bridge between two clearly defined structural spaces. It's not part of either, but a separate threshold that links the two
 - Bluths are no longer rich, but they're not commoners
 - George Sr not imprisoned, not free in the attic
 - Idea developed by Arnold van Gennep (Rites of Passage)
 - Transitions (bridegroom the night before a wedding)
 - Monsters like zombies (living and dead: "undead") or all the man/beast combinations (minotaur, werewolf, etc.)
 - "The comedic signals the liminal rupture of categories by bringing together multiple sets of expectations and thus disrupting categorical assumptions. This can be as simple as a mundane category mistake where two things that share something in common are swapped, such as a young child, just learning the social importance of simple words and categories, might laugh excitedly at the notion of putting a sandwich on her head and calling it "hat." A hat is an object, and it goes on the head; a sandwich is an object, but it is a category mistake to put in on the head."
 - "By "bringing together ... images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principle idea," contrast is established "between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, [and] profanity" (Francis Hutcheson qtd. in Carroll 153)."
 - Humor coming from societal roles and expectations being threatened or breached
 - Lucille: "I love all my children equally...I don't care for Gob" (101)
 - "However, the audience only laughs precisely because his behavior is recognized as being improper (Eco), and thus, a category mistake. Laughter ensues, not because Gob's behavior is celebratory but only because it is understood that his behavior is reprehensible. This makes the comedic fundamentally bound up in relationships of power."

- “Get a job” is the line used on the poor, but Michael uses it on his lazy elitist family
- State of Arrested Development : Critical Essays on the Innovative Television Comedy, edited by Kristin M. Barton, McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, “Narrative and the Narrator in the Politics of Memory” Dustin Freeley
 - “However, Arrested Development blends these molds of past and contemporary television shows, in that it portends to be a cohesive narrative about the trials and tribulations of the Bluth family, regardless of the fact that, the characters— as the title of the series suggests— fail to develop.”
 - Series and serial comedy
 - “While Arrested Development creates an overarching story that might exist across episodes, the rejection of closure occurs most often between episodes, where, beginning with the pilot, the narrator deceives us by offering what happens “on the next Arrested Development .” However, the subsequent episode doesn’t elaborate on the moments offered at the preceding episode’s closing sequence. Rather, the moments offered from “the next” episode are left tangential and fragmented.”
 - “Furthermore, Buster’s very existence is an embodiment of different temporalities insomuch as he is a thirty something-year old man stuck in the progress of perpetual college student whose studies have included archaeology and cartography. While intriguing, both of these disciplines revolve around the past. In the case of archaeology, Buster is unearthing remnants from the past, and cartography is veritably obsolete, something not lost on Michael who asks, “Hasn’t everything already sort of been discovered, though... by, like, Magellan and Cortés?” (“Pilot” 1:1). Furthermore, we find that he is not adept in either discipline. In “Charity Drive” (1:6), Buster smashes a skull with his rock hammer, which he blames “90 percent” on “gravity,” and when given a nautical map to aid the Bluths in their escape from the Securities and Exchange Commission, he notes, “obviously this blue part here is the land” (“Pilot” 1:1). With the smashed skull, Buster’s education actually allows him to destroy an element from the past so that less can be learned, while his inability to distinguish water from land slows the Bluths’ potential escape, thus leaving them trapped in the present conundrum.”
 - “For Deleuze, the present and future are only perceived, as they are just manifestations of past events repeating themselves in different forms. Throughout Arrested Development , these circuits are fashioned through both a witty narrative and the omniscient narrator.”
 - Narrator + single camera shooting = documentary feel
 - “As the narrator relays events in the series in the past tense, the show itself actively blurs the lines between past, present, and future. This mode of telling a story is quite antithetical to most contemporary television shows, wherein “The

experience of film imagery is generally taken to be in the present tense, the spectator apparently experiences action as it happens” (Shaw 82). The difference with *Arrested Development* is that each of the characters acts in what appears to be the present, but the narrator’s voiceover remains in the past tense”

- Iraq War jokes
 - Mission Accomplished in the one where they build the house
 - Lucille saying exit strategy to the maid
 - George Sr. found like Saddam
 - Light Treason
 - WMDs
 - “In ‘Sad Sack’ (2:5), supposed evidence of weapons of mass destruction— another buzzphrase— is found in a Bluth email, which compels the same broadcaster to announce “We’ve obtained photographs that officials call definite proof of WMDs in Iraq.” Of course, these turn out to be “balls,” but the confidence with which the broadcaster offers definitive proof, replete with the headline “We Knew It!” fosters a false reality and veers far away from unbiased journalism. In tandem, when the photos are revealed as “balls,” the headline, “We Blew It,” is one ripe with sexual innuendo and a glib apology that is not offered to the Bluths, but the viewers. Effectively, the Bluths still remain a public enemy associated with the conflict in Iraq, while the broadcast can conjure a laugh with its punny headline.”
 - Freeley argues that this reinforces a blending of past and present since the Iraq War of 2003 was a little *deja vu-y* in its own right
- “Frederic Jameson explains, ‘that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past’ (179).”
- “Rather, the arm functions as a symbol of frightening moments from childhood when a lesson was supposed to be taught. If the shock of the amputated arm overshadows the lesson being taught, then the inappropriate actions (not leaving a note, yelling, etc.) are destined to repeat themselves— and they obviously do when Michael discovers that Lindsay, Gob, and Tobias have been driving George Sr.’s car while he’s in prison and have left it in shambles (“Pier Pressure” 1:10).”
- Lessons Taught
 - J Walter Weatherman (110)
 - Michael and Lindsay spring George Sr from jail (108)
 - George Michael and Maeby kiss (101)
 - Buster joins the army (202)
 - Michael tries to teach George Michael not to smoke pot but George Sr teaches him not to teach lessons (110)
 - “The common denominator in these episodes is that the characters’ actions have little or nothing to do with the lesson intended to be taught.”

- The family repeats the past and does not learn from it, thus the repetitive jokes and the title *Arrested Development*
- “In the introduction to his exploration of genre studies, Jason Mittell asserts that “genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function” (*Genre and Television* xii). This mash-up of genres problematizes how we understand the serialized adventures of the Bluth family. We are unable to categorize the Bluths because they are often unable to categorize themselves. They exist as imitations in a world of imitations. As the narrator notes in “The Immaculate Election” (2:14), Tobias’s ruse is the “exact plot of Mrs. Doubtfire ,” and, as such, indicts Tobias as both creatively bankrupt and the product of a culture that thrives on imitations. All told, *Arrested Development* ’s use of transparent allusions to other films, styles, and use of varying genres further traps the characters and the audience in a veritable circuit of repetition.”
- “Within each episode, we are simultaneously robbed of the present, as we follow a story that happened in the past, and promised moments in the future that go unfulfilled and instead are relegated to the past once the next episode begins.”
- “Regarding the narrator’s omniscience, trust is formed because he is the source of both flashbacks that further establish the present events in the narrative but also because both the flashbacks and his interjections provide corrections to the characters’ personal narratives that often function as a way to manipulate the truth.”
- Bluth sounds like blurred truth
- “I Swore I’d Not Go Reality” Patrick Gill
 - “In addition to its sparse use of lighting, it is the unsteady single camera and the voiceover narration that give *Arrested Development* its unique feel of semi-authenticity. The role of the narrator, who does indeed make himself conspicuous by means of a number of obtrusive references, is largely restricted to providing orientation and additional texture to the stories being played out in front of the audience.”
 - “Rather than using the outward trappings of the reality format for their own sake, then, *Arrested Development* actually turns things on their head by foregrounding the documentary aspects in exactly those situations where they can provide depth and substance—an additional dimension to what is already a fairly dense mixture, given the action being played out by the characters and the voiceover commentary. Cutting to home video footage of the Bluth boys growing up or to infomercial footage of George Sr. selling the Cornballer helps establish elaborate backgrounds in front of which the current lives of members of the Bluth family are played out.”
 - As opposed to other mockumentary works, *Arrested* doesn’t really use the form to critique it or as a joke itself. The camera might be acknowledged or a cutaway to a document might be used but “these are the decorative trimmings of the

documentary form that—for all its potential to create entertaining meta-references—is substantially used to give texture and depth to the characters in *Arrested Development*.”

- “In some respects, the Bluths are constantly in danger of being permanently adversely affected by goings-on in the show, so that there is indeed a notional sense of jeopardy. After all, the entire show is based on the considerable downfall of George Sr., so the audience knows that things can indeed go badly for the family. And yet the sense of jeopardy on the part of the audience is held in check as the audience is prepared for the characters to take almost unlimited amounts of punishment without pity.”
- *Arrested Development* use television’s episodic form to undercut conventional assumptions of returning to equilibrium and situational continuity while embracing conditional seriality—some story lines do in fact continue, while others are never referred to again. *Arrested Development*, a more explicitly serialized comedy, subverts these conventions even more, as most episodes end with a “next week on [sic] *Arrested Development*” teaser, showing scenes continuing that episode’s stories. However, regular viewers soon learn that future episodes will not show these scenes, nor will they have actually occurred within the ongoing storyworld (although in the second season the show varies this norm by allowing some of the teaser material to occur diegetically)”
- “Such recurring jokes in general and catchphrases in particular constitute a throwback to much earlier days of comedy, when catchphrases deployed in radio comedy “provided predictable recognition points for audiences ... as television moved away from stand-up towards situation-based comedy drama, catchphrases tended to be linked more with fictional characters than with real performers” (Ayto viii). While catchphrases thus originate from a need for recognition and familiarity, their conspicuous use in *Arrested Development* seems to go almost the opposite way: recurring lines are used so frequently and by such a wealth of characters that they become almost entirely unpredictable, and instead of being associated with a specific character, they appear to point at shared ways of thinking and communicating among the Bluths. It is interesting to note in this context that characters do not simply start out with a catchphrase or two but that the catchphrases used in the show gradually accrue, giving viewers a chance to first become familiar with the phenomenon before it is employed to maximum quantitative and qualitative effect over the course of four seasons. The stereotypical function of catchphrases on sitcoms is thus undermined by their concrete use on *Arrested Development*. Another trait typical of the classic sitcom consists of the careful manipulation of individual characters’ knowledge or insight in relation to the viewer’s. The type of laughter engendered from a situation in which the audience knows more than a particular character is a staple of the traditional sitcom (although other forms of laughter exist). Where this occurs in *Arrested Development*, though, it is not a case of a momentary ignorance or a charming naivety on the part of the character in question: when viewers are given

to understand that their knowledge is superior to that of a character, it is a permanent and categorical superiority. Any so-called “insight” gained by characters like Gob, Buster, Tobias, or Lindsay will not only come long after viewers have drawn their own conclusions, but even when it finally comes, it will still be a wrong-headed and entirely inadequate response to the problems facing the Bluths.”

- J Note: These details are often so overwhelming in value that you forget about specific ideas that have been planted only for them to come back later at an opportune time when every storyline collides at the end of each episode
- “Where *Arrested Development* decides to fulfill clichéd notions of the sitcom genre, however, it does so wholeheartedly, embracing supposedly outdated conventions such as catchphrases with such fervor that their original function and thus their utility within the sitcom genre is turned on its head.”
- “In addition to this, the show also highlights the performative aspects of almost everything its characters do. From Lindsay wanting (but being unable) to cry to Gob’s magic shows; from Steve Holt’s constantly having to celebrate his own name to Lucille’s hopeless efforts at winking; from Kitty’s compulsive flashing to the appearance of Mrs. Featherbottom; from Maeby’s fraudulent assumption of new identities to George Sr.’s fraudulent assumption of his twin brother’s identity—the show constantly entertains viewers with ideas and failures of performance.”

TV the book

- “An incredible Rube Goldberg contraption of a sitcom, elaborately setting up most of its Jones in a way that seemed like far too much effort, until the punchlines started rolling at the audience with devastating speed”
- “Arrested development was also a vicious satire of the head-in-the-sand thinking that got America into that mess overseas”
- Demanded complete attention to the setups in order for the jokes to properly land
- “This was more work than most viewers were willing to do, and thus arrested struggled in the rating for all of its three seasons. But the rewards for those who wanted to pay attention were enormous, like interlocking running jokes about Michael’s contempt for George Michael’s boring girlfriend Ann Veal, whose existence he kept forgetting, and George Michael’s own uncomfortable feelings for his first cousin Maeby”

Behind the Scenes

- Season 1
 - Will Arnett @1:30 “Arrested Development is more like a hidden camera show”
 - Jason Bateman “It’s Royal Tenenbaums shot like Cops”
 - Ron Howard - You could use the new grammar of reality television to create a new sitcom with more density

- J note: It certainly isn't the first sitcom to be a single camera edit, but perhaps proved that the handheld, mockumentary style could work in the US (British Office came out in 2001). Reno 911! Is about the same time period and should be considered. Curb Your Enthusiasm 2000
 - Apparently first show to be shot on HD video
- Hurwitz @3:12 nonlinear storytelling
- Howard @3:25 narrator as a straight man to the cast
- Hurwitz @10:44 Maeby and George Michael as complete opposites and playing off each other fearless vs fearful, dedicated to his father vs resentful of her parents
- Mitch Hurwitz Panel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9MW_FVSUbc) @2:00
 - Shooting with HD video and reality style offered the opportunity to shoot fast and cheap. Howard wanted to use that to refine the script in the way that multicam shows did. Hurwitz "wanted to use that savings in expense and time to shoot a lot of scenes and to try to get at family enmeshment and to try to get at character that went beyond stock character because coming from sitcom you know you're dealing with stock characters because you don't have that much time. You know there are jokes in between things, the script is probably 25 pages and so I really wanted to try to almost do what the Simpsons did in a way by showing a lot of different parts of the family's life. And then we just went through the development process, it seemed like a long shot to everybody."
 - We could push boundaries because nobody really took it all that seriously
- Hurwitz multiplex interview (ask before using)
 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5448baj0M30>
 - @2:58 Talking about Sitwell Enterprises and trying to make everything as detailed as possible so that you can mine it for jokes either now or later.
 - Circle back to talking about Ron Howard narration and how it makes everything more clear

The Television Genre Book

- "The 'theatricality' of sitcom is also evident in that much of it is shot on video, and is brightly lit, so that such series appear artificial when compared to the more 'realist' aesthetic employed by the majority of television fiction. Overall, this means that it's quite easy to 'spot' a sitcom when channel-hopping because it has a look and aesthetic which marks it out from other genres"
- British sitcoms started the change in visual style: People Like Us (BBC, 1999, 2002), Marion and Geoff, Human Remains (BBC, 2001), The Office (UK version)
- Mockumentary style provides: "actors in these programmes have no need to perform to a large audience, meaning that performances are much 'smaller'. Perhaps most importantly, these series do not have laugh tracks, which for decades have served as the most obvious reminder of sitcom's comic intent, as well as signalling the audience for whom such programming is made. In these series, then, there is the abandonment of the

conventions which have traditionally defined the genre, in the conjunction with the adoption of the characteristics of other normally quite separate, kinds of programming”

- Marion and Geoff: “The comedy arises in the disparity between Keith’s reading of his own life and the audience’s perception of the truth of his situation. While the series is a ‘comedy of embarrassment’, Barrett can clearly be placed in a tradition of similarly deluded male British sitcom characters...yet what is significant about the series is how it’s shot. The whole is filmed as if is Keith’s video diary, with a camera placed on his taxi’s dashboard as he goes about his business. The camera never leaves the cab and so we never see the other characters who are impinging on his life. In its avoidance of on-screen conflict, Marion and Geoff is markedly different from traditional sitcom, which has usually relied on interactions of multiple characters for its comedy.”
 - J note: Arrested does put most of its conflict, especially climactic conflict on camera in much the same way Frasier does in its one-house episodes with complex interrelationships set up and then played out as the climax (The One Where They Build a House)
- Response to docusoap movement in UK, as well as subsequent reality TV and its deception of audiences by being shot in truthy ways
- “It is noticeable that America has yet to produce a slew of similar comedy programmes with the same kinds of aesthetics. This not to deny that American sitcom aesthetics haven’t changed, however; series such as Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Larry Sanders Show, 30 Rock, and Scrubs all reject the traditional sitcom style, and have abandoned the laugh track, resulting in series with more complex narrative space and the lack of ‘artificiality’ which can be seen as defining sitcom for its first few decades. In the fluid, chaotic camerawork of these series, there’s a surface parallel with the ‘comedy verite’ programmes of the UK. However, what’s significant about these American series is that none of them adopts the mock-documentary format, for in none of them do the characters behave as if they know they are being filmed”
- The Office: “Arriving on television with very little publicity, and containing no television stars, the series resolutely refuses to demonstrate its comic intent openly, instead employing ‘a rhetorical form built to convince the viewer that he or she is acting as a fly-on-the-wall in a real situation”

Questions

- Are the recurring jokes funny because they keep popping up in new and different ways? Because they find little nooks and crannies in the new details?
- How does a show about lack of character growth work in a serialized form? Don’t we get tired of seeing everyone revert in 20 minute chunks?
 - One answer might be that Arrested eschews traditional timing and sets characters back to square 1 in the middles of episodes and has them start their new venture semi-immediately, depicting a bounce back (usually accompanied

by undeserved optimism). The complicated nature of these “rube goldberg” trappings seem to give us/them hope that if they just attack this from a different angle, they can succeed, when in reality, the problem is not their approach, but them.

- Why is Arrested funny and not tragic or horrifying?

Ideas

- Compare the double entendres/literal interpretations of an Arrested Joke to Coach from Cheers to explain how they play differently in different formats and to highlight that difference in style
- Categories of jokes in Arrested
 - Literal interpretations/puns/wordplay/double entendres
 - Repetition/Callbacks
 - Details of character/quirks
 - Meta-jokes about television structure itself