Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom

About halfway through the first season of the FOX television show Arrested Development the program’s narrative abruptly confronted its televisual style. As the Bluth family enters a courtroom, the presiding judge announces that no cameras are allowed, and the doors are closed, blackening the television screen and cutting off the unfettered access to the Bluths viewers have enjoyed all season. This courtroom incident is the first—and only—time Arrested Development overtly suggests there is an actual camera crew within the show’s diegesis that is responsible for the documentary “look” of the show. No character addresses the camera or complains about the presence of the crew in his or her car and bedroom. The Bluth family may be gloriously aloof, but they are not so clueless as to fail to recognize they are the subjects of a documentary or reality television show. However, that is exactly what the program looks like. The televisual style of Arrested Development, with its handheld cameras, awkward pacing, and violations of continuity rules, looks a lot more like a documentary than it does a traditional sitcom. Still, this reflexive moment of the slamming courtroom doors is little more than a convenient transition into the commercial break. When the show returns, the cameras will go on unacknowledged, just as before. The observational style will continue to provide intimate access to the unfolding comic travails of the Bluths, with all the visual and aural cues viewers of documentary and reality television programs have become accustomed to.

Arrested Development is one of a growing number of television comedies that look different and are made differently from comedies in the past. This essay seeks to situate this emerging televisual mode of production, looking to the producers of the shows to see how they conceptualize their work and explain the mode of production, as well as mapping out how that work might be read by audiences within the traditions of both television and documentary forms. In his analysis of a number of recent British sitcoms, The Office in particular, Brett Mills has appropriately termed this televisual style “comedy verité.” The theoretical contexts of these two forms and the industrial context of contemporary American television, with its need for both product differentiation and standardization of the production process, are both vital to understanding comedy verité as a mode 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. Comedy verité seems capable of reinvigorating the sitcom format because it fits the constraints of the material economy of television, and as a mode of representation its observational style is peculiarly suited to the tastes of contemporary audiences. Indeed, as Jason Mittell recently argued in this journal, we have witnessed since the 1990s an unprecedented trend toward narrative complexity in television storytelling that blurs distinctions between episodic and serial narratives, that exhibits a heightened degree of self-consciousness, and that demands a higher intensity of viewer engagement “focused both on diegetic pleasures and formal awareness” (38). It is within this context that I believe comedy verité can best be understood not as a subgenre of television comedy but as an emerging mode of production that is being adopted for its efficiency, visual complexity, and semiotic clout.

Perhaps the most important and obvious industrial trend in television over the last couple of decades has been the dwindling of the network audience, as viewers are increasingly split between choices of channels and other media entertainment options. One way this has affected programming content is that original narrative programming is now booming on cable, which was once primarily the province of reruns. Cable programs have been willing
to take greater risks, particularly with comedy, since they can appeal to a smaller audience and not abide by the same decency guidelines as broadcast television. In response to this, the networks are shifting toward a year-round calendar of original programming. Scripted programs, which are more expensive than nonscripted, have necessarily decreased in number as reality-based television programs pick up the programming slack.

On the cultural (and not economic) side of this equation, situation comedies have struggled to connect with audiences as they once did. Perhaps as a nostalgic response, combined with an antipathy for the reality programs taking their place, there has been some public lamenting that the sitcom is dying a slow and painful death. An article in the *New York Times* explained: “The trend across all of network television is sharply away from comedy as a staple of entertainment programming, pushed aside by an audience bored by a tired sitcom format, changing industry economics and the rise of reality shows” (Carter). At the same time, the aesthetic grammar of nonfiction TV is increasingly influencing scripted television. Nowhere is this more evident than in the emergence of sitcoms that have adopted the visual codes—even the mode of production—of the observational documentary. In the early 1960s the television networks turned to producing documentaries as a strategy to counter the bad publicity brought by the quiz show scandals and the “vast wasteland” critique of TV content. As Michael Curtin has shown, documentary programs were partially attempts to redeem the networks for lapses in good taste—both ethical and aesthetic. If the content of documentaries saved the reputations of the networks in the past, today their style breathes new life into the sitcom.

This new mode makes both stylistic and semiotic references to what Bill Nichols has described as the “observational mode” of documentary, including both cinema verité and direct cinema. Echoing the substantial difference between those documentaries, there are significant differences between the approaches of these shows, particularly in preproduction, but they all take advantage of the opportunities for improvisation enabled by embracing the observational documentary look and, with differing degrees, its mode of production. Comedy verité has become common enough, with enough self-described “handheld, improvised comedies” that it is necessary to examine the mode of production to find what is indeed “handheld” and “improvised” and what is, through its televisual style, referencing the observational documentary that audiences have learned to decode as a privileged way of representing the “real.” (See John Corner for a compelling discussion of what he calls “post-documentary television.”)

The two primary programs that will be discussed here are the aforementioned *Arrested Development* and HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which predates the FOX show and has outlasted it as well. Both shows developed cult followings and garnered critical raves, though neither is a hit sitcom by traditional standards. Though *Arrested Development* won an Emmy for best comedy series its first season, it couldn’t connect with a large enough audience to sustain itself beyond three seasons, each with fewer episodes produced than the season before. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has chugged along on the demographic profile of its viewers and their willingness to subscribe to HBO. Were these two programs the only ones in existence, comedy verité might not warrant consideration as an emerging third mode of producing narrative-based television comedy. They are not, however, and as an introduction to the aesthetic I offer a short sequence from the MTV series *Jamie Kennedy’s Blowin’ Up* that illustrates the televisual grammar currently in use and also demonstrates how the mode is particularly suited to programs whose content also blurs the distinction between real and unreal.

*Blowin’ Up* (2006) follows the exploits of comic actor Jamie Kennedy and his friend Stu Stone as they labor to achieve their childhood dreams of becoming rap stars. Most episodes consist of loosely scripted scenes of the duo driving around Los Angeles and meeting up with celebrities in order to seek advice about what they need to do in order to make it big. These scenes are fit into the A/B plot structure typical of a sitcom. Though structured like an ordinary sitcom, the program is taped with digital cameras, is shot on-location, and looks like a reality program (that, or the type of documentary that might exist if a legion of D.A. Pennebakers were unleashed to capture the early years of bands whose later exploits would be documented in the expositional style, à la *Behind the Music*). In the fourth episode of *Blowin’ Up*, Kennedy decides he needs to get a photograph in a tabloid in order to get publicity and generate buzz for his upcoming album, which the two have been hard at work on. Marveling at Kevin Federline’s red-carpet reception and burgeoning rap career after marrying Britney Spears, they decide Jamie needs to get photographed with a popular Hollywood starlet. With the help of their photographer friend Giles they go on a “celebrity safari.” Before long—after a false alarm
Examples of masquerade shows. One notable example of the documentary style made a couple of aesthetic systems and performing a particular "televisual masquerade." Masquerade shows revel in reaction shot, that signal that the sequence overall can be imposed cross-hairs on footage also made black and white, as though looking through the camera's viewfinder. The color, handheld shots from various perspectives of the conversation are aggressively reframed, emphasizing their hastily recorded nature, though we are not made to believe that Jamie, Stu, or Giles shot any of them. Additionally, the license plate on the truck and faces of passersby are blurred out, suggesting this is indeed a "real" scene caught on the street and not staged with the proper permissions. After Mena catches Giles pointing his camera at her, she hurries off, and the handheld camera catches her making an amused and/or disgusted face that Jamie can't see but the TV viewer can. Though she has politely rejected his advances, Giles has gotten his shot: Jamie and Mena appearing to hold hands as they exit the coffee shop. Giles doesn't believe the photo is worth anything, but it will indeed be used by MTV as a promotional ploy and released to the press in advance of the episode of Blowin' Up.

This sequence is an aggressively stylized product of the comedy verité mode of production. Though adopting some of the production practices of the observational documentary, it is the exaggeration of the handheld shots, in conjunction with viewfinder footage and Suvari's reaction shot, that signal that the sequence overall can be described as an example of what John Caldwell calls "televisual masquerade." Masquerade shows revel in displaying aesthetic systems and performing a particular style of visuality. Prior to the comedy verité mode, the performance of the documentary style made a couple of notable appearances on television as single-episode examples of masquerade shows. One notable example of the documentary aesthetic as televisional masquerade is a M*A*S*H episode, "The Interview," originally broadcast in 1976. Written by the show's chief creator, Larry Gelbart, "The Interview" was his final episode to direct. Filmed in black and white, "The Interview" follows a television correspondent as he talks to the show's characters about their experiences and feelings about the Korean War. This episode not only "looked different" but allowed the characters to explicitly articulate positions on the war that had to be alluded to or handled indirectly through narrative. The documentary conceit also proved convenient when ER broadcast a live episode in 1997. In the appropriately titled "Ambush," the NBC camera crew was disguised as a documentary film team. Thus, if any cameras "accidentally" got on-screen or if actors looked in the cameras, the show's "real" crew could be taken for the supposed documentary crew, somewhat lessening the pressures of performing a one-hour drama live. While this production was a blatant attempt to associate ER with the "golden age" of live television drama in the 1950s, the residual "quality" connotations of the documentary presumably didn't hurt, either. Both these examples are stylistic exceptions to the usual mode of production of the shows (single camera, shot on film), and both self-consciously mimic documentary filmmaking. Both cases also existed outside the influence of nonlinear editing and digital filmmaking that have combined to make reality television a viable format. M*A*S*H predates both technological changes by more than a decade, and ER was broadcast live so no postproduction editing could take place. Still, these stylistic anomalies are notable because they embraced both the documentary "look" and its semiotic connotations of legitimacy and prestige. In the suffering format of the sitcom, "real" comedy is both a strategy for product diversification and a marker of distinction.

Before examining the theoretical ties between the consumption of observational documentaries and observational comedies, it is worthwhile to note how changing technologies have been fundamental to encouraging these new ways of producing (and theorizing) film and television. In the cases of both cinema verité and comedy verité, technology has been an important catalyst for the emerging aesthetics. Portable, synchronous sound 16mm film cameras and faster film stocks for indoor and nighttime shooting encouraged a reconceptualization of the documentary and a new aesthetic of documentary production in the postwar period. Charles Musser describes how the American version of this aesthetic, which developed
contemporaneously in the United States, Canada, and France and is labeled “direct cinema,” was more observational in nature, while the French cinema verité was more confrontational. In either case, he notes, “by following individuals for lengthy periods of time, the film-makers become part of their subjects’ daily existence” (527). While the degree of self-consciousness might vary dramatically from one filmmaker to the next, these films all to some extent merged form and content to get to the real—to merge with their subjects. The making of the documentary was now part of the documentary, the process of representation recognizable through the handheld camera and long takes, paradoxically constructing a film that read as more real than other styles.

It is also worth noting that television programs weren’t the first to commandeer the “real” look of observational documentary. Almost from its beginnings, the observational style was well known enough through both the documentaries and earlier newsreel footage that its connotations could be summoned in fiction films by judicious use of the handheld camera and intimate framings. Musser lists Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), Jaques Rozier’s *Adieu Philippine* (1962), and Richard Lester’s *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) as fiction films that appropriated the techniques of cinema verité in order to provide “a greater sense of realism” (532). David Bordwell also notes a number of films from the 1960s (*Faces, A Man and a Woman, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) that selectively used cinema verité strategies to connote more “real” human interactions and imbue confrontations with a spontaneous edge (144).

Nichols notes that observational films, in their “purest form,” eschew voice-over commentary, nondiegetic music, and even interviews. Social actors engage with one another rather than addressing the camera or filmmaker. Editing reinforces a sense of events unfolding in real time rather than a manipulated rhythm or pace: “These techniques anchor speech to images of observation that locate dialogue, and sound, in a specific moment and historical place . . . and the space gives every indication of having been carved from the historical world rather than fabricated as a fictional mise-en-scène” (Nichols 38). Still, very few cinema verité or direct cinema documentaries are purely observational. Even without an on-screen appearance by the filmmaker or voice-over, a subject looks into the camera, a boom mic comes into the frame, the handheld camera jiggles. All these remind the viewer that a film is being made. Nonetheless, as Brian Winston points out, the observational or direct cinema mode of documentary production became the dominant standard by which all other documentary “truths” were measured. The style of cinema verité or direct cinema so conditioned the idea of what a documentary should be like that older, more expositional films such as John Grierson’s classics became viewed as something other than documentary because of their strategies of reconstruction and commentary (Winston 205). Unfortunately, the easily identifiable observational style became more important than a commitment to uncovering the truth through rigorous filmmaking. The result was a watering down of the cinema verité and direct cinema styles into a genre he truncates as “verite”:

Verite is an ersatz style developed by television on both sides of the Atlantic, a bastard form which reduces the rigour of direct cinema practice to an easy amalgam of handheld available-light synch shooting and older elements. Verite films (and tapes) contain direct-cinema–style material, but can also use commentary, interviews, graphics, reconstruction and the rest of the realist documentary repertoire. As a consequence, shooting periods and ratios are reduced to levels close to traditional norms. Thus it is that the current dominant documentary style is not direct cinema itself, but is rather a derivative of it . . . Nevertheless, the careful structuring of direct cinema, in part necessitated by the need to find a narrative without the help of commentary, interviews and other mainstream devices, was not absorbed as part of the verite package. (Winston 210–11)

Though Winston speaks derisively of the truncated “verite” as a bastard form of observational documentary that hasn’t done its homework, the style became dominant because it succeeded both in terms of its semiotic connections with audiences (effectively claiming the real) and the “nuts and bolts” of industry economics. Making documentaries in the verité style, especially without the extensive preproduction, could be cheaper. This simple industrial imperative is amplified in TV comedy because of the limited material economy of series television. Like verité docs, comedy verité programs also vary greatly in terms of the preproduction planning and scripting that go into them, and they may also veer away from the purely observational style. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* often ends scenes with extended close-ups of Larry David’s face (soap opera–like) as he ponders his often sticky and usually embarrassing situations. These shots are often accompanied by nondiegetic music on the soundtrack. The fantasy or dream sequence also occasionally makes an appearance. In the final episode of its fifth season, Larry even had a near-death experience that found him trading barbs with Dustin
Hoffman and Sasha Baron Cohen as two angels assigned to his entrance at the pearly gates. Arrested Development relies on Ron Howard’s voice-over narration for continuity between scenes. His narration serves as narrative cement not because it explains things but because it connects them temporally, hoping the meaning and humor will unfold on their own.

As a mode of production adopted temporarily or in totality, comedy verité combines the “don’ts” of observational documentary (manipulation, interactivity, effects) with its claim to capturing reality as it unfolds in order to create a televisual masquerade with, at least in some cases, successful comic effects. The key to these comic effects would seem to be both an undermining of the “real” access of the observational documentary with a shift in viewer engagement of the content. In their wide-ranging theoretical examination of film and television comedy, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnick usefully note Freud’s distinction between the set-up joke or gag and the comic event: “For Freud a joke is made (constructed, produced); it exists only in utterance; and its immediate material is language and signs. The comic, by contrast, is witnessed (discovered, observed). It can exist, beyond the realms of formal utterances, in situations encountered in everyday life” (72). This distinction made by Freud long before cinema verité or multicamera sitcoms offers an enticing connection between observational documentary and observational humor. What comedy verité may be doing through its distinctive televisual style is shift the source of humor in the television comedy from the constructed joke to the observation of a comic event. From the perspective of the television industry, this televisual shift made sense both in terms of product differentiation (make sitcoms that look different) and material economy (the improvised style fits the limited budget and time constraints of the production). From a theoretical standpoint, the shift echoes that made in documentary from the expositional mode of representation, with its all-knowing narrator who makes sense of events, telling the viewer what they mean, to the observational, with its suggestion that the truth will reveal itself if we watch long enough. The observational component of these sitcoms, which includes not just what they look like but also the timing of shots and the sense that at times we observe events in real time, creates a different type of engagement with the narrative. The sitcom is thus reinvigorated by a shift from the tired realm of the staged sitcom, with its three cameras, studio audience, or one-camera, coverage shooting, to an experience of observation or witness.

By now it will have occurred to readers that film and television comedies have looked like documentaries before. Those, however, have generally been in the guise of parodying the documentary or other forms of nonfiction television. HBO’s The Larry Sanders Show, a clear precursor to the current programs, provided a behind-the-scenes look at television production via an observational aesthetic. Though not presented as a mock documentary, the program was still a show about television. This same observational “look” has more recently been selectively employed in the NBC sitcom 30 Rock—aagain a television comedy about producing television comedy. Those two programs seem to have adopted the observational style as a corollary to parodying television production; if parody not only simulates form but critiques it, then the observational aesthetic is adopted as another method of telling the “truth” about television production. It is this claiming of the real through documentary style that perhaps has the longest tradition in television productions.

Caldwell describes how in the past the televisual mode of production has made visual style part of the content itself through claiming the real—not through simulation of documentary style but through a raw, degraded “image destructive style.” In particular, he discusses the shift in television advertising to this aesthetic after commercials had become irrelevant to jaded consumers. Producers who could not afford to shoot on film used electronic manipulation to degrade the image: “Far from clear or highly resolved, these images are forcibly videoized and degraded through the imposition of noise, but are somehow read as real nevertheless” (Caldwell 303). Caldwell’s description of the degrading of the video image in the televisual mode of production echoes the “make it messy” visual ethos made famous in the 1980s television drama Hill Street Blues and later employed in programs including Homicide and NYPD Blue. In his book Inside Prime Time Todd Gitlin details the creative struggles that Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll encountered in making the program. Gitlin offers Hill Street Blues as an example of how difficult it is to make television that goes against the grain of other television, whether in terms of style or of content. Robert Butler, who directed the pilot, was fundamental to Hill Street Blues’ visual style and responsible for the “make it messy” catchphrase. Again, his approach wasn’t simply a formal strategy to offer a visual alternative to what other police dramas looked like;
it was a semiotic strategy. “Make it worse. Make it worse,” Butler said. “It makes it more real” (Gitlin 293). Comedy verité, then, has its formal/semiotic precursors in other self-conscious televisual simulations of the real.

The Office is an interesting case study for examining how comedy verité can simultaneously code television as both real and parodic. At least in its initial U.K. incarnation, the show was much closer to a parody of documentary than a sitcom. The characters acknowledge, are interviewed by, and perform for the camera. The main character, David (U.K.)/Michael (U.S.), performs the role of manager for the camera. The gap created between Michael’s performance of managerial excellence and the gross inadequacies of his actual skills (whether as manager or as aspiring comedian) creates much of the humor. This follows the schema Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight use to explain where the humor derives from in the mock documentary: “The humour in these texts, then, comes in part from the contrast between the rational and irrational, between a sober form and an absurd or comic subject” (68). The documentary as sober discourse of interrogation, expected to produce knowledge, then creates comic effect through the comic contrast between that discourse of sobriety and the hilarious ineptitude of the subjects. David/Michael is a terrible manager, and the entire staff is lacking as a serious subject of documentary inquiry. Likewise, the Christopher Guest mock documentaries veer from documenting bad rock band (This Is Spinal Tap), to a bad musical production (Waiting for Guffman), and back to a bad folk band (A Mighty Wind).

Indeed, Mills sees in the BBC’s comedy verité “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 verité” (75). 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. As The Office has become a successful American sitcom, it has veered farther away from the mock documentary conceit. Much of the show’s footage continues to suggest the observational mode, primarily through handheld shooting and a pacing that suggests particular segments unfold in real time. But increasingly these segments take place in intimate settings, include shots suggesting a particular character’s subjectivity, and are less marked by Michael’s performing for the camera. On-screen interviews and characters’ performances for the mock crew remain as set-up jokes for the viewer, while the observational scenes produce the comic.

Handheld Improvised Comedy vs. Handheld = Improvised Comedy

Having explored the historical and theoretical contexts of comedy verité, I want to now shift to a more industrial perspective by looking at what the key creative individuals involved in producing Curb Your Enthusiasm and Arrested Development believed is made possible by their unconventional modes of production. This can be useful, I think, in understanding how the deployment of televisual style can from the industrial perspective both be a sound financial decision and have extensive textual ramifications in terms of opening up different spaces for creative expression by changing the typical mode of production. After all, the sitcom standard of the three-camera set-up, filmed live before a studio audience, was formulated by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz not just for financial reasons but for reasons of comedic timing and performance too (Butler 197). These two examples are chosen in order to understand how what initially may appear to be a visual strategy of fakery or “mocking” the documentary can more importantly play a role in affecting the sort of narrative complexity Mittell describes.

Larry David’s guidelines for making Curb Your Enthusiasm, according to coproducer and director Robert Weide, were “all location, all in-sequence and no script” (Sweetzer). This was the directive the production has followed, but, like Arrested Development, Curb Your Enthusiasm has made its documentary style literal only once. The pilot was an HBO special titled Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm, a mock documentary following Larry as he starts doing stand-up after leaving his job writing and producing Seinfeld, which he also helped create. The pilot ends with Larry chickening out on the big concert, but Curb Your Enthusiasm returned as a comedy series produced with the same visual style but without the conceit of a documentary team recording it and without the “talking head” interviews of the pilot.

Prior to Curb Your Enthusiasm, Weide was best known as the director of a number of documentaries about comedians, including Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl. This training in documentary no doubt influenced the approach to the visual style of the Curb plot, besides being appropriate for its subject matter: “Larry wanted me to do it because of my documentary background, figuring I’d know how to apply
the rules of documentary filmmaking to this odd hybrid. I was very excited by the idea of purposely blurring the line between the real and the fabricated, so that viewers would actually be trying to figure out what was real and what wasn’t” (Sweetzer). Though Weide’s documentaries were more the talking head than direct cinema variety, the improvised program that David wanted demanded a different approach to the production. “I basically shot the special as if it were an actual cinema vérité documentary,” says the director (Weide). The series dropped the documentary conceit but stuck with the style, strictly at first, then gradually loosening up a bit to get the necessary coverage and for the simple fact that a “real” documentary crew would never go to some of the places Curb Your Enthusiasm needed to go. Rather than having scripts for an episode, the cast works from an outline of what has to happen in each particular scene and improvises dialogue. While the scene is improvised, two high-definition video cameras shoot the action simultaneously, with one always on David because so much of the comedy depends on his reactions. There is no rehearsal of scenes, just one quick blocking, then the first take is a general master shot. The scenes will be reimprovised several times as the director and actors sharpen the scene and get plenty of coverage to ensure it can be cut together: “We shoot scenes as many times as we have to, then continue to hone it in the editing room.” Generally, each episode, he says, takes five to seven days to shoot, then three weeks to edit (NPR, 9 March 2004). Curb Your Enthusiasm thus spends far more time in the postproduction phase than traditional sitcom modes of production, especially the multicamera mode with its reliance on “switching” between cameras while the scenes are performed chronologically before a live audience. The program also requires more postproduction work than the traditional single-camera mode, with its standardized approach to coverage and scripted lines. The improvised scenes mean both dialogue and blocking can vary greatly between takes.

The mode of production integrates documentary and fiction methods, echoing shifts between the real and unreal in the show’s content, as some actors (such as David, Richard Lewis, and real-life husband and wife Ted Danson and Mary Steenburgen) “play themselves” and other actors play characters (Cheryl Hines plays Larry’s wife, Cheryl David—though his real-life wife is named Laurie; Larry’s friend and agent, Jeff Greene, is played by Larry’s friend—but not agent—Jeff Garlin). The program is shot on-location in “real” offices and homes that aren’t “really” Larry’s or Jeff’s.

David Barker has usefully described the manipulations of television space as a key way in which meaning is encoded during television production. He distinguishes between two types of TV space: (1) camera space, which is the horizontal field of view (wide shot, medium, medium two-shot, close-up) and camera proximity (where the camera is placed in relation to the performers); and (2) performer space, which refers to performer blocking along axes defined in relation to the camera. Barker’s categories of camera space and performer space help to analyze television production techniques by connecting them to the semiotic strategies that hold the narrative together or prompt audience reaction to the characters and story. In his comparison of the single-camera mode of production with the multicamera mode, Barker shows how these different types of space can be manipulated to structure meaning. Despite its much-vaunted relevant content, All in the Family, for example, is a standard multicamera sitcom, with Archie as the axial character around whom the other characters’ lives revolve and upon whose reactions much of the comedy depends. Accordingly, Archie’s chair sits center stage, and most of the performer blocking is across the stage, on the x-axis. The space of the stage living room is carefully demarcated, with each performer having a space that others may or may not move in to, Archie’s chair being the most “off limits.” As Barker points out, the cameras could move into the spaces only to make the audience uncomfortable. Barker mentions that it is absolutely necessary that the viewer is never allowed to share Archie’s point of view; rather, the audience must always be looking at him. He is the object of derision, and being allowed to share his point of view—by the camera entering the performer’s space and engaging in a shot-reverse-shot pattern—would undermine this (Barker 173).

While the action may have revolved around Archie’s throne in that multicamera sitcom, Larry is constantly on the prowl on L.A’s West Side. Archie was something of a fish out of water, a relic from another time who couldn’t accept the social changes on the outside that had found their way into his home to confront him. If Archie is a social dinosaur because he is out of touch, Larry has the social clumsiness of the dinosaur. He is a cultural misfit, well-meaning, perhaps, but given to social missteps of an unending variety. Like Archie, much of the humor in Curb derives from Larry’s reaction to his own predicament. In
All in the Family’s multicamera mode of production, this is encoded through the well-timed close-ups on Archie’s face, the cameras hitting their well-rehearsed marks like the punch line of a joke, carefully timed and switched on-the-fly during the performance. In Curb, that reaction is sure to have been caught on tape but will have to be mined in some assembly of rough continuity.

According to Weide, the scenes in Curb are restaged until all the necessary coverage is obtained and the dialogue and comedy refined and repeated during the process as well. From reading this description and by looking at the resulting scenes, it is clear that the “handheld, improvised” (observational) approach to the show is another type of coverage filmmaking. The cameras may be handheld and the content improvised, but the editing of the shots follows classical Hollywood patterns. For example, a scene that takes place at a dinner party at Jeff Greene’s house begins with an establishing exterior shot of the house. Inside, a medium close-up shows Larry listening to a Russian couple; it then cuts to an over-the-shoulder two-shot of the Russians as the husband speaks and the wife translates. The next shot is an over-the-shoulder of Jeff talking to Marty Funkhauser, which is a violation of camera continuity, but, because Larry is at the same moment talking about Marty, continuity is maintained through the dialogue, and the visual jump-cut is consistent with the verité style. Most of the scene continues the shot-reverse-shot pattern common in single-camera production. These sequences are first between Larry and the Russians, then between Larry and Jeff. Though the humor of the situation is recognizable visually, it is dependent upon sound for continuity, with connections made between events through audio cues or sound bridges. These include Larry’s mentioning of Marty’s name, Jeff’s wife calling him away from Larry, and the scream of Jeff’s daughter when she discovers a photograph of Larry’s decayed tooth. A greater emphasis on dialogue continuity is more necessary than in the single-camera format, where the set-ups are carefully planned, or in the multicamera set-up, when the on-screen relations are always clear and the entire stage may easily be put in view.

While comedy verité shows share key characteristics, there can still be substantial differences (again, as in Winston’s “verité” docs) in their stages of production. Arrested Development is fundamentally a different version of comedy verité because it is carefully scripted. The “improvisational” component is affected, thus making it an example for the verité mode of production as deliberate stylistic choice, rather than one necessitated by the lack of standard preproduction scripting. However, it is still particularly suited to the program’s content. While Curb’s verité style is necessary to catch improvised material, Arrested Development’s approach allows a very dense program that doesn’t have to pause to hold for studio audience laughs to pass and can “get in more” comic and narrative content, according to writer/producer Mitchell Hurwitz (NPR, 3 November 2005).

 Appropriately, the idea for Arrested Development grew first out of a question of form: Ron Howard had the idea of a sitcom that looked like a reality program. “The intent by Ron, who spent half his life in multiple-camera comedy and half his life as a single-camera director, was to marry the best of both worlds,” David Nevins, president of Imagine Television, said when the deal to make the show was first announced (Schneider). Nevins queried Hurwitz about the possibility of a new approach to making the family sitcom: “His question was, ‘What if we shot a show in digital video, so we could go very fast and didn’t have to spend an hour and a half lighting for each shot, we could just go out there and start shooting, like Cops or Blind Date? Could we spend that time sharpening the jokes and making a more ambitious production? What would happen if we applied the sensibility of multi-camera to single-camera?’” (Robinson).

The preproduction process in the multicamera sitcom, where camera positions and lighting schemes are standardized, focuses on the tightening of the dialogue and comic delivery, with repeated chances to test these out. The use of handheld, high-definition video cameras would free up more time for such tightening. Additionally, Hurwitz describes how, in striking comparison to Curb Your Enthusiasm’s brief outlines, the scripts for Arrested Development might start at sixty pages and be whittled down to thirty-two. Careful attention to the writing process on this program was expected to help tighten comic timing as well as free up some time for limited improvisation:

Something about not waiting for the laugh of a laugh track allows you to take lines that otherwise might be seen as just direct jokes, and make them seem realistic. . . . We throw a lot of the jokes away. So it feels improvised, but we really do write these out. We write in the overlaps often. We write in the stutters sometimes, if that’s important to a scene. Then, that said, a lot of the people on our cast—Will Arnett, David Cross, and Jason Bateman are really good at adding to the dialogue, and spinning things, and coming up with pieces here and there. But it’s a
Hurwitz’s comments here about “direct jokes” made “realistic” echoes Freud’s distinction between the setup joke and the comic. Though carefully scripted, the comedy verité mode of Arrested Development makes the humor seem observational or comic. The “so much” material Hurwitz referred to may have doomed Arrested Development for broadcast life, though the show’s density is ideal for rewatching. While the program was still in production Hurwitz fatalistically explained: “We’re really making a show for the new technology here. We’re making a show for Tivo, and we’re making a show for DVD, and it really becomes part of our objective in making this thing” (NPR, 3 November 2005). Whereas television has always been considered more dispensable than films, and sitcoms especially, again, new technologies may be bringing about changes in TV form—this time because of use by the audience. These changes might not have caught up to the broadcast programmers, who are still looking primarily at Nielsen numbers at first broadcast rather than the repeated viewings of devoted fans willing to buy DVDs.

The density to which Hurwitz refers includes jokes that might be missed the first time around. However, the program was also one of the most televisually dense during its tenure on the air, and though it primarily featured the look of the observational documentary, this was accentuated by still photos and flashbacks (and even 3D!) that signified the program was putting the viewer in a position to witness not just everything that happened to the family but what might have happened to them many years prior or in front of some other camera altogether. In the first episode of the second season, for example, George Bluth’s brother, Oscar, is repeatedly mistaken for George and attacked by police. When Howard’s narrator tells the audience that George has escaped prison, he is quickly shown in a distorted still photo that is matted in the shape of a circle, with text that tells us we are seeing footage from an ATM machine. Just after this, another green still photo again shows George and is credited as a Newport Beach traffic light photo. Later, video footage from a “security camera” shows Oscar attacked by police in an elevator. These visual documents are lent legitimacy because they look different—they’re distorted and discolored—and because they are taken not by “fly-on-the-wall” cameramen pretending not to be there but by unmanned surveillance cameras.

If from the perspective of its producers Curb Your Enthusiasm is an improvisational comedy necessarily captured through handheld cameras, from the perspective of the audience the mode is a strategy of “claiming the real,” marked by its documentary style as well as its radical deviation from standard sitcom form. Though Arrested Development’s televisual style violates the “hands-off” standards of the observational documentary, these excessive, even reflexive, gestures are consistent with the masquerading televisual style. Though Curb Your Enthusiasm, Arrested Development, and Jamie Kennedy’s Blowin’ Up do not include the “making a documentary” conceit, like Christopher Guest’s movies or the BBC and NBC versions of The Office, they all identifiably borrow the style of observational documentary. This borrowing of documentary style is about finding not just a mode of production but a method of reading as well. Whether audiences associate the look with Maysle’s documentaries or Survivor, the connotation is understood to be the same: this is “real”—at least relative to other television.

In his essay “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” Michael Renov notes that common among all the tendencies of documentary filmmaking is the indexical relationship between the documentary and its “real” content: “The documentary ‘truth claim’ (which says, at the very least: ‘Believe me, I’m of the world’) is the baseline of persuasion for all of nonfiction, from propaganda to rock doc” (30). Will the truth claim become the new baseline for persuading viewers to laugh now that the laugh track and the studio audience signify the worn-out style of the past? More likely, comedy verité will exist as an alternative, a distinctive visual style or production strategy dependent upon the traditions of the “high” cinema verité documentary as well as the economics of “low” reality TV. That claim is rewritten in the sitcom to suggest that you are not watching comedy but are observing the comic as it unfolds before the handheld cameras. Whether the comic is improvised or carefully scripted, it looks like it just happened. As a mode of production, comedy verité can effectively create opportunities for producing laughter that hadn’t been there before. These might range from Curb’s improvisation to the densely packed, carefully scripted dialogue of Arrested Development. The viewer is situated as a witness of the real/comic through this alternative mode of making or seeing television comedy. As a method of
producing televisial masquerade, comedy verité connects the dots between the audience member’s “ways of seeing” to his or her humor.

Works Cited


NPR. *Fresh Air from WHYY*. Mitchell Hurwitz interview. 3 November 2005.


