

What is TV Acting?

“Sitcom Celebrity”

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When it comes to television, all of us from time to time enjoy a sitcom now and then. Or maybe more frequently, as more ardent followers of certain shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Video streaming outlets such as Netflix and Hulu allow viewers to binge their favourite shows, in a race against time to consume and comprehend the entire universe, character, plot and all in one go. Also, nostalgia plays into many a sitcom sitting let alone binge, and favourites could very well include the likes of *Friends*, *Frasier*, *Cheers*, *Rosanne*, *Full House* (and *Fuller House*) – indeed the list goes on.

But what about the issue of sitcom celebrity? Has the sitcom genre displayed, cultivated, recycled, and ultimately complicated notions of “TV acting,” instead allowing us to rethink televisual performance in terms, sometimes exclusively, with regards to celebrity. My answer to this question is “yes.” Now more than ever, in my opinion, television programming, for many individual viewers, television producers, and TV marketers and distributors – not to mention gossip columnists and paparazzi – rely on big names, familiar names, and indeed excessive names as the “attention grabber” and “wow factor” for their style of acting and performance in a particular program. Sitcom – short, of course for situational comedy – now has the ability to tickle our funny bone and have us follow our favourite star actor-turned-celebrity each week on the tube, in uploaded seasons available for streaming, and in the Twitterverse – where oftentimes the real fun or funniness begins.

Particularly in American sitcoms, there still remains a certain crassness and irreverence towards screen performance and what seems to be televisual acting style akin to the comedy sketch. And this is precisely where some sitcoms bleed from fiction into reality in terms of how celebrity can transcend the character played by the actor into the celebrity playing themselves. One of the most recognizable celebrities to be the butt of jokes and celebrify the art of such televisual crassness in jest is none other than Charlie Sheen. Son of Martin Sheen and brother to Emilio Estevez, Charlie became something of a televisual enfant terrible during and after his departure from CBS's *Two and a Half Men*. While Ashton Kutcher filled-in for the "killed-off" Charlie in the show, Sheen fostered and found anew an audience and fanbase beyond the show, especially on social media, whereby his sitcom persona and acting as himself succeeded through failure.

Indeed, failure is I think the secret ingredient of how celebrity trumps acting in the traditional sense – blocking, character development, the Method, and so on – which allows stars like Sheen to just be and not necessary achieve any degree or evoke any caliber whatsoever of acting in the traditional sense of the term – even the Grecian comedy/tragedy binary. Charlie Sheen is playing Charlie Sheen with or without the laugh track – drinking beer, acting like a slacker, and somehow always getting with the women (whether or not it works out is a different story). I choose Sheen because he appears to be an obvious case whereby his failure to act does not hinder his performative appeal but in fact *enhances* it. Can someone act so naturally like a slacker as he? Apart from Sheen and *Two and a Half Men* (and *Anger Management*), we should also consider the failure to act in televisual sitcoms in terms of the badness of acting as pleasurable – in the sense of a guilty pleasure – say of Kim Kardashian in *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and its spin-offs, the guidos and guidettes of *Jersey Shore* and its spin-offs, the

uber-rich mamas of *The Real Housewives* series, and even Sofia Vergara on *Modern Family*.

These reality show and the one mockumentary style show all showcase elements of sitcom acting as failures to act, even if it is merely an unsuccessful shopping spree, *GTL ad nauseum*, or perfecting the art of boredom amid urban decay – physical, mental, emotional, commercial.

So, again, what is TV acting? Because the televisual genre of the sitcom is built upon and entertains the masses through a range of humour including double entendre, gross-out, slapstick, *schadenfreude*, and even at times gallows, the acting “style,” if we can even call it that, of sitcom is based in fact less on the generic conventions brought forth through the medium of television and instead more on the big name(s) persona(s) that take(s) it upon himself, herself, or the group to evoke a certain naturalism through the failure to act, thereby putting forward a new notion of the sitcom genre participating – even if hinted at in certain reality series – as non-acting, where famous for being famous has the upper-hand on acting for the purpose of acting.