

Quality Laughs

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While international discourse on quality TV has focused almost exclusively on drama, comedy is emerging on the margins of discussions of the best of scripted television. Therefore, I would like to intervene in this roundtable question by raising television comedy as a vital area for further exploration (specifically focusing on the US-UK context, as this is what I am most familiar with in my personal viewing and professional research).

In particular, highly acclaimed US series like *Atlanta* and *The Good Place*, UK shows like *Fleabag* and *Chewing Gum*, and US-UK co-productions like *The End of the F***ing World* challenge us to consider how comedy factors into transatlantic considerations of quality, as each series has aired to great critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. What elements of comedy best play into considerations of quality and prestige? Do drama-leaning series like *The End of the F***ing World* play better critically? Is an edge of irony or darkness necessary to gain critical respect? Could a studio audience multi-camera comedy ever gain transatlantic legitimation, or is that reserved only for the single-camera comedy at this point?

Given the communal cultural orientation of multi-cams, one could argue that they are too nationally rooted to achieve transatlantic success, let alone critical respect, and this highlights the challenge of comparing cultural standards for humo(u)r across nations. What's funny and funny in what way in Great Britain is not always the same as in the U.S., and vice versa, and claims of "better" usually mean "funnier to me personally" in this context. Few British television formats seem more particularly attuned to the country's sensibilities than its comedies, while U.S. television's countless failed attempts to remake British sitcoms over the years are usually framed as evidence of American inferiority, whether in terms of the organic integrity of comedy or due to economic incentives that favor remaking over importing, sacrificing creative integrity in the process. But while sitcoms traversing the Atlantic traditionally have been differentiated in nationalist terms based on cultural specificities of humor, this seemingly stands to change for writers, critics, and audiences alike as transnational flows increase. Series like *Catastrophe* and *You're the Worst* draw from both American and British comedic styles, and perhaps the line between what defines those styles grows more indistinct with each transatlantic exchange. If this is the case, the future flows of transatlantic television comedy might not just be rooted in what draws laughs but in what draws critical attention.

Finally, while it is the case that US outlets have historically, even notoriously, invited British sitcom remakes rather than importing them, streaming services and their insatiable need for content now provide a prominent platform for UK originals, which might possibly alter that dynamic. Returning to my initial list of examples, *Fleabag* exclusively streams on Amazon and *The End of the F***ing World* and *Chewing Gum* stream on Netflix in the US. Further, small-scale, idiosyncratic UK comedies that would

be unlikely to draw remake interest, like BBC Four's *The Detectorists*, can find a US home on streaming services like Acorn. Does this change the game for what is likely to be remade or imported in the comedy realm? In his review of *Catastrophe*, *New York Daily News* critic David Hinckley touted the British import on Amazon as "the latest confirmation that some of the best TV these days isn't on traditional TV." Can comedy be used by a platform, whether linear or streaming, to signal prestige and quality or is that distinction primarily reserved for drama? After all, almost all critical comparisons between UK and US TV on the basis of who makes "the best television" circulate around drama. Why aren't these comparisons usually drawn using comedy? In the end, how can we judge "quality laughs" across nations compared to how we typically judge dramatic prestige?