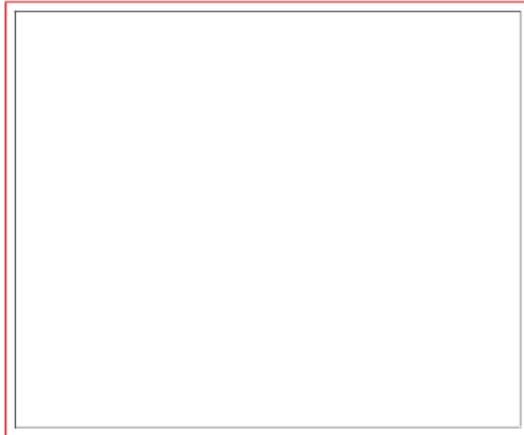


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## Pop Culture Watch: Modern Family (or "What Happened to the Sitcom?!")

On the recommendation of a friend, I decided to give a serious watching to the new TV show *Modern Family*, a program that chronicles (in mockumentary style) the interactions between an



extended family. Having been amused by the program early on, I fell off the wagon because I believed the show was too "modern." By that, I mean the program exemplified the common connotation of the adjective "modern," as a proxy for nonfunctional or "messed up" (consider, for instance, modern art or modern fashion). What is more, most things "modern" revel in their messed-up-ness; the moment of subversion is often a self-aware moment, as if the modern object *knows* it's doing something groundbreaking and subversive. Yet *Modern Family* is just one of a litany of television sitcoms in recent decades to feature dysfunctional, or "modern," family life.

Consider this in contrast to the 1980s, the decade of ideals. If one wanted to learn about family life in these United States, they had a unique beacon of wisdom: the situational comedy, or sitcom. Sitcoms like *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, and *Full House* taught us important lessons each week as family members overcame their differences to reconcile their problems in the span of 25 minutes.

Slowly, however, through the 1990s and into the new millennium sitcom programming attempted to chronicle ordinary rather than idyllic family life. Programs like *Roseanne* still dealt with family themes but Roseanne handled her three children in ways that would make Danny, Uncle Jesse, and Uncle Joey shrink in horror. Instead of treating her children with respect as one would treat a fellow adult, Roseanne enabled her children by acting childish in response. If only DJ Conner were more like DJ Tanner, Roseanne might not have needed to sink to such levels.

Vice President Dan Quayle even criticized *Murphy Brown* in 1992 as a poor example of family values for the way the title character was an unwed mother devoted to her career. This kind of selfishness became a staple of programs and propelled *Seinfeld* to the top of the charts as each character (who was too selfish to settle down and start a family) was out for his- or herself, often with humorous and interconnected results.

All this relates to *Modern Family* because the program seems to join this larger trend. Yet the twist in this "modern" tale is that parents should look to their children as benchmarks of maturity and wisdom. Indeed, the children show moments of self awareness beyond their age whereas the adults on the show tend to be self-indulgent and regressive. Consider, for instance, episode 12, "Not In My House," aired on January 13. In the opening moments of this episode, the young husband (Phil) lets his son, Luke, take the blame when his wife (Claire) finds a picture of a topless woman on the computer. The truth of who downloaded the picture is only revealed near the end of the episode when Luke denies having looked at it, claiming "It wasn't me! That's gross, I'm ten [years old]!" By process of elimination, Phil is required to come clean. In this same episode, Luke approaches Claire to admit with shame that he looked at his sister's diary. Luke's actions show a willingness to admit fault, a quality that he certainly did not learn from his father; Phil explains that the picture was sent to him to by a buddy and lovingly tells his wife "I don't do that stuff. You're all the porn I need."

Arguably the most dynamic character of the series, the one that challenges the stereotypes the most, is Manny Delgado, the pre-teen son of the latina. He has "adult" conversations with people, prefers fencing as his sport, and often looks with bemusement (and occasional scorn) on the childishness of his relatives. This character is in contradistinction to the adult

characters that fit their stereotypes: the gay couple is flamboyant, the young husband is metrosexual and a failure in his attempts to be "hip," the housewife is harried, the latina is passionate (which works well with her heavy accent), and the old man is a grouchy womanizer.

Perhaps I'm being too hard on this show. Perhaps it's just entertainment designed to make us feel better about the normalcy of our own lives. Yet I do not suspect that this is the case. I fear that the lessons from *Modern Family* are more a reflection, rather than rejection, of reality. However, hope may exist for those who believe postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He theorized that television is a simulation of reality in which media consumers substitute the symbols they see in the media for reality such that the images become the standard by which reality is judged. If this is true, then programming that returns to "pre-modern" models of family, featuring functional communication and conflict resolution skills, might be a way to improve American society and reduce selfishness as a guiding feature of interpersonal interaction.

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