

Parafiction in the 1950s sitcom: Meta humour and self-referentiality in *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*

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The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show (1950–1958) portrays the domestic life of its titular comedians as a pair of married vaudeville and radio entertainers. Replicating the dynamic of their own successful vaudeville and radio double act, Burns plays the put-upon but patient straight man, leaving most of the comedic heavy lifting to Allen, whose performance as a ditzzy ‘dumb Dora’ archetype belies a sophisticated humour based on word play and multiple meaning. One aspect of the show largely overlooked by scholars is its extensive and, for the time, radical use of meta and self-referential humour. Borrowing heavily from Burns and Allen’s real lives, the show was set in their home at 312 Maple Drive, Beverly Hills, with a living room and kitchen set closely modelled on their own, and their characters’ jobs as entertainers mirrored their own professional history. Often, Burns’ character would literally step out of the set, look into the camera, and address the home audience directly, commenting and making jokes about the events of the episode as a stand-up comedian would. By modelling their characters’ lives so closely on their own, and by playing with self-referential humour so extensively, Burns and Allen can be considered an early example of parafiction in screen media. Parafiction, a term used to describe performers appearing as ‘themselves’ in fictional media (Warren 2016), creates a complex diegetic relationship between the fictional and the real. This paper, a historical re-examination of the show as well as similar sitcoms starring Jack Benny and Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, makes the case that the 1950s sitcom represents the previously unacknowledged beginning of the tradition of parafiction in television, and traces its influence through to some of the most celebrated parafictional television shows of the modern era, including *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* (1986–1990), *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–present).

Warren, K. (2016), ‘Double Trouble: Parafictional Personas and Contemporary Art’, *Persona Studies*, 2(1), pp. 55–69.

Biography

Bradley J. Dixon is a writer and early-career researcher from Melbourne, Australia. He has served as an editor for the film journal *Senses of Cinema* and as a programmer for the Human Rights Arts & Film Festival and Melbourne International Film Festival. Currently, he is a PhD candidate in the Screen & Sound Cultures research group at RMIT University, studying persona and practice in comedy media.