

“REALITY” AND THE FOUNDING DISCOURSES OF TELEVISION  
OR, WHY WE “LOVE LUCY”

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On January 19, 1953, two babies were born--in the morning, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz Jr had a son, and in the evening, the fictional characters they played, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, also had a son,. The episode in which the baby was born hit an all-time high rating, with an estimate of more than 44 million viewers. CBS and Desilu, Ball and Arnaz’s production company, had taken a risk in portraying Lucy’s pregnancy on a situation comedy, and Lucille Ball broke boundaries as the first obviously pregnant actress to portray a pregnant character on the screen. In blurring the line between reality and artifice with the synchronic “real-life” and “fictional” births, I Love Lucy was a metaphor for what television as an institution and apparatus was doing anyway: making more permeable the traditional demarcations between public and private, truth and artifice, and representation and social experience.

In light of the recent trend in reality tv programming, it is interesting to look back at the founding discourses of television in America with an eye towards how the fluid relationship between reality and artifice characterized early television in general and I Love Lucy in particular. The medium of television had an immediacy and sense of presence that far outstripped radio and film. Whether live or, like I Love Lucy, filmed “live,” the discursive patterns of early television encouraged viewers to feel like they were actually present at the event or performance. In his discussion of how television changed American political and social life, historian David Halberstam summarizes, “People now expected to see events, not merely read about or hear them. At the same time, the line between what happened in real life and what people saw on television began to merge . . . . Nothing showed the power of this new medium to soften the edge between real life and fantasy better than the coming of Lucille Ball.”

New York Times Magazine writer Jack Gould explained the appeal of I Love Lucy in a

March 1, 1953 article:

“I Love Lucy” is as much a phenomenon as an attraction. Fundamentally, it is a piece of hilarious theatre put together with deceptively brilliant know-how, but it also is many other things. In part it is a fusion of the make-believe of the footlights and the real-life existence of a glamorous “name.” In part it is the product of inspired press agency which has made a national legend of a couple which two years ago was on the Hollywood side-lines.”

The “inspired” publicity machine to which Gould refers was indeed industrious and effective. By February 1952, just 4 months after I Love Lucy premiered, the show had not only hit number 1 but had also hit all the major newspapers and magazines with features making strong connections between the real-life actors and their on-screen characters. Of the hundreds of magazine and newspapers articles and features about Ball, Arnaz, and I Love Lucy that I’ve researched, hardly any stray from the Desilu publicity machine’s claim that television saved their marriage. The story goes like this: After their 1940 marriage, which no one thought would last because they both had volatile personalities, they were each so busy with their careers that they barely saw each other. When Ball was approached about doing a television series loosely based on her popular radio sitcom, “My Favorite Husband,” she suggested Arnaz play the husband, but the producers balked. A Cuban with a thick accent was a far cry from who television producers imagined paired with the All-American redhead. Ball and Arnaz developed a vaudeville act that they took on the road to prove that the public would accept them as a duo; the tour was well-received but they canceled the second half because Ball was pregnant. That pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, but soon she was pregnant again and they filmed the pilot episode. CBS and Philip Morris picked up the show, and they began production 1 month after

their daughter Lucie was born. The quite remarkable details of the production context also figure largely in the magazine and newspaper articles--that Ball and Arnaz owned the show through their company Desilu Productions, and insisted it be filmed in front a live audience in a Hollywood sound stage, although New York was still the broadcasting center at the time--but the articles always stress the connections between their real lives and television lives. As a March 1952 Chicago Sunday Tribune article put it: “Desi and Lucille are particularly grateful to TV because it has given them an opportunity to live a normal family life”--or as a July 1952 Look magazine feature stated, “There has never been a divorce between the public and private lives of the Arnazes, and their TV comedy is no exception.”

Of course, despite the PR copy that the show was based on the Ball and Arnaz marriage, clearly it was not. In particular, the divergence between talented, successful, and famous Lucille Ball and thwarted, unfulfilled unknown Lucy Ricardo is huge. The extratextual insistence that the Ricardos were like Ball and Arnaz allowed the actors a bizarre public fantasy of a private life that followed more traditional gender roles than their real-life partnership, or rather, re-enacted rebellion against traditional femininity again and again. Nevertheless, there is an emotional reality to the portrayal of the intimacy of marriage that transcends the continually denied gap between reality and fiction.

The situation of I Love Lucy articulated the contradictions of marriage, gender, the battle of the sexes, and middle-class life--the things that a majority of television buyers and television watchers were concerned with. Ball attributed the series' success to how it made comedy out of everyday reality:

We had a great identification with millions of people. People identified with the

Ricardos because we had the same problems they had. Desi and I weren't your ordinary

Hollywood couple on TV. We lived in a brownstone apartment somewhere in Manhattan, and paying the rent, getting a new dress, getting a stale fur collar on an old cloth coat, or buying a piece of furniture were all worth a story.

People could identify with those basic things--baby-sitters, traveling, wanting to be entertained, wanting to be loved in a certain way--the two couples on the show were constantly doing things that people all over the country were doing. We just took ordinary situations and exaggerated them.(quoted in Andrews 1985, 225-26)

Note that the things Ball lists as ordinary problems all deal with domestic, private life; the problem solving leads back to the core of the show: the “love” between the couple. As historian Elaine Tyler May summarizes, “In the postwar years, Americans found that viable alternatives to the prevailing family norm were virtually unavailable. Because of the political, ideological and institutional developments that converged at the time, young adults were indeed homeward bound, but they were also bound to the home” (May 1998,15).

By calling attention to the power relations of the sexes in everyday domestic life, *I Love Lucy* made a proto-feminist contribution to postwar domestic ideology. To be sure, Lucy’s desire to escape the confines of domesticity, to be autonomous and public instead of dependent and private, were ridiculed and usually ineffectual. However, the glimmers of equality in the Ricardo marriage combined with the audience’s extra-textual knowledge of the real-life Ball and Arnaz marriage/creative partnership posited the hope of a collaborative marriage alongside of its dramatization of the conflicts of the fifties ideal of the companionate marriage.

This aspect of the conflation of Ball/Arnaz and the Ricardos emerged even more when the show incorporated Lucille Ball’s real-life pregnancy into the fictional world of the series.

When Ball and Arnaz revealed her pregnancy to the show's producer, it could have been the end of the top-rated series; now not only had television "saved" their marriage, but it enabled Ball to maintain her career and have a family. Moreover, Ball performed the cultural work of a trickster in mainstream America by being the first openly pregnant woman to perform on television, which challenged accepted ideas about the impropriety of public representations of pregnancy. For example, even though the censors would not allow anyone to say the word "pregnant" on the show, Arnaz refused when Philip Morris wanted Lucy's pregnant body hidden behind furniture. Instead of hiding Ball's pregnancy, I Love Lucy treated it as it had treated many other "ordinary situations," with comic treatment of Lucy's cravings and mood swings, aspirations for the baby's future, Ricky's sympathetic morning sickness and important role as father, and cute maternity clothes (the inspiration for a line of Lucy and Desi commodities).

The intertwining of fictionality and "reality" in the seven pregnancy shows resulted in an emotional intensity that allowed the viewer to participate in a highly mediated but nevertheless moving enactment of expecting a baby. Throughout these reality-based shows, the audience is privy to a re-enactment of personal events, or rather, Ball and Arnaz turned their private experience into a public representation which reflected and shaped the popular pursuit of marriage and family.

The episode in which Lucy tells Ricky she is expecting was foreshadowed by many mentions of Ball's real-life pregnancy, and reports that the baby would be incorporated into the show. In the episode, Lucy tries to tell Ricky the news, but things interfere, and the dramatic irony build--the viewer knows what Ricky doesn't. The climax of the show occurs in Ricky's nightclub-- and Ball and Arnaz were understandably emotional as they filmed the scene. Producer Jess Oppenheimer recalls that after both actors teared up, they did another take and

filmed a more upbeat scene as originally scripted, but they decided to use the first one:

**ROLL CLIP** from “Lucy Is Enceinte,” filmed 10/3/52; broadcast 12/8/52.

Ricky gets an anonymous note that a woman wants to tell her husband they are expecting a “blessed event” and Ricky goes from table to table looking for the couple as he sings “Rockabye Baby.” He comes to Lucy, realizes it is her, and after an emotional moment of realization, sings “We’ re Having a Baby” as he walks around the stage with a tearful Lucy. The episode ends with a close-up of the couple, crying and laughing.

This moment is significant because it is Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz we are watching, not the characters--this is a glimpse of reality TV. But what strikes me the most is the intimacy of this scene, a familiarity with the people on the screen that had been forged in a series that did revolve around the mundane, intimate moments of marriage and everyday life. In order for the creative team to choose the take in which the actors were choked up and have it work, there had to have been a long setup to this moment, paved with a hybrid of fictionality and reality that transcends both.

The scene itself plays with the line between reality and artifice, and public and private. As Ricky goes from table to table in this public place of performance and commerce in search of the parents-to-be, we the viewers are included because the camera position is from the audience, encouraging our identification as a live audience member (reinforced by the laughter of the studio audience--another Desilu innovation that blurs the boundaries between reality and artifice). The mise-en-scene of the nightclub stage and incorporation of musical performance into the plot is typical of how early television oscillated between domestic and theatrical space in shows like Burns and Allen, Ozzie and Harriet, and Make Room for Daddy as well as I Love Lucy. As scholar Lynn Spigel explains in her excellent study, Make Room for TV: Television

and the Family Ideal in Postwar America:

The self-reflexive strategies of early television worked in two, seemingly opposite, directions. On the one hand, self-reflexivity provided viewers with critical distance from everyday life—the ability to laugh at the staid artifice of domesticity. On the other hand, it encouraged viewers to feel closer to the scene of action, as if they had an intimate connection to the scene. By acknowledging its own artifice and theatricality, the family comedy encouraged viewers to feel as if they had been let in on a joke, while at the same time allowing them to take that joke seriously. (165)

The strategy of letting the audience in on the joke and in on the seriousness runs through the seven pregnancy episodes, which made comedy out of the reality of Ball and Arnaz's life—including the uncertainty of the baby's sex, and perhaps most interestingly, Lucille Ball's pregnant body and what it could and could not do. Although there was not a great deal of Ball's trademark physical comedy in the episodes filmed while she was 6 and 7 months pregnant, here is one bit of physical comedy that, like the moment when Lucy tells Ricky they are expecting, calls the viewer's attention to reality rather than fictionality:

**ROLL CLIP** from "Ricky Has Labor Pains," filmed 10/31/52; broadcast 1/5/53

Lucy is tidying up the apartment and drops something; she tries to pick it up, but her pregnancy interferes. She does manage to pick it up, but can't stand up again. Ricky comes in, helps her, and puts her in a chair that she can't get out of. He leaves to take out the garbage and the phone rings; Lucy resourcefully upends the table and manages to stand up.

The convergence of reality and fictionality suggested by Ball's physical comedy in this

scene peaked on January 19, 1953, when the two babies were born. Ball knew she would deliver by Cesarean section, because she had had her first baby that way, and so the delivery was scheduled far in advance for January 19. In a bold move, Desilu and CBS decided to broadcast the episode titled “Lucy Goes to the Hospital” for the nineteenth as well. That week’s Newsweek cover story, “Desilu Formula for Top TV: Brains, Beauty, Now a Baby,” describes the dual blessed events:

If all goes well, newspaper readers all over the country will be treated on Jan. 20 to the story of Mrs. Arnaz having a baby--the morning after they see Mrs. Ricardo go to the hospital on TV. All this may come under the heading of how duplicated in life and television *can* you get. (56)

Because no one knew if the Ball-Arnaz baby would be a boy or a girl, they couldn’t duplicate that piece of reality for the November filming of the episode “Lucy Goes to the Hospital,” and so it was decided and kept secret that the Ricardo baby would be a boy. Whether the two babies would be the same became a matter of much speculation, and was genuinely unknown and unscripted; this element of “uncertainty due to chance,” which Mary Beth Haralovich argued in her paper at this conference is central to the narrative pleasure of reality television, further blurs the boundaries of reality and fictionality and foreshadows reality TV.

Examples of the headlines reporting the births foreground an interesting take on the collision of reality and fictionality: “Lucy Sticks to Script: A Boy It Is!” (NY Daily Mirror 1/20/53); “TV Was Right: a Boy for Lucille” (Daily News, 1/20/53); “It’s a Boy for TV’s Lucille Ball, Just What Her Script Ordered”; “Lucy Follows TV Script and It’s a Boy.”

These quips that real life stuck to the script suggest a salient point about this early foray into the terrain that, 50 years later, becomes reality television--that ultimately the narrative

frameworks that television and all media use to tell stories are the only ways we know to relate the events we experience, whether in real-life or in the highly mediated representations that fill the screen. Reality television is highly contrived, but there is the hope of seeing something genuine, something real, as perhaps we do when we watch Lucy tell Ricky they are going to have a baby and see not only the characters, but also glimpse a genuine live moment between Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball.