These series have about them an air of documentary, as if they were free from the usual expectations and restraints of narrative structuring, from the interrelation of character and event.
A curmudgeon’s canon: random thoughts on ‘Summer Heights High’, ‘The Office’

Brian McFarlane explores the realm of ‘cringe television’, a place where documentary techniques, egotistical characters and political incorrectness collide, and where we might learn more about ourselves than we’re willing to confront.

If you don’t want to watch ‘reality television’ (an oxymoron, if ever I heard one) or crime series in several continents; if you don’t feel like being improved with well-meaning documentaries about matters of Grave Importance; if above all you hate having your heart warmed; what’s left for you on television? well, one of the real treats available to you is ‘cringe telly’, the sort of entertainment that appeals to your inner curmudgeon. this is television that is as excruciating as it is lethally funny, that makes you squirm as you try not to rupture yourself with improper laughter. this essay is dedicated to all those who would rather spend the evening in traction than watch Australian Idol or another episode of Midsomer Murders.

What is ‘cringe’ television?

What follows is not a theorisation of the genre at issue, but a tentative go at isolating some of its characteristics – that is, a few of the reasons that make it so attractive a proposition to some viewers. The approach is entirely empirical, growing out of merely watching the stuff and trying to discern recurring patterns across about ten programs that, with some clear variations among them, seem to qualify for inclusion in such a genre. This could raise issues about what constitutes a genre – how many exemplars does it take to consider a genre established? I’m not sure how widely the term ‘cringe television’ is used; I’m employing it here to cover a range of series that seem to me to have key elements in common, though not necessarily to the same degree.

First, all of these series have about them an air of documentary, as if they were free from the usual expectations and restraints of narrative structuring, from the interrelation of character and event. But there are more positive identifying marks of the documentary mode. There is a pervasive sense that what is being shown has been caught by, not staged for, the camera, and of course this is no more true of, say, The Office or Summer Heights High.
than it was of many ‘legitimate’ documenta-
ry films, from Man of Aran (Robert J. Flaherty, 1934) to David Attenborough. There is always a mélange of the real and the contrived. But the cringe series set out – sometimes subtly, sometimes not – to mock the procedures of classic documentary. I mean, for instance, the function of the on-the-spot interviewer, the direct address to the camera, and the careful awkwardness of the ‘non-actors’ – the whole faux documentary, or mockumentary, mode.

What sorts of situations are these series set in? Mostly they purport to examine workplaces (office, school, etc.), though there are some exceptions to this, as in We Can Be Heroes. If there is an underlying seriousness in such programs, it may well be because work is a serious business: it can be, and no doubt often is, the site of major stresses, of jockeying for positions, of doing others in, of control freaks doing their best to live up to their descriptor, of a lot of unrewarding activity. Most people, in a work situation, will be at the beck and call, if not indeed the mercy, of some higher-up. Relationships can thrive or they can be suspect if there are goals to be aimed at competitively; there is immense amount of scope for self-seeking and self-aggrandisement, as well as for the rewards of friendship and the stimulus of co-operation. The faux documentary approach, trying to look as unscripted as possible, lays these possibilities bare – with brilliant astenty in The Office and Summer Heights High, comically but more crudely in Very Small Business and Stupid Stupid Man.

What kinds of people does cringe television have in its sights? The protagonists tend to be monsters of egoism such as David Brent in The Office or Mr G. in The Office, characters whose personal vanity and solipsistic view of the world render them almost invulnerable to sullen looks or innuendo or even downright opposition. However, when someone with real authority challenges them, they’re stuffed, since their own amour propre is based almost wholly, if not only, on their own view of their capacities. For them, other people exist to cater to their needs, to bolster their vanities, their already golden opinions of themselves. An exception to this generality is the unseen Roy Mallard, the innocent, bumbling interviewer in the BBC’s People Like Us, who is always apologising for the untoward ways in which others have made him look a prat.

One of the recurring reactions cringe television incites in us is a barely suppressed sense of outrage at the way it flies in the face of political correctness. It is perhaps true to say that most of us who pride ourselves on our liberal recoil from sexism, racism, fascism or any of the other -isms so repellent to our generous-spirited consciences are at least passingly exorcized by the appalling offence offered to such high-mindedness. This can happen overtly, as in The Office when we instinctively shiver at the awfulness of David Brent’s views, or bumblingly as in Roy Mallard’s ever-polite way of going along with what is offered to him as an investigative reporter. One way or another, our carefully monitored liberalism will get a terrible doing over by the way these series go at it – and, sometimes, just to complicate our reactions further, we may feel that the comedy has just pushed the barriers too far; is too near the bone for a sly laugh at political correctness. Am I really suggesting something more than a shiver of revulsion at what we may think of as ‘bad taste’? Has such a criterion any place in appraising such series?

So, is it all a question of tone? Of what it feels like? If so, how would we characterise this tone? For one thing, and a crucial thing, it is devoid of sentimentality. It is ruthless in going for the egoists’ jugular, whether subtly (by not letting them ever become aware of the awfulness of their me-centred view of the world) or by their sheer incomprehension of the massive ego-puncturing that has been dealt them. But over-weening vanity and egoism doesn’t always get it in the neck, and this may be what affronts us most. It’s one thing to be entertained, in our superior way, by those who are so obviously less charming, less insightful, less liberal than ourselves, as long as we are so obviously less charming, less insightfully entertaining, in our superior way, by those who may indeed feel that Swift goes too far, just as some viewers of cringe television will find some of the comedy too near the bone.

To come nearly up to date, surely Barry Humphries, in such incarnations as Dame Edna Everage, with her breathtakingly casual racism and sexism, or the gross Sir Les Patterson, Minister of the Yartz, ensured that the Swiftian spirit was alive and well in the late twentieth century. These two, egoists both in their contrasting styles, enabled Humphries to engage in some wild political incorrectness in the guise of being true to his outrageous personas. Then, in different mode, there was the toe-curling incompetence of interviewer Norman Gunston (Garry McDonald), with his comb-over, shaving nicks and bumbling intrusiveness, conning his way into the presence of nonplussed victims. In the 1990s, the eponymous fictional current affairs show in the ABC’s Frontline was cleverly satirical in ways that might have caused some red faces among the producers, hosts and reporters of the real thing, drawing attention to some very questionable ethics in their preparation and presentation.

Still, though, the series I’m concerned with have taken things a little further. They strive to look and feel like realism, to give off an air of being unstructured in narrative terms, of on-the-spot locations, and of being willing, with apparent artlessness, to utter the most appalling sentiments. To clarify this distinction, it is instructive to compare the US version of The Office with its groundbreaking UK original. The US Office is entertaining enough but in an altogether more conventional framework. Sure, there is still the intermittent direct address to the camera, but the plots of the episodes are more obviously structured, not seeming to allow enough scope for what the camera might just pick up (an illusion, of course, in the UK series), and the characters seem too ‘acted’ for the same reason (in other
words, they’ve lost the air of having just happened to be on the spot as the documentary filmmaker and his camera were passing. Could this be the result of commercial TV’s strictures requiring, as it appears to, a steady move to mini-climaxes before the ad breaks? Its jokes are more carefully honed, and it doesn’t dare risk quite so unattractive a protagonist (unattractive on all counts, that is) as Ricky Gervais’ David Brent. Steve Carell may be no matinee idol, but he’s Brad Pitt compared to Gervais. The edge of cringiness has been lost, and as a consequence its pleasures, real enough as they are, have a more readily recognisable sitcom aura. The fun is broader, the ‘realism’ has been tailored to the demands of narrative, and the excruciation factor has been softened – and the rewards for curmudgeons have been trimmed. In some ways this is also true of the US version of Kath & Kim, but it doesn’t quite belong in the cringe category as the UK’s The Office does. K & K, even in its Australian series, didn’t espouse the realist look and sound of The Office.

The cringe-makers

The great Australian cringe-maker is surely Chris Lilley: in two senses of the word, that is. First, as writer and producer, he is the creator of Summer Heights High (2007) and its predecessor, We Can Be Heroes (2005); and, second, as an actor he has incarnated their cringe-making protagonists like Ja’mie King (in both), Mr G. (in the former) and Phil Olivetti (in the latter). He has been rightly garlanded with awards and nominations in both creative capacities. What do his characters have in common with Steve Coogan’s roving reporter Alan Partridge (The Day Today [1994], Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge [1994–5], I’m Alan Partridge [1997–2002]), Gervais’ David Brent, Chris Langham’s temporising politician Hugh Abbot in The Thick of It (2005, 2008), Robyn Butler’s Frances O’Brien, aggressive chief of The Librarians (2007), or Wayne Hope’s shyster entrepreneur in Very Small Business (2008) or incompetent editor of COQ men’s magazine in Stupid Stupid Man? One answer is suggested above: they are all utterly self-serving, unable to conceive of a worldview of which they are not the centre, and are all, as a result, capable of appalling insensitivity to the needs and feelings of others and to any denigration of them. And how po-faced that sort of description sounds in the face of some of the most demanding comedy that television has given us.

If I were considering cinema as well, I would need to take account of Sacha Baron Cohen’s Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (Larry Charles, 2006), whose sexist, racist protagonist wrecks havoc across the United States, bewildering scores of the unwitting. Baron Cohen has, of course, a history of outrageous television personas, most notably as Ali G from 1998: he is just too outré for mere comparative consideration here. He is worth having in mind as we think about these other cringe-makers, as he is perhaps as outrageous as any of them, though there is an order of crudity (and I don’t just mean of the prurient kind) in the way he is drawn that may have something to do with the need to reach international big-screen audiences.

Lillesys of the field

To some observers, Lilley, thirty-three, is simply the most exciting comic satirist to have emerged in Australia since Barry Humphries, with whom Lilley is now sometimes bracketed (along with the unknowable chameleon Peter Sellers and the prince of excruciatingly confronting humour, Ricky Gervais).1 Personally, I’d have no difficulty in accepting either the accolade or the heady comparisons in the above. In We Can Be Heroes he creates, as both writer and actor, six disparate characters, five of whom are contending for the title of Australian of the Year, and these five have little in common apart from the fixity of their attention on their own affairs and images. From the start, the series exhibits an absolutely straight face: there is a high-minded voice-over from a breathily serious Jennifer Byrne, extolling ‘inspirational role models’ as the camera pans ‘across the country’, stopping to take in some clear examples, such as sporting heroes and a group of happy Aboriginal children. Nothing in this introduction to each episode prepares us, except in malicious high-mindedness, for what follows. ‘I wanted to be special … up there with your Einsteins and Ian Thorpes’ are the opening words of former Queensland policeman Phil Olivetti, who has saved some children from danger when a bouncy castle took off. His entire conversation is about himself, sometimes coloured monstrous complacencies of them all, or of the vile Phil trying to bribe Mal, a member of the selection panel, to put in a good word for him, while confiding to him how large his member is. And so on. The series blows a refreshing gust of cliché-rattling wind through its six episodes, and it makes you wonder how the ABC was ever able to continue with its Australian Story, which takes seriously the sort of ‘issues’, as Ja’mie would say, that are given such a doing over in Heroes. Unsurprisingly the series won Logies in 2006 for Outstanding Comedy and Outstanding New Talent. But appallingly funny as Heroes is, it is really a curtain-raiser to the still more appalling but more substantial Summer Heights High.

The three protagonists of Summer Heights High, though all are involved in the eponymous secondary school, never meet each other in the whole course of the series. Can this have been intentional on Lilley’s part? Not just to avoid the logistical problems of all three being played by the same actor – that is presumably hardly a problem in these tech-
nologically advanced days – but as a means of reinforcing the essential solitariness of Ja’mie, Mr G., and Jonah, however populously they surround themselves with admiring sycophants. It’s as though they occupy separate semi-worlds in the larger world of the school which director Stuart McDonald and cinematographer Nick Gregoric render with, simultaneously, a documentary-style verisimilitude and a cod-teen-movie genre affiliation via the artfully syrupy theme song and would-be lyri- cal overhead shots with which each episode starts. This is followed by the solemn titles that read: ‘The following programme was filmed on location at a public high school. Three in-

dividuals were chosen as subjects. Their daily lives were documented over one school term.’ In these titles a Griersonian influence would seem to be at work – and the father of docu-

mentary might well rotate in his grave, but was allegedly not always above a little fakery.

Lilley is undeniably brilliant in the three leading roles. A small loss of the head and he catches to the letter Ja’mie’s vanity, or her careful use of the phrase ’no offence’ before uttering some wholly offensive sentiment; Mr G.’s appealing smile ushers us in to his egoism, and his fey but steely concern with promoting his image as an ’inspirer’; and stroppy, break-dancing Polyne-

sian Jonah, rightly described by one reviewer as ‘the one character who isn’t a monster all the way through, the victim himself of a bul-

lying father’, is nevertheless a foul-mouthed bully as well, claiming he only said ‘puck off’ when he actually said something far worse. The bragging, the racism, the wild incorrect-

ess (’I love disabled people,’ Ja’mie gushes to the principal of the state high school to which she goes on a term’s exchange), the sexism and the lewd sexual banter, the tragedy of drug abuse – these and so much more are tightly and intricately woven into Lilley’s screenplay and into the texture of his playing.

The body language and diction that so distinguish each of the three, not only from each other but from those around them, amount to comic genius, but one should note as well the importance of ‘those around them’. These characters are played by a mix of actors and non-professionals, actual students and staff. A notable example is real-life high school headmistress Elda Beretton, who plays Miss Murray, principal of Summer Heights High, and who acts with perfect restraint and straightforwardness of face as she tries to accommodate Mr G.’s vainglorious ambition. Another is actor David Lennie as Doug Peterson, the student welfare officer, played with the quiet understatement of a man sorely tried by the unruly Jonah but determined to persist in his ’work with the victim and also the perpetrators [of bullying]’. I’m aware that it is almost impossible to give any idea of how funny these people are while they remain completely documentary-natural.

Beyond the cringe: tricky Ricky and The Office

If Ricky Gervais’ The Office didn’t actually in-

troduce the idea of cringe television, it is by now perhaps the program most closely as-

sociated with the mode. Steve Coogan’s naff reporter Alan Partridge is as wholly self-cen-

tred and as unaware as David Brent of the im-

pression he makes on other people; and Chris Langham as Roy Mallard in People Like Us, with his roving mic, is terminally and embar-

rassingly inept. But Partridge is not quite as crudely self-seeking as Gervais’ David Brent, and Mallard keeps stumbling over his own ef-

forts to be self-effacing. Australia’s Wayne Hope, in his Don Angel persona in Very Small Business, has to keep slipping around to main-

tain some control over his life, and this is prob-

ably also the case with his Stupid Stupid Man character, Charlie Van Dyke, whose sexism is en-

capsulated in his casual remark to his secre-

tary ‘G’day sweetie, make us a cup of coffee, would you, love?’ One might make the odd ex-

cuse for any of these as they go on their blink-

ered way, but with Brent it is as painful as it is funny to watch as he puts his foot wrong every time, without ever being aware of it. A local television reviewer, writing about the American version of The Office, noted:

Like that other US adaptation (you know the one [i.e., Kath & Kim]) this is broader, softer and much prettier than the original. But in this case, that’s no bad thing. The British original, for all its brilliance, was so excruciating you regularly had to leave the room.3

Well, there’s an element of hyperbole in that, but it is true that David Brent is possibly the least likeable protagonist of any television se-

ries in living memory – and the one you can least easily take your eyes off. He can’t talk on the phone without rolling his eyes to any-

one watching, to suggest what a cool dude he is. His casual and invertebrate racism reach-

es its apogee in his ‘joke’ in which he asks, ‘What’s black and slides down Nelson’s Column?’ My delicate liberal sensitivities for-

bid my giving you the answer. When it is de-

cided that the Swindon branch of the paper manufacturing company should take over the Slough office where Brent has reigned supreme, he does his best to undermine the process, torn between competing with the incoming Swindon boss, Neil, (even to the point of buying – and badly wearing – the same leather blouson) and bad-mouthing him to the Slough staff, of whose loyalty Brent is fatuously and erroneously sure.

What is so remarkable about The Office is the firm grip it has on the documentary technique. It doesn’t feel obliged to soften or to conven-
tionalise the narrative impact of the cross-

currents of life in the workplace, or in the neighbouring pub. It keeps its eye on the real-

ist exposure of the tensions and aspirations of the office, interspersing Brent’s complacent self-regard with the sycophancy of Gareth (as-

sistant to the regional manager, not, as Brent reminds him, assistant regional manager) and the quite touching glances of affection between Tim and the receptionist Dawn. However, the real poignancy is in the aftermath of the excruc-

iation Brent has so repeatedly caused: his total lack of self-knowledge, his unthinking certainty of his own proficiency (as communi-

cator, comedian, all-round fun guy) and of his popularity as a boss can end by freezing our laughter as we contemplate his utter solipsism.

These series are not without an element of pathos, but not of any conventional kind: it is most likely to arise from the fleeting glimpses we get of the protagonists’ insecurities, and from our grasp of the solitariness that springs from their built-in solipsism. It is this ‘pathos potential’ that really takes us beyond the cringe. These programs offer us several cru-

cial challenges. We probably have to accept the fact that we are laughing at Brent or the Lilley creations at least partly from a position of our own superiority, a fact that perhaps be-

comes only apparent to us when we stop to think of where the comedy comes from in this very confronting genre.

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cently appeared in its third edition.

Endnotes

1 Peter Wilmoth, ‘Gilding the Lilley’, The Sun-

day Age, 4 May 2006, p.15.

2 Thomas Sutcliffe, ‘Last Night’s TV: Class Act From a Man of Many Parts’, The Independ-


3 Melinda Houston, ‘Critics’ Choice’, The Sun-