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*I've been writing everything down and I'm not sure
whether I have a plot or a recipe for chili con carne.*

--George Burns, to the studio audience, in the *George
Burns and Gracie Allen Show*

In an episode from the second season of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, a drycleaner finds a disturbing note in George's coat pocket. The note reads as follows: "Goodbye, darling. What I'm about to do is the only way to end my misery. Try to forgive me. When I'm gone, remember I love you." The concerned drycleaner shows the note to Gracie. The episode's title—"Gracie Thinks George is going to Commit Suicide" (1951)—reveals the conclusion that is drawn.

George, of course, isn't intending to kill himself. He reveals this in his first address to the audience: "That suicide note they just read is nothing, I'm not going to kill myself." The note was written for a bit he's about to perform at the Friars Club. George is about to clarify matters when he realizes that this misunderstanding might have its perks: "I can use this to keep Gracie's Mother from visiting," George realizes. He then begins his performance within the performance, wearing a perpetual frown and uttering statements like, "What does it matter anyways?" Gracie and others begin their suicide watch.

Many other episodes of *Burns and Allen* begin with similar miscommunications. As George says himself in an early aside, "This isn't the first time I've been the *victim of a misunderstanding*." The episode highlights the pivotal role of subjectivity in the world of *Burns and Allen*. Once George's letter is taken out of context, multiple "realities" are formed. Until Blanche (Gracie's best friend and neighbor) overhears George reveal his

plot to Harry (Blanche's husband) everyone is convinced of George's suicidal tendencies. As the plot unravels, more characters spin separate fictional yarns, only adding to the confusion. The show becomes "a bottomless pit of representation . . . an endless quagmire of metarealities."¹ In order to teach George a lesson, Blanche and Gracie come up with a plan. Gracie, in a Shakespearean gesture of tragic love, will ingest the placebo poison (jellybeans) before George. Meanwhile, George's friends (still convinced of George's impending demise) pretend to be his better pal so one of them can bequeath his golf clubs.

This web-like narrative of constant performance is not only typical of *Burns and Allen* but also of various forms of modern theater, particularly that of Luigi Pirandello. In *Burns and Allen*, the characters' persistent miscommunications and elaborate performances resemble Pirandello's model of the theater of incommunicability. In this model, characters are unable to share or re-present the purely subjective realities of other characters. They repeatedly contradict one another, tell conflicting stories of the same event, and are defined by roles they play (theatrical and societal) and how others perceive them. And because reality, in Pirandello's world, is based upon the adage, "It's so if you think it's so," (also a title of one of his plays) the audience is denied the comfort of 'objective' truth. Ultimately, Pirandello's theater is a distorted mirror of society, where the performance of roles (gender, professional, ethnic, etc.) is inescapable. In Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Father character emphasizes this point when he describes the character of the Mother: "She isn't a woman, she's a mother, and her drama . . . lies, as a matter of fact, all in these four children[.]"² In short, we're always acting, playing roles.

This vital theme of Pirandello's theater is echoed in the above episode's closing moments. Even though the characters' masks have been stripped away—George's plot is exposed and Gracie has ended her drama of romantic sacrifice—the episode ends on a theatrical gesture. Gracie exits the set, leaving George alone on the living room couch. The camera briefly holds on George before it pulls back and reveals the stage curtain drop. Any realism associated with space of the living room quickly dissolves. This final shot insinuates that George (the other characters and the audience) are forever on-stage.

This analogy between *Burns and Allen* and Pirandello is a window into the complex, historical relationship between early television and modernism. The show's modernist elements (self-reflexivity, intradiegetic narration, and performance-within-performance) were presaged by the duo's previous approaches to entertainment, namely vaudeville and radio. Vaudeville and modernist theater were neither aesthetically opposed nor culturally segregated. The New York theater circuit was a world in which both forms of entertainment coexisted and influenced each other. Tracing the European modern theater boom in America—specifically in context with the career of Pirandello—alongside vaudeville historically illuminates the 'modernist' aesthetics of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*.

The Modern Stage: Vaudeville & The European Avant-Garde in America

Both vaudeville and modernist theater reached the peaks of their success in the volatile urban centers of the early twentieth century. The kinetic worlds of vaudeville and the European avant-garde were an extension of their frenzied urban environments. A

brief overview of the New York theater scene in the 1920s will help elucidate the similar cultural impulses driving these different forms of entertainment.

In order to illustrate how American vaudeville and the European avant-garde crossed paths in the 1920s (and eventually how they impacted early television) one must turn to the careers of J.J. and Lee Shubert (“The Shubert Brothers”) arguably Broadway’s most influential impresarios. Working outside of the Syndicate—an organized monopoly of the nation’s theater circuit which, at one time, concentrated 95 percent of America’s theaters in the hands of seven Broadway businessmen—The Shuberts became the most successful (and most feared) independent theater owners on Broadway.³ Although the Shuberts are remembered chiefly as being producers of safe, accessible mainstream theater (musical comedies and revues, vaudeville, melodrama, historical pageantry, etc.) they also played a vital role in the introduction of the modern European theater to America.⁴

In late 1921, J.J. Shubert crossed the Atlantic to explore the marketing possibilities of European theater. This business trip helped open up the American stage to European drama. A *New York Times* article from July, 5 1922 reveals that the Shubert did not return empty handed: “J.J. Shubert, theatrical producer, who was an incomer yesterday on the Majestic of the White Star Line, said that he had acquired the rights to many plays.”⁵ A second article gives a more thorough description of Shubert’s discoveries, which included plays by British dramatist Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Irish fantasy writer Lord Dunsany, Italian modernist Luigi Pirandello, and many more.⁶ About a week later, *the New York Times* “Gossip of the Rialto” column predicted the massive presence of foreign plays for the upcoming theater season:

“Europe . . . is coming to the Rialto in force next season. Returning producers [like Shubert] who have announced their plans for the season of 1922-23 give evidence that they have been busy abroad, and while promising a substantial number of American works [they] . . . expect to make some of their highest theatrical scores with plays and musical pieces from England, France, Italy, Germany, Austria and Hungary . . . it does look like a conspicuously foreign season.”⁷

Broadway’s cultural landscape was rapidly changing. American theatergoers desired novelty. The 19th century conventions of popular melodrama and moral realism, although still popular, were growing tired for many. Shubert’s exploration into the adventurous terrain of modernism was, therefore, hardly a gamble. As Atkinson notes, it was not simply for art’s sake that “Broadway [in the 1920s] was hospitable to everything abroad.” Even though many of these European plays succeeded in “challenging the complacent minds accustomed to conventional drama,” continues Atkinson, “Entertainment [and profit] was then--as it always is--the theater’s chief occupation.”⁸

There are numerous reasons for Broadway’s immediate embracement and exploitation of European theater. Atkinson argues that American soldiers became accustomed to European drama while at war. Others cite the rise of “Little Theaters,” smaller houses in which producers could take chances on plays outside of the mainstream. Yet this suggestion is inadequate since European drama also thrived in larger theaters.⁹ Atkinson and others overlook the more obvious possibility that theater owners and producers were responding to the increasing diversification of the American city. The industrial boom of

the 1920s provided unprecedented employment for immigrants while unionization and labor laws guaranteed leisure time for industrial workers.¹⁰

The Shuberts stronghold on the European theater market was part of the larger goal of dominating the American stage. In order to achieve this, the Shuberts needed to assert their presence in both the burgeoning European market and the already popular world of vaudeville. The Shuberts, already established as minor players in vaudeville, aggressively sought to expand their power. On July 3, 1922 – just days before J.J. Shubert’s return from Europe and his subsequent announcement of his plans for European theater – *The New York Times* announced the “completed plans for the Shubert vaudeville’s second season.” And although the article states that the Shubert’s “new circuit is not a potential rival of Keith vaudeville [the dominant player in the vaudeville circuit],”¹¹ a later article gives a more genuine portrait of the Shubert’s larger ambitions: “the Affiliated Theaters Corporation . . . will extend the Shubert Vaudeville circuit to include . . . thirty five cities . . . More than 200 acts for the different unit have been signed for [and] . . . the full circuit will be started next September.”¹² It is clear that the Shuberts not only had to venture outside of the ‘legitimate theater’ world in order to compete but also needed to look beyond New York. The Shuberts’ presence needed to be felt nationwide. They would achieve this through constant touring of their vaudeville players and the steady leasing of the European plays for which they owned the rights.

It is important to reiterate that the Shuberts vaudeville plans were announced just days after J.J. Shubert returned from Europe. The proximity of these two business ventures suggests a durable link between vaudeville and modernist theater. In addition, Broadway’s massive theater building projects of the early twenties, its purchasing of an

unprecedented number of plays and the subsequent lowering of ticket prices—all of which helped open up Broadway to the masses—brought vaudeville and modern theater closer together.

This link is also apparent on the creative side of the business. Many contracted vaudeville stars dreamt of entering the reputable world of the ‘legitimate stage.’ Signing with a crossover company (i.e. involved in both theater and vaudeville) like the Shuberts helped make this goal seem realistic.¹³ Although this desire to ‘ascend’ to the world of the legitimate stage suggests a classed distinction between drama and vaudeville, the cultural boundaries between legitimate theater and vaudeville were rather arbitrary. Indeed, many still distinguished the legitimate theater as “class entertainment” while they relegated vaudeville to the lowly status of “mass entertainment.”¹⁴ Yet this distinction had little grounding in the economic reality of the theater world. All companies wished to maximize profit, a goal that was inconsistent with class exclusion. By the mid-1920s vaudeville was ‘cleaning up its act’ and enjoying the respectable patronage of middle class families. Meanwhile, the legitimate stage was opening itself to the lower classes it once excluded. Not to mention, Broadway never missed an opportunity to exploit the vaudeville stage. Theater producers would often test works in process at vaudeville theaters. If the act was a crowd pleaser, then the Broadway was the next stop; if it bombed, revisions were in store.¹⁵ Ironically, many theater producers belittled vaudeville while using it as a testing ground for their product. Broadway cherished the opinion of vaudeville goers because they were theater goers too.¹⁶ The Shubert’s all-inclusive theatrical enterprise is one of the strongest examples of this unity between the legitimate

stage -- which, by 1922, included the modern works of dramatists like Luigi Pirandello and George Bernard Shaw -- and vaudeville.¹⁷

Popularity was the goal behind all of the Shuberts' business decisions. Out of the Shuberts' many imports, it was Luigi Pirandello who enjoyed the most immediate and lasting success. Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* premiered October 30, 1922 at the Shuberts' Princess Theater.¹⁸ The critics were immediately buzzing. Early the next month, *The New York Times* printed a spotlight on the Italian author. The article boasts Pirandello's artistic merits and "international repute," but also makes sure to highlight his accessibility: "[Pirandello] is commonly accepted as leader of the 'grotesque' school of modern Italian dramatists. Most of his work, however, rises far above the intellectual acrobatics of this group."¹⁹ Both the Shuberts and the press were careful not to depict *Six Characters* as esoteric art, but as esteemed mass entertainment. After all, modernist theater was a business.

The critics were not the only ones responding. *Six Characters'* run at the Princess was an enormous success. The play captivated audiences for four months (three more than the average Broadway show). Pirandello's presence on the theater circuit would only grow over the next year. English translators raced to publish Pirandello,²⁰ while the Shubert organization purchased the rights to *all* of his plays.²¹ An advertisement for the English translations proclaimed that "Pirandello is probably the most significant writer of this century."²² By 1924, *Six Characters* reached Los Angeles, where it thrived on the "Little Theater" circuit.²³ The Pirandello-craze was so pronounced that it enticed the author to travel all the way from Sicily to see it for himself.²⁴

What did Americans see in Luigi Pirandello? A great deal can be explained by examining the aesthetic and cultural similarities between Pirandello and vaudeville. These similarities will ultimately illuminate the historical impulses behind what can be described as the ‘modernist’ elements in *Burns and Allen*.

The frantic energy and cultural heterogeneity of urban America transformed viewing habits and performance styles. Vaudeville comedians and modernist playwrights were changing the way people viewed and classified art. Henry Jenkins relates vaudeville’s “increased emphasis on the spectator’s direct emotional response” and transgressions from the “aesthetic of comic realism” to a collapse of the theater’s cultural hierarchies and strict “moral principles.”²⁵ Pirandello saw New York City itself as a symbol for the fall of theatrical tradition: “[From] that first view of your city from the deck of [the harbor] I [was] sure that [New York] represents the new type of dramatic thought which is wanted today.”²⁶

The constant involvement of the audience is analogous to Pirandello’s concept of the “invaded stage.” This theme is most pronounced in Pirandello’s “theater plays”—plays that involve the staging of a play—when a diegetic audience literally interrupts the production they are watching. The “invaded stage” is a rejection of the aesthetic pretensions of theatrical realism, the (perceived) ability to feed meaning to a submissive audience. Now the audience was part of the show. Meaning in both Pirandello and vaudeville is created in a reciprocal exchange between audience and performer. As Anne Paolucci notes, “in the theater a work of art is no longer the work of the writer . . . but an act of life, realized on the stage from one moment to the next, with the cooperation of an audience that must find satisfaction in it.”²⁷ This continuous awareness of the

audience's impact on art was embedded into vaudeville practice. While on the nationwide vaudeville "circuit," performers learned to quickly adapt their acts according to the diversity of their audiences.²⁸ George Burns and Gracie Allen spent a large portion of the 1920s on the circuit, sharpening this uniquely modern performance method.²⁹

Other vaudeville performances were in direct dialogue with modernism. Burlesques (i.e. farcical recreations) of modern plays became a staple in the act of Shubert-contracted vaudevillian Lew Fields.³⁰ Fanny Brice, ex-Ziegfeld Follies dancer and famed vaudeville comedienne, performed comical imitations of Martha Graham, co-founder of the Julliard School and innovator of modern dance.³¹ Legitimate theater star and comedian, Hanley Stafford, joined Brice in her popular radio comedy, *The Baby Snooks Show*. Fifteen years before his radio career, Stafford was praised for his characterization of the Father in the LA premiere of Piranadello's *Six Characters*.³² Twenty years after appearing in *Six Characters*, stage actor John Brown would find himself next door to George and Gracie, playing their neighbor Harry Morton in the *Burns and Allen* TV show.³³ Gracie Allen also participated in the "dialogue." In October, 1938 Gracie Allen announced the opening of her surrealist art exhibit.³⁴ The event took place at the Julien Levy Galleries in New York, America's first gallery dedicated to exhibiting avant-garde works. Evidently, Gracie Allen's comedic style was perceived as 'avant-garde' by some of her contemporaries. The exhibit brochure emphatically makes this connection: "Gracie Allen has been making pictures for years, but these are her first on canvas. When she turns *her undoubtedly surrealist mind* to painting the results are indescribable [emphasis added] [.]"³⁵ Even if Gracie Allen,

Fanny Brice and the others were parodying modern art, their performances still reveal an understanding of the artistic forms of modernism.

This lasting modernist influence is most evident in Burns and Allen's audience/performer dynamic. Audience involvement was facilitated by a realization that the stage was just that – a stage. Neither vaudevillians nor Pirandello claimed to offer a window into an untarnished reality. Drama critic Francis Fergusson argues that “the most fertile property of Pirandello's dramaturgy is the use of the stage itself. By so boldly accepting it for what it is, he freed it from the demand which modern realism made of it, that it be a literal copy of scenes off-stage.”³⁶ This foregrounding of a work's fictional status crossed-over into the radio and television of Burns and Allen.

The Burns and Allen radio show saw little change in its eighteen year run. It was essentially an audio extension of their vaudeville act, with George playing the straight man and Gracie the illogical “dizzy.” By the 1940s, this persistence of a genuine vaudeville aesthetic—which disrupted growing expectations of plot lines and ‘radio realism’—is revealing for it stood in contrast to much of the popular radio of the time.

A review from 1936 gives an impression of the duo's ‘anti-realist’ approach to radio: “A Burns and Allen broadcast . . . is a half hour of madness and smooth entertainment . . . From the initial . . . routine, the show progresses smoothly and expertly despite the ‘break-up of lines [which is] . . . deliberate on this program . . . [and the] careless fumbling of dials and knobs by the engineers.”³⁷ Burns and Allen unveiled the show's fictional construction by fumbling with dials and intentionally screwing-up their lines. These reflexive comedic devices were “successfully laugh-provoking for many

years.”³⁸ For radio to undermine its alleged professionalism with these on-air snafus must have been hysterical for listeners.

By the early 1940s the radio comedy aesthetic was changing. Although radio comedy was still spattered with vaudeville players, the genre saw a greater emphasis on story. Instead of relying mainly on the combative exchanges between opposite types—straight man/ ‘scatterbrain’—radio comedy wove vaudeville chatter into clear (yet minimal) narratives.³⁹ An article from *Time* explains how Burns and Allen were affected by these changes: “Time and the public temper have led Burns and Allen to abandon [hackneyed] pitter-patter . . . But [nevertheless] the vaudeville mood is still their mainstay, despite the elaborate plot of the script and the guest stars.”⁴⁰ The article’s use of the phrase “vaudeville mood” is revealing. It implies something contrary to realism and logical narrative that has survived in *Burns and Allen*—in spite of radio’s push for plot. One episode, “George Visits an Art Gallery” (1941), exemplifies their lasting disregard for realistic comedy. Burns and Allen playfully flouted this growing emphasis on verisimilitude in radio. This was achieved by abruptly integrating the production crew into the show. In the episode, George tries to retell his wonderful experience at an art gallery. While doing so, he’s repeatedly disrupted by Gracie’s loony comments. George forgets what he was about to say and becomes furious. The angry George must look beyond the story world for help: “*Soundman*, what was I thinking of?!?”

Burns and Allen: The “Impossible Script”

In nearly every episode of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, George stands at the stage proscenium and summarizes the show’s events for his audience. Here,

George attempts to clarify the convoluted narrative instigated by Gracie. Yet these attempts to logically explain Gracie ultimately fail. This inability to cohesively 'narrativize' Gracie is exemplified, quite literally, in a number of episodes in which male characters attempt to record Gracie's actions into a logical 'script.'

An episode entitled "Wardrobe Woman Wins Free Trip to Hawaii" (1952) begins with George in a state of writer's block, unable to think of new ideas for his television show. In the midst of George's creative problems, Jane (the wardrobe girl for Burn's T.V. show) announces that she has just won two free tickets to Hawaii. Jane, realizing that Hawaii would be the ideal spot for a honeymoon, says to Gracie, "Isn't it a shame I'm not getting married." Gracie takes Jane's comment to mean that she's unmarried when, in fact, she's happily married with children. Gracie then becomes determined to find Jane a husband so she can enjoy the honeymoon of her dreams.

George, in a direct address to the audience, summarizes the events: "Interesting little situation: Gracie is going to get [someone] married to Jane, which should come to something as a surprise to her husband and children." George then realizes he should probably inform Gracie on Jane's marital status before anything disastrous happens. But George also realizes that this impending comedy of errors might make the perfect television scenario. George decides to sit back, take detailed notes, and enjoy the show.

And thus begins a chaotic series of miscommunications and hysterical performances: Gracie performs a hula dance ("a taste of Hawaii") to convince Harry von Zell (George's bachelor friend) to marry Jane; Jane overhears Gracie calling a matrimonial agency and thinks Gracie's planning on divorcing George; and (finally) Jane's *real* husband arrives and Gracie tries to fix him up with his own wife.

George recognizes that his script in progress is far too absurd for television. The show ends with Gracie, in a state of self-congratulatory bliss, watching the happy “new” couple (Jane and her long-time husband) leave for their trip. At this point, George begins to tear the pages from his notebook. “Nobody could ever believe this,” says George. He was presumably attempting to *adapt* Gracie’s antics into a coherent half-hour comedy. His realization evokes the discovery of the Director in Pirandello’s *Six Characters* – to produce a logical script for this anti-rational “life drama” is a futile task.⁴¹ Like all of Pirandello’s “theater plays”, this play-in-the-making “eludes the possibility of a script.”⁴² George seconds this notion when he looks towards his audience and says, “I’ve been writing everything down and I’m not sure whether I have a plot or a recipe for chile con carne.” The ironic fact that George’s script would have produced virtually the same show the audience just watched, reveals much about the irrational world of *Burns and Allen*—a world in which logic and reason collapse beneath Gracie’s irrational will. Even though Gracie’s convinced that she’s a successful matchmaker only because she’s been restricted of crucial information (Jane’s already married!) she never comes off as the dupe. Her final sense of accomplishment is a triumph of the imagination.

Another botched attempt to logically ‘narrativize’ Gracie occurs in an episode entitled, “Gracie Goes to a Psychiatrist for Blanche’s Dream,” (1951). Blanche tells Gracie that she’s been planning on visiting a psychiatrist because of a recurring nightmare: “Harry and I are on a ship and the ship sinks. And there I am struggling in the water and Harry leaves me there to drown.” Blanche, however, is too embarrassed to get professional help for these fears of abandonment. Gracie volunteers to go to a psychiatrist with Blanche’s troubles and then relay the doctor’s wisdom back to her.

After the Doctor hears Blanche's nightmare from Gracie, he assures her that these fears are very common and that she does not need psychological help. Gracie, relieved, breaks character and starts talking to the Doctor in her typical, zany manner. The Doctor revises his diagnosis.

"Lie down, Mrs. Burns," the doctor commands. The Doctor then locks Gracie in his office and begins drilling her with questions. "Did your parents enjoy good health?" asks the doctor. Gracie, misinterpreting the question, answers, "Of course, they loved it!" Similar exchanges occur and the Doctor becomes more and more impatient. The Doctor then leaves the room to take a call. Gracie walks over to the Doctor's side of the desk and sits down in *his* chair. When the Doctor returns, Gracie begins playing doctor, mimicking the trite questions previously directed at her.

Once again, Gracie defies logical (or scientific) interpretation. Even after the Doctor audibly records Gracie (mirroring George's previous written record) the doctor still cannot understand his 'specimen.' In fact, as suggested by the seat change, the sanity paradigm is reversed. When Gracie leaves, the Doctor is left speechless staring at the ceiling, mouth agape like a mental-case.

This final gesture is echoed in another episode, once again involving a psychiatrist. In "Gracie Thinks George is going to Commit Suicide," (1952) Gracie gets a psychiatrist (Dr. Coleman) to speak with her despondent husband. Yet after mere minutes of speaking with Gracie, the psychiatrist loses interest in the suicidal George. "Let's forget about your husband. I've suddenly become very interested in you," says Dr. Coleman. Once again, the psychiatrist initiates the examination. He approaches Gracie with an ambitious glimmer in his eye. Dr. Coleman, like the others, is going to figure

this woman out. These analytical quests reflect what Eric Bentley calls “the pseudo-religious . . . love of truth [and knowledge]”⁴³ in Pirandello’s characters, a human desire which the author (and Gracie) constantly deflate.

Once again, the character’s positions are reversed. Gracie begins supine on the couch with the confident doctor pacing behind her, asking questions and assiduously taking notes. Yet Gracie’s madcap remarks—“Yeah I ate lobster as a baby; I was too little to hold on to any food, so my mother [would] give me food that would hold on to me”—eventually take their toll on the Doctor. The scene ends with the exhausted doctor lying on the couch while a poised Gracie paces over him (pen in hand) and drills him with questions.

One might argue that these scenarios only recycle cultural stereotypes of the irrational female—a myth historically used to justify the exclusion of women from the “rational” spaces of business and government. Yet these reversals of power-structures (Gracie’s seizing of the doctors’ professional spaces) and deflections of masculine agendas demand a more nuanced reading. These male attempts to “record” Gracie resemble Beth Newman’s notion of the “onlooker-narrator.” Here, the power structures implicit in writing a woman’s story come full force. The “onlooker-narrator” strives to “defend himself against the threat of the feminine by telling her story and writing it down . . . and seeking in this oblique way to make it—and her—his own.”⁴⁴ In this light, Gracie’s appropriation of Dr. Coleman’s occupation underscores the dominant ideology of the day and reveals its unstable infrastructure. In the 1950s, women—the favorite target of what Elaine May calls the Cold War “expert”—were held under extra scrutiny by professionals.⁴⁵ The perseverance of domestic roles (breadwinner/homemaker) was

essential for a panicked nation's sense of security. Gracie's constant (and victorious) battles with 'experts' are vestiges of the relativity and absurdity of modernism at odds with the logic and desperate conformity that defined the Cold War era.

Conclusion: The End of Incommunicability

The image of Burns and Allen avidly reading Pirandello or Pirandello enjoying the comedic misunderstandings of Burns and Allen remains fantasy. Nevertheless, by tracing the connections between vaudeville, Burns and Allen and Pirandello, it becomes clear that television is more than an immediate byproduct of the Cold War era. The conservative domestic comedy of the mid-fifties did eventually placate the raucous energy and transgressive politics of vaudeville-influenced television. In the mid-fifties domestic sitcom, incommunicability was exchanged for the clear delivery of messages. If illogic persisted, it was generally assigned (pejoratively) to women. Characters no longer succumbed to the absurdity of their surroundings (like George and the Psychiatrists) but experienced epiphanic realizations. Most of these 'discoveries'— realizing that a woman's place is in the home not the workforce; family life is far more fulfilling for a woman than an independent life of business and travel; a bachelor lifestyle is a depraved existence; etc.— reasserted and naturalized the domestic norms of postwar America.

Of course, American television was never a radical medium. As Wertheim says, even in the early fifties "television audience[s] did not want to hear social commentary," but wanted to be entertained. Yet this does not mean that *Burns and Allen* is without political subtext. If Allen's ironic depiction of the ditzy housewife did not out rightly

subvert gender and domestic norms, it at least tickled them. After all, George Burns and Gracie Allen were happily married for many, many years. Yet *Burns and Allen's* primetime successors lacked the irony and self-awareness that George and Gracie (and Luigi Pirandello) relished. Unlike the domestic 'realities' of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, which were presented as the *only* way to live,⁴⁶ there “was no attempt [in *Burns and Allen*] to sustain the illusion that [the show] is a [reality] at all.”⁴⁷ Burns and Allen acknowledged their participation in the trifles, materiality, and inevitable absurdities of suburban life—but this doesn't mean they couldn't laugh at them too.

¹ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 166.

² Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in *Naked Masks: Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, ed. and trans. by Eric Bentley (New York: EP Dutton, 1952), 221.

³ Andrew B. Harris, *Broadway Theater* (London: Routledge), 8-11. The Shuberts were initially based in Syracuse, New York, where the brothers owned a handful of theaters. In 1905, the Shuberts left for the cut-throat world of Syndicate-dominated Broadway. The brothers realized that they would have to compromise with the Syndicate if they wished to make the slightest mark on Broadway. They leased a Syndicate theater and staged August Thomas's western melodrama, *Arizona* (1900) which became the Shuberts' first Broadway hit. Their profits from *Arizona* freed them from the whims of the Syndicate and allowed them to buy ten theaters on the Broadway circuit. By 1925, the Shuberts owned eighty-six theaters on Broadway and twenty-six in other major cities (Harris, 8-15).

⁴ This portion of the Shuberts' career is largely ignored from histories on both Broadway and the Shuberts. The most recent overview on the Shuberts' (See above reference, *The Shuberts Present*) has no mention of what will be key to this essay—Shubert's business in Europe and the consequent popularization of modern European theater, especially that of Luigi Pirandello. See also Brooks Atkison, *Broadway* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), a tome on Broadway which, although it mentions Pirandello in passing, never does so with relation to the Shuberts.

⁵ "J.J. Shubert Returns—Brings Plays Acquired in Tour of Europe—Iring Berlin Back," *New York Times*, 5 July 1922, 25. The countries Shubert toured were England, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, France and Belgium. Shubert's discoveries were most fruitful in England and Italy. See Also "New of the Berlin Stage" *The New York Times*, 6 June 1922, 78, which announces Shubert's return to the states.

⁶ "J.J. Shubert Brings Plays and Artists—The 'Lady of the Rose' for Eleanor Painter, and Pinero's 'The Enchanted Lady—Engages Hilda Woerner—Brock Pemberton to Produce Dunsay's 'If,' With Author Here, and American and Italian Plays," *The New York Times*, 7 July 1922, 20. Shubert loaded his foreign theater arsenal to the brim. He obtained the rights to operas by modern German composer Leo Fall, Italian playwrights Luigi Barzini and Arnaldo Fracaroli, and French dramatist Louis Verneuil, and others still. Shubert also signed contracts with actors while overseas, one of them being Hilda Woerner, German singer and film actress.

⁷ "The Gossip of the Rialto," *The New York Times*, 16 July 1922.

⁸ Atkison, 227-228.

⁹ See Harris, 11-20.

¹⁰ For immigrant theater audiences in the 1920s See Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 42: "American theater, in contrast to European tradition, depended on box-office revenues rather than state subsidies. When middle class audiences began to patronize the stage in growing numbers, they represented an increased demand that, together with technological advances, enabled entrepreneurs to establish a monopoly." See also, *Henry Jenkins, What Made Pistachio Nuts? : Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 38-39: "By the early twentieth century, increased leisure time and expanded family budgets had greatly broadened the potential market for commercial entertainment [...]."

¹¹ "Shuberts to Reopen—Vaudeville on Review Plan to Begin Full Circuit in September," *New York Times*, 3 July 1922, 12. The Shuberts were aware that Keith vaudeville was a force to be reckoned with. Keith invented the idea of staging vaudeville as a "continuous performance," which accommodated the rushed schedules of modern-day patrons. Keith's reputation was acknowledged nation-wide. A perceived usurpation of Keith's territory would have blemished the Shuberts' business ethos and damaged potential business relations. See B.F. Keith, "The Vogue of the Vaudeville," in *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 16.

¹² "Shuberts to Give Revues in Vaudeville—New Corporation to Form Companies and Route them Through Thirty-five Cities of Circuit," *New York Times* 11 February 1922, 21.

¹³ This topic demands more intensive research. Although the cast and crew from the Shuberts' stage plays are documented it is difficult to know just how many of these actors got their start on vaudeville. Because the goal of ascending to the legitimate stage was common for many vaudevillians, it is fair to assume that many performers signed with the Shuberts – who held undeniable sway in the theater world—for this very

reason. For a brief overview of vaudeville performers and the legitimate stage, See William Smith, *The Vaudevillians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., 1976) , 7-11.

¹⁴ Smith, 8.

¹⁵ Smith, 9.

¹⁶ For vaudeville and class issues See Charles W. Stein, "Introduction," *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1984) , 3 : "[V]ariety tended to be crude and often vulgar [while] vaudeville was of a more polished and refined nature . . . Variety aimed its appeal at the working classes; vaudeville, while it did likewise in the beginning, was able to broaden its appeal ultimately to include both the middle and upper classes of American society. Members of the intelligentsia often became staunch partisans of vaudeville."

¹⁷ For a vivid example of the diverse offerings of the Shubert Organization. See "America's Foremost Theaters and Hits," *New York Times*, 19 April 1922, 27. In this advertisement, Vaudevillian Eddie Cantor and illusionist The Great Houdini are listed alongside the high brow dramatist, George Bernard Shaw.

¹⁸ "New Play at the Princess," *New York Times*, 12 October 1922, 24.

¹⁹ "Who is Luigi Pirandello?" *New York Times*, 5 November 1922, 97. See Also John Corbin "The Happy Pessimist," *New York Times*, 5 November 1922, 10. In contrast to the above article, Corbin criticizes *Six Characters* for being too obscure for popular audiences: "'Six Characters' . . . is delightfully novel and stimulating; but its appeal would be wider if it dealt with the finished product of the theater familiar to the general public." Corbin's predictions were wrong. *Six Characters* was revived and many other Pirandello plays were staged on Broadway throughout the 1920s.

²⁰ "Latest Works of Fiction," *The New York Times*, 8 November 1923, BR8.

²¹ "Gossip of the Rialto," *The New York Times*, 7 October 1923, X1 : "Brock Pemberton [the Shubert's most reputable producer] announced . . . the conclusion of negotiations for the English-speaking rights to all of Pirandello's plays . . . Mr. Pemberton, who produced 'Six Characers in Search of an Author' last season, thereby introducing the work of the Italian dramatist to America, will produce at least three of his newly acquired plays this year."

²² "Luigi Pirandello" [E.P. Dutton & Company advertisement], *New York Times*, 16 December 1923, 18.

²³ Edwin Shallert, "A Real Novelty—'Six Characters in Search of an Author' Unusual," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 September 1924, A11. *Six Characters* was revived approximately two years after its premiere in Los Angeles. See "Studio and Stage," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 1926, A9 : "'Six Characters in Search of an Author . . . which was considered the most successful production of last season is to be repeated by popular request[.] . . .'"

²⁴ "Pirandello, Poet, Here for New Play," *New York Times*, 20 December 1923, 12 : "An interesting passenger, who arrived from Genoa on the new liner Duilio of the Navigazione Generale Italiana Company yesterday was Dr. Luigi Pirandello, poet, author, and playwright."

²⁵ Jenkins, 46.

²⁶ T.R. Ybarra, "Pirandello, Playboy of the Playwrights—Author of 'Six Characters' Finds New York Fantastic and Almost Gets Mistaken for Georges Carpentier," *New York Times*, 6 January 1924, 5.

²⁷ Anne Paolucci, "Introduction to the Italian Theater by Luigi Pirandello," in *The Genius of the Italian Theater* , 23-24, quoted in Anne Paolucci, *Pirandello's Theater: The Recovery of the Modern Stage for Dramatic Art* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974) , 60.

²⁸ Edwin Milton Royle, "The Vaudeville Theater," in *Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) , 28.

²⁹ Milton Berle, George Burns, and Bob Hope, "A Trio of Immortals," in *Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) , 302-305.

³⁰ See Armond Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) , 26-27.

³¹ See Bernard Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville* (New York: Citadel, 1961) , 91, for a picture of "Fanny Brice doing her Martha Graham . . . modernist dancing." Also See Norman Katkov, *Fabulous Fanny: The Story of Fanny Brice* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

³² Edwin Shallert, "'Six Characters in Search of an Author' Unusual," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 September 1924, A11: "Exceptionally well done to my mind were the roles of the father character and the stepdaughter character. Hanley Stafford as the former had many long and difficult speeches to which he gave much conviction."

³³ “John Brown, Radio and TV Actor, Dies; Played Digger O’Dell in ‘Life of Riley,’” *New York Times*, 18 May 1957, 19: “[Brown] made his Broadway debut in Pirandello’s ‘Six Characters in Search of an Author.’”

³⁴ “Comedienne to Show Art—Gracie Allen Offers Paintings of ‘Surrealistic School,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1938, 27. Unfortunately, Gracie’s paintings are lost. See Ingrid Schaffner and Lisa Jacobs, “Introduction,” in *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 13-14: “There is no definitive archive to consult on the Julien Levy Gallery . . . We still search in vain for even a glimpse of one of the original jewels designed by Salvador Dalí that Levy exhibited in 1941. Or for one of the tantalizingly entitled paintings such as *Man with Mike Fright Moons over Manicurist*, by the comedienne Gracie Allen.”

³⁵ Julien Levy Gallery brochure for *Paintings by Gracie Allen*, September 1938, quoted in Lisa Jacobs and Ingrid Schaffner, ed., *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 56.

³⁶ Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1949), 148 quoted in Anne Paolucci, *Pirandello’s Theater: The Recovery of the Modern Stage for Dramatic Art* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 5.

³⁷ Dale Armstrong, “Radiopinions,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 April 1936, B12.

³⁸ Armstrong, “Radiopinions,” B12.

³⁹ Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Radio Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 314-315.

⁴⁰ “Straight Man,” *Time*, 13 December 1943, 58, 60.

⁴¹ Paolucci, *Pirandello’s Theater*, 60.

⁴² Paolucci, *Pirandello’s Theater*, 49.

⁴³ Eric Bentley, “Introduction,” *Naked Masks: Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: EP Dutton, 1952), xvi.

⁴⁴ Beth Newman, “The Situation of the Looker-On: Gender, Narration, and Gaze” in *Wuthering Heights* *PMLA* vol. 105 no. 5, p. 1034.

⁴⁵ Elaine May, “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155-156: “Whether or not all Americans read or believed the professionals, there can be little doubt that postwar America was the era of the expert. By articulating cultural norms, they expressed as well as helped to shape American values . . . Armed with scientific techniques and presumably inhabiting a world above popular passions, the experts had brought us into the atomic age.”

⁴⁶ Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sit-coms and Suburbs,” in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 128-129.

⁴⁷ Lynn Spigel, “Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourse on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955” *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 17.

Appendix

Filmography
(Material Viewed at UCLA Film and Television Archive)

- “Alice Gets Married.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, February 6, 1956.
- Big Broadcast, The*. Directed by Frank Tuttle. Starring Bing Crosby, George Burns and Gracie Allen. Paramount, 1932.
- College Humor*. Directed by Wesley Ruggles. Starring Bing Crosby, George Burns and Gracie Allen. 1 hr. 32 min. Paramount, 1933.
- “Company for Christmas.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, December 15, 1955.
- “Fanny Brice Gives Baby Snooke Party--Hollywood, California.” Hearst Newsreels Collection. August 27, 1939.
- “George and the Missing Five Dollars and Missing Baby.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, February 21, 1955.
- “George Sneezing—Gracie Things He’s Insane.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, October 23, 1952.
- “Gracie Adopts a Dog.” *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, December 3, 1955.
- “Gracie Goes to a Psychiatrist for Blanche’s Dream.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, September 9, 1951.
- “Gracie Thinks George is Going to Commit Suicide.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, December 18, 1952.
- “Morton Buys Iron deer--Gracie Thinks George Needs Glasses.” *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, October 5, 1954.
- “Night of Vaudeville.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, March 28, 1955.
- “Ronnie’s Elopement.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, December 12, 1955.

“Shakespeare Caper.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, October 8, 1955.

“Wardrobe Woman Wins Free Trip to Hawaii.” *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. CBS, October 9, 1952.