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## WHY *30 ROCK* IS NOT FUNNY (IT'S METAFUNNY)

### I

THE FIRST TIME I saw *30 Rock*, I was struck by how often it fails to be funny. This is not to say that *30 Rock* is never funny—sometimes it is very funny indeed. But what stood out most to me was how strikingly *not* funny it often is. The show is, nevertheless, very entertaining. And it is curious that a sitcom—a show that is ostensibly designed to entertain through the use of humor—could entertain so successfully while being so unsuccessful at making its audience (or at least this member of the audience) laugh. This curiosity is the subject of this paper. My purpose is to offer a theory that explains three features of *30 Rock*: first, how it sometimes achieves comedic effect; second, why (what I take to be) its peculiar comedic strategy often results in the failure to be funny; and third, why *30 Rock* is entertaining and (I think) philosophically interesting even when it fails to be funny. I think that there is a single explanation for all three of these features.

First, it will be useful in discussing *30 Rock* (2006–present) to make some preliminary remarks about other recent network sitcoms that bear a strong family resemblance to it. I have chiefly in mind *The Office* (2005–present) and *Arrested Development* (2003–06). These will be useful not only as a background against which *30 Rock* can be better understood and against which its originality can be more clearly seen, but also as evidence of the type of humor often employed by such shows. They will serve to illustrate a basic pattern that recent sitcoms frequently follow. This basic pattern will be a major focus of what follows, and concentrating on it will add the benefit of making it unnecessary to give detailed attention to humor more generally.

This last point is important. Humor is notoriously difficult to give a general theory of, and philosophical theses that depend too much for their plausibility on any particular theory of humor are on correspondingly shaky ground. I hope, to the extent possible, to avoid detailed engagement with various theories of humor and therefore a host of potential objections to my view by restricting my comments to one very specific sort of humor—the sort that I will describe by referring to the TV shows already mentioned.

My thesis is that *30 Rock* derives much of its entertainment value from comic story lines that succeed precisely by failing to exploit opportunities to include jokes of the same specific sort that it, and other network sitcoms, quite often employ.

## II

There are in the literature three basic theories of humor on offer, none of which has been shown to be entirely satisfactory: the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. According to the superiority theory, humor is achieved primarily by giving one's audience a sense of superiority to some object of derision, e.g., a person who serves as the butt of a joke. According to the relief theory, humor results from the feeling of relief that often follows a stressful experience. According to the incongruity theory, humor is the result of a perceived incongruity in something that we find funny. While each of these views has had its defenders and detractors, it is the third that has gained prominence, both for philosophical and for psychological reasons (Carroll, pp. 156–67).<sup>1</sup> Cases of jokes that are funny without giving anyone a sense of superiority or feeling of relief after a stressful experience are a dime a dozen in the literature on humor.

Some philosophers have expressed doubts about the incongruity theory as a general theory of humor. As Brown rightly notes, a wide variety of phenomena can be equivocally identified as incongruities. Contemporary theorists classify as incongruities so diverse a set as “inappropriateness, . . . disharmony, discrepancy, disagreement in character or qualities, discord, inconsistency, unsuitableness, incoherence, unreasonableness, unconventionality, and absurdity” (Brown, pp. 18–19; see also Carroll, pp. 159–60).<sup>2</sup> While each of these bears some resemblance to the others, it is unclear whether there is a single unifying characteristic that unites them all. Various incongruities seem to be united more by a family resemblance than by a common essence or unifying characteristic.

To my mind, however, this is more a virtue of the incongruity theory than a vice. After all, jokes don't seem to have an essence or unifying characteristic any more than incongruities do (see Carroll, p. 166). Perhaps all jokes are funny? But some are not. Perhaps they all aim at being funny? But so do pranks, comedic plays, and certain performance pieces. (When Jim Carrey "kicks his own ass" in a public restroom in *Liar, Liar*, his performance aims at being funny, but isn't a joke.) If jokes, which I take to be paradigm cases of comedic things, have no common essence, we should not expect a theory of humor to identify some essence or unifying characteristic that everything funny is supposed to have in common.

Still, it is difficult to establish the incongruity theory as a general theory of humor. *Some* things seem to be funny without being incongruous in any obvious way. When children (and some adults, as the Homeric Hymns and *Canterbury Tales* seem to prove) laugh at farts and other bodily functions, they aren't laughing because of any incongruity, but who could deny that they find the subject of their laughter funny? When I laugh (under my breath, I hope) at people who slip on ice while walking across campus in winter, I am not laughing because of an incongruity. But some slips on the ice are funny, whether they strike me as incongruous or not. Or think of the cliché, "It's funny because it's true." Unless the cliché itself is a joke (and not a particularly funny one), it suggests that some cases of humor derive from congruity rather than incongruity. That being said, the incongruity theory of humor seems to get many cases of humor right, and to do so in a way that is sensitive to the apparent lack of any common characteristic that funny things are supposed to share. It's just that it should be understood, at most, as a partial theory of humor, not a complete one.

One interesting upshot of the incongruity theory of humor—even understood as only a partial theory of humor—has recently been discussed by Noël Carroll.<sup>3</sup> If funny things are often funny by virtue of some incongruity, then it is possible that entire story lines, and not only episodes or jokes or scenes within stories, may be funny by virtue of their structure, i.e., by being structured in a way that is, in one sense or another, incongruous. Carroll suggests two different ways in which an entire story may have an incongruous structure and, thereby, count as a comic story line: it may be, first, composed of a series of events, each of which is subject to incompatible interpretations depending on one's point of view (Carroll calls such a plot an *equivocal* plot) or,

second, composed of a series of events which, taken all together, are wildly improbable (Carroll calls such a plot an *improbable* plot).

A good example of an equivocal plot structure comes from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As Carroll describes the plot, "Algernon Moncrieff . . . sets in motion a slew of multiple-interpretation situations when he shows up at Jack Worthing's manor house, pretending to be Ernest, Jack's nonexistent brother" (p. 169). Since the audience knows, and most of the characters on stage do not, that Algernon is not, in point of fact, Ernest, the audience understands what happens in each scene very differently from the way in which the characters on stage understand what is happening. As the story line unfolds, with the characters still ignorant of Algernon's identity, the gap between what the characters think is happening and what the audience knows is happening grows ever larger. This creates an incongruity between different ways the story line can be interpreted, depending on whether one adopts the viewpoint of the characters or of the audience.

In order to follow the narrative to its conclusion, audience members must be able to entertain simultaneously both interpretations (based on the characters' and their own points of view) of each scene they see; otherwise the actions of Algernon and the other characters make little sense. Audience members are thus forced to interpret the unfolding story of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in two incongruous ways until the very end, when the on-stage characters finally learn the truth about Algernon and the incongruity is resolved. The structure of Wilde's play is incongruous from beginning to end and is, consequently, an equivocal plot structure.

As an example of an improbable plot structure, Carroll offers *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, and Blonde*:

[The] leading character, Elle Woods, a Harvard Law School graduate who bizarrely enough simultaneously has a world-view made up of equal parts of sorority lore, fashion magazine advice, and beauty parlor gossip, heads to Washington, D.C., to pass an animal-rights bill. Given her awesome naïveté and her lack of insider knowledge about the ways of the Capital, along with her penchant to reduce every challenge to the kinds of solutions afforded by her "Blonde" (a.k.a. Dumb Blonde) world-view, the likelihood of her succeeding is frankly infinitesimal. Of course, that she might succeed is a possibility that we entertain, once she initiates her project. It has a niche on our horizon of expectations, but only barely so. For the likelihood that she has any realistic hope of actualizing her

intentions is about as low as one can go without dissolving into zero. And yet, in improbable scene after improbable scene, she advances until she finally achieves everything to which she aspires. (pp. 176–77)

The incongruity in the plot of *Legally Blonde 2* consists in the fact that we have certain expectations about the course that a story line might take—expectations that are based on our knowledge of various elements of the story. Most of us know, or think we know, enough about Harvard Law School and the U.S. Congress to doubt whether a fashion expert immersed in sorority culture could ever really succeed with either. These expectations are incongruous with the plot structure of *Legally Blonde 2*.

I wish to argue that *30 Rock* exhibits an altogether different way in which a plot structure may be comic. The comedy of *30 Rock*, like the comedy of *Legally Blonde 2* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* depends, in large measure, on global incongruities in plot structure. However, the incongruities that often characterize the structure of episodes of *30 Rock* are importantly different from either equivocal or improbable plotlines. Rather than arising from episodes that may be interpreted very differently depending on one's point of view, or on the violations of expectations about how stories are likely to unfold, the incongruities that often characterize episodes of *30 Rock* arise from comically flouting expectations about how comedy works.

To understand what I have in mind, it is necessary to describe a basic pattern that shows like *30 Rock* often follow in order to create humor. Accordingly, I turn my attention now to *Arrested Development*, *The Office*, and *30 Rock*.

### III

An example from *Arrested Development* serves as an instructive starting point. Lucille Bluth, the wealthy wife of a businessman, and her daughter, Lindsay Bluth Fünke, attempt to have dinner at an exclusive restaurant. Unfortunately for them, Lucille's husband, George Sr., is in prison for fraud and her family's social standing has been diminished. When Lucille and Lindsay show up at the restaurant without having made a reservation, they are turned away. The episode (season 1, episode 11: "Public Relations") proceeds as follows:

NARRATOR. With her blood sugar at a perilous low, Lucille made Lindsay pull into the nearest restaurant.

- SERVER. Welcome to Klimpy's! Anywhere you like!
- LUCILLE. This does not bode well. (*Sitting down and reading over the menu*) I'll have the Ike and Tina tuna.
- SERVER. Plate or platter?
- LUCILLE. I don't understand the question and I won't respond to it.

Several features of this conversation are worth mentioning. First, it presents a straightforward counterexample to both the superiority and the relief theories of humor. No one in this scene is portrayed as inferior to the audience or made an object of its derision. No real anxiety is created or alleviated. Rather, the scene is funny because of the sort of incongruity that it portrays.

Behavior in restaurants is governed by a complex set of social norms. Restaurant behavior is not only restricted by these norms, it is also informed by a great deal of non-normative cultural knowledge and skills. Diners know how to use menus, how to order their food, how to attract the attention of servers, and how to pay for the meal once finished. These norms and skills jointly create a set of expectations regarding the behavior of restaurant goers. When customers do not follow the relevant norms or are unskilled in the ordinary ways, we are *surprised* by their actions.

A competing set of expectations is created by the audience's knowledge of Lucille Bluth's character. Lucille is not merely wealthy. She often shows gross misunderstanding of people who are not wealthy and demonstrates a basic inability to interact with them. She feels uncomfortable when not interacting with the social and economic elite, and frequently behaves in inappropriate ways when in situations that include individuals of other socioeconomic classes. It is therefore not possible for the scene to play out in a way that satisfies all of the audience's expectations.

This setup plays a vital function. Violating expectations alone does not create humor. There are two reasons for this. First, as Cave points out, "not just any incongruity will do"; there is nothing funny about a bare  $P \& \sim P$  (p. 135).<sup>4</sup> Second, and more important to the current paper, even when incongruities are of the appropriate kind, we do not always see humor in them. Often, when our expectations are not met, we find the situation offensive, creepy, morally repugnant, disappointing, confusing, or a host of other adjectives. However, just as often, such situations seem funny at a later date, when viewed in a different context or when the people involved are in a different mood. Similarly, in order for the situation in *Arrested Development* to be seen as funny (rather than

creepy, offensive, disappointing, or whatever), it is not enough to create a clever incongruity. The audience must also be prepared to interpret that incongruity as funny. The preceding context, the establishment of competing expectations that cannot be mutually satisfied, facilitates this preparation. It creates a comedic situation. It allows the audience to prepare for an impending violation of (some of) their expectations.

But the violation of expectations in a comedic context is still not the whole story. If *all* of our expectations were violated, the scene would not be funny. If, for instance, the restaurant had been one that does not operate according to standard social norms and if Lucille had acted out of character, the humor of the situation would have been lost. The scene is funny because of the way in which it violates one set of expectations in order to fulfill another. In this case, our expectations regarding Lucille are met, right down to the specific language in which she expresses herself. Several episodes earlier, Lucille had had the following exchange with her son, Michael (season 1, episode 4: "Key Decisions"):

- LUCILLE.     When's the last time you went on a date?  
 MICHAEL.     I just haven't met anybody who's not completely self-absorbed  
                   and impossible to have a conversation with.  
 LUCILLE.     If that's a veiled criticism of me, I won't hear it and I won't  
                   respond to it.

The verbal similarity between Lucille's lines in these two scenes is no accident. Rather, it plays into the fulfillment of expectation that underlies the humor of both scenes.

This should suffice to sketch the pattern I'm interested in discussing. A character is placed in a specific situation. Facts about the character create one set of expectations. Social norms and cultural knowledge relevant to the situation create a competing and incompatible set of expectations. This prepares the audience to interpret what ensues as comedy. As the scene plays out, one set of expectations is violated in order to fulfill the other. This combination of violating and fulfilling expectations in a comedic context creates humor.

It must be stressed that this is not a general theory of humor, a theory of humor in sitcoms, or even a complete analysis of the humor in the scene above. Nor is it meant to be a corrective to the incongruity theory of humor. It is merely a pattern that is typical of the comedy in certain sitcoms that may be considered the same subgenre as *30 Rock*.

Space prohibits a thorough demonstration of how widespread this

basic pattern is in the sitcoms under consideration. But two more examples may establish that the pattern is not unique to the scenes considered so far and offer some additional support for, and clarification of, a few comments already made.

The first example is, again, from *Arrested Development*. Lucille's youngest son, Buster, is a perpetual graduate student. As a child he attended the prestigious Milford Academy, which teaches that children should be neither seen nor heard. Buster so excelled at this that the faculty stopped noticing him and forgot all about him, as a result of which he remained at the academy beyond the intended date of his graduation ("Public Relations"). He is predictably bad at social interaction, tends not to express dissatisfaction, and seriously oversteps social bounds in those few situations in which he does express his dissatisfaction at something. Comments that he makes while angry are always bleeped out. Moreover, he always treats his mother deferentially. Buster's older brother, Gob (pronounced *Jobe*, an acronym for George Oscar Bluth), is a magician and sometime ventriloquist who owns an African American puppet named Franklin. Franklin's stage personality is very crude. He nearly always shouts and frequently offends by expressing racial stereotypes (presumably based on Gob's beliefs about black Americans) while on stage. This is doubly offensive, since the Bluths are white.

In a scene from "Meat the Veals" (season 2, episode 16), Buster is wearing Franklin on his forearm to hide the fact that he recently lost a hand in a bizarre swimming accident involving an escaped seal. Meanwhile, Lucille wishes to take Buster to the country club. It is a running joke throughout *Arrested Development* that minorities are not well accepted at the country club the Bluths attend. The following brief exchange takes place:

- LUCILLE. They're not going to let you into the country club with that  
(*indicating Franklin*).
- BUSTER. (*Speaking with an affected accent as Franklin*) I don't want no  
part o' yo' tight-ass country club, ya freak bitch!

The pattern here is the same as above. There is no way for all the audience's expectations to be met. Given that Buster is wearing Franklin, there is some expectation that he speak as Franklin. Facts about Franklin create the expectation that Buster shout obscenities in a racially insensitive way at his interlocutor. Facts about Buster, combined with facts about the situation, create the expectation that Buster will say something

deferential to his mother rather than expressing any frustration, anger, or dissatisfaction. Moreover, there is a background assumption that any crude comment of Buster's will be bleeped out. These expectations are all established in anticipation of the joke so as to help the audience properly interpret the dialogue between Buster and his mom as comedy.

In this scene expectations regarding Buster's character and treatment of his mother, as well as expectations regarding the censoring of Buster's cruder comments, are violated in order to fulfill expectations based on the presence of Franklin the puppet. Whereas the humor in the scene considered above was grounded in the violation of situational expectations in order to preserve characterological expectations, this scene involves the violation of characterological expectations in order to meet situational expectations. The point here is just that the violation of one such set of expectations in order to meet the other is essential; it does not matter what the expectations are or whether the violated (or fulfilled) expectations are based on characters or situations.

The final example of this section is from *The Office*. Michael Scott is the regional manager of a paper company called Dunder Mifflin. He frequently offends his employees by making comments of a racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise insensitive nature. As a result of one such series of comments, Dunder Mifflin's corporate office schedules a mandatory seminar on diversity for Michael at his office in Scranton. Michael finds the presentation condescending and decides to lead his own diversity-promoting activities for the remainder of the day. Michael's character creates one set of expectations; the fact that the office is participating in activities designed to foster diversity and open-mindedness creates an incompatible set of expectations; and the remainder of the episode generates humor through violating one set of expectations in order to fulfill the other (season 1, episode 2: "Diversity Day"). The pattern is the same as above.

This episode is of additional interest because it illustrates the importance of setting up a comedic situation. Michael's employees are not amused by his actions; they are offended by them (compare Lucille's reaction to Buster in the scene described above). At one point, an Indian American woman named Kelly slaps Michael and storms out of the room. The employees and the audience at home are both witnessing the same situation, but their reactions are very different. Indeed, the fact that the employees are so offended is part of what makes the audience laugh: it highlights the norms and expectations that Michael is violating. The audience reacts to Michael differently from the way

his employees do, in part, because they are prepared to interpret his words and actions as comedy.

In addition to creating a competing set of expectations, *The Office* (and the same could be said of *Arrested Development*) helps its audience to interpret jokes properly in two other ways. The first is through the use of genre. Simply by advertising itself as a sitcom and following practices common to other sitcoms (such as the pattern I've been discussing), *The Office* prepares its audience to rightly understand its comedy. The second is by making its characters likeable. If Michael Scott were always offensive, if he routinely violated norms that were important to the audience, we might eventually become unwilling to interpret such violations as comedy; witness the decline of *The Colbert Report* (2005–present). It is a common feature of human relationships that we are more willing to interpret charitably the actions and words of people whom we like than of people whom we do not like or know. The more we like Michael, the more willing we will be to laugh at what he does rather than be offended by it.

Part of what makes Michael likeable is the fact that he is often very compassionate and charismatic (see, for instance, the end of season 3, episode 16: “Business School”). But an equally important part of what makes Michael likeable is the fact that he has made his audience laugh so often in the past. As long as his character remains consistent, as long as Michael's character is the character that makes us laugh, our initial willingness to interpret him charitably persists. Expectations about Michael's character are thus important in two ways. They help create comedic situations and they perpetuate the audience's willingness to properly understand the show's humor.

So much for the basic recipe. Competing sets of expectations based on characters and situations, the violation of some expectations in order to fulfill others, consistency of likeable characters, and basic faithfulness to genre (including the presence of these very ingredients) are the backbone of much of the comedy in *The Office* and *Arrested Development*.

#### IV

The same template applies equally well to *30 Rock*. One brief example will serve to illustrate this fact. Liz Lemon is the head writer for a comedy show on NBC. She has a limited social life, no real money, and is awkward at social events involving large groups of people—especially wealthy people. She is described as a “third-wave feminist” (season 1,

episode 1: "Pilot"). Jack Donaghy, her boss, is the vice president of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming. He is a socialite, very wealthy, uncomfortable interacting with the less wealthy, and highly conservative. While charismatic, even charming, in public, Jack is eccentric in private and among friends. For example, he has a habit of giving himself self-aggrandizing pep talks in the mirror before facing potentially intimidating situations. Jack and Liz are fiercely loyal to each other.

In "Retreat to Move Forward" (season 3, episode 9), Jack invites Liz to accompany him to a business retreat. He has suffered several (reasonably well-known) embarrassments since the previous year's retreat, and wishes for Liz to provide him with moral support. She accepts the invitation out of loyalty. Shortly after arriving, however, it becomes clear that Jack's chief source of embarrassment is Liz. The other businesspeople seem unaware of Jack's recent misfortunes. But Liz is unfamiliar with corporate lingo, shows what other executives see as an inappropriate lack of subordination, makes several comments that would be better suited to a far less formal setting, and, at one point, briefly pretends to have a penis. When Jack confronts Liz about the embarrassment she is causing him, she becomes offended and declares that their friendship is "over."

Jack is scheduled to make a speech near the end of the retreat. After being hooked up to a microphone, he proceeds to the men's room to psych himself up with a pep talk. Unbeknownst to him, the microphone he is wearing is turned on. Consequently, the crowd gathered in the ballroom can hear his speech:

JACK. Well, buddy, heere we go. Bottom of the ninth, baaases loaded. Oh yeah! It's winning time, *you magnificent son of a bitch!* . . . You go in there and show those turds who's boss. Make mommy proud of her big boy because he's the best. Just do it! Is it in you? I'm loving it! . . . You are Jack Donaghy, titan, maverick, lover!

Liz, mortified for her friend, runs to the men's room to alert him of the situation. Then, desperate to spare Jack further embarrassment, she takes his microphone, runs onto the ballroom stage, and attempts to convince the crowd, by volunteering to impersonate anyone they wish, that it was she on the microphone all along.

Liz's lack of improvisational skill dooms this effort to failure. As a last-ditch effort, she begins to sing "Everybody Dance Now" (complete with improvised synthesizer sounds), while stripping off her business suit. This guarantees that any memory of Jack's "psych-up speech" will be displaced by memories of Liz's far more embarrassing display.

Here we have a complex set of competing expectations. Liz's social ineptitude leads to the expectation that she will be an embarrassment. Jack's social adroitness leads to the expectation that he will not cause any embarrassment to himself. But Jack's recent misfortunes create an expectation that he will be an embarrassment to himself nonetheless. The formality of the setting creates an expectation of dignified behavior, but Liz's personality is anything but dignified. Liz's loyalty to Jack leads the audience to believe that she will come to his aid somehow, but their recent fight gives rise to the opposite expectation. While Jack is expected to give himself a pep talk (foreshadowing may play an important role here), the privacy in which he generally does so creates the expectation that no one other than the viewing audience will hear it. These expectations cannot all be satisfied. *30 Rock* finds ways of serially violating nearly all of them in the interest of satisfying others.

To this extent, *30 Rock* is funny and its humor is very well executed, but the show is unremarkable. It fits the mold of the other sitcoms considered above. In fact, *30 Rock* sometimes calls attention to similarities between itself and other sitcoms. It recalls *Arrested Development* by featuring Will Arnett (who plays the part of Gob Bluth) as a guest star on several episodes during the first five seasons. In these episodes, Arnett plays the part of Devon Banks, whose personality is remarkably similar to Gob's (season 1, episode 18: "Fireworks"; season 2, episode 2: "Jack Gets in the Game"; season 2, episode 13: "Succession"; season 3, episode 1: "Do Over"; season 4, episode 2: "Into the Crevasse"; season 4, episode 7: "Dealbreakers Talk Show"; and season 5, episode 18: "Plan B"). Moreover, several episodes of *30 Rock* seem to be loosely based on, or to take their inspiration from, episodes of *The Office*.<sup>5</sup> This helps to identify *30 Rock* as part of a genre that operates according to the pattern I have been discussing.

The real genius and originality of *30 Rock* stems not from the superficial form of its humor but from its subject matter. *30 Rock* is about a television show and the people who create that show. All of the major characters are writers, actors, or executives for a network comedy called *TGS with Tracy Jordan* ("TGS" is short for "The Girlie Show," *TGS*'s original title). Consequently, *30 Rock* can use the expectations arising from the audience's knowledge of television comedies to create comedic situations. *30 Rock* does this in two different ways. The more mundane of the two I will call *second-order humor*. The more interesting of the two I will call *metahumor*.

Second-order humor is the result of applying the basic comedic pattern

we have been considering to situations that generate expectations on the basis of that very pattern.

An example will help to clarify this idea. At the beginning of the first season of *30 Rock*, *The Girlie Show* is a successful comedy, but not a huge hit. Jack thinks that he can improve ratings by bringing in a famous movie star, Tracy Jordan, whose movies are popular among heterosexual adult males—a demographic that *The Girlie Show* has overlooked. Jack and Tracy propose several changes to the show (among which is changing its name) with the goal of making it more appealing to straight men. The star of *The Girlie Show*, Jenna Maroney, has trouble adjusting quickly to the proposed changes (as well as to the fact that there will be another, more famous, star on the show).

One of the last scenes of “Pilot” is of *The Girlie Show*, the script of which has been changed at the last minute to accommodate Tracy. The scene depicts Jenna portraying an elderly woman who has an obsession with cats. The fact that *The Girlie Show* is a comedy leads the audience of *30 Rock* to have certain expectations, among which is that *The Girlie Show* should be funny. A scene involving a cat-obsessed old lady offers an obvious formula for humor: the cat obsession creates a set of expectations that are incompatible with the social situation in which the old lady finds herself—and the scene in question starts out precisely along those lines. Meanwhile, the fact that Jenna is unfamiliar with the cat-lady scene, combined with the recent changes to the show and the difficulty that Jenna has been having in adjusting to them, creates a competing set of expectations: *The Girlie Show* will not meet its audiences comedic expectations, and will fail to be funny.

*30 Rock* achieves humor in this scene in the ordinary way. When *The Girlie Show* falls flat as expected, the expectation that it will follow comedic norms is frustrated. This expectation is frustrated, in fact, in order to meet expectations about the show’s failure to be funny. While (and *because!*) the audience of *The Girlie Show* is not amused, the audience of *30 Rock* is.

In this case, *30 Rock* exhibits a sort of second-order humor. It makes its audience laugh by following a general comedic pattern—a pattern grounded in the creation, fulfillment, and violation of expectations. But in this particular case, the expectations in question arise because of the audience’s familiarity with that very pattern.

Metahumor is second-order humor become self-referential. In *30 Rock*, this is achieved when *30 Rock* itself, rather than *The Girlie Show*, becomes the subject of second-order humor.

Self-reference on its own is not difficult to achieve. It happens, for example, in *Arrested Development* when the narrator—who is different from the other characters on the show in that, as narrator, he is aware of his own participation in a television series—favorably compares his own narrations with those on a fictional television show, *Scandalmakers*, that plays a minor role in *Arrested Development*'s story line (season 2, episode 17: “Spring Breakout”). Self-reference sometimes happens even more explicitly, albeit somewhat less elegantly, in *30 Rock*. For example, in keeping with a long history of jokes about product placement in previous episodes (for instance, in season 1, episode 7: “Jack-Tor”), Liz makes the following remark in “Somebody to Love” (season 2, episode 6):

LIZ. That Verizon Wireless service is just unbeatable. If I saw a phone like that on TV, I would be, like, “Where is my nearest retailer so I can get one?”

After Liz makes this comment, Tina Fey (the actor who plays Liz) briefly steps out of character, turns to the camera, and flatly asks, “Can we have our money now?”

While self-reference (as well as comedy) is present in both of these examples, metahumor is absent from both. The reason for this lies in the particular expectations that the self-reference violates. Since TV shows do not generally refer to themselves, there is a basic (albeit violable) expectation that TV shows won't be self-referential. However, the general tendency not to refer to themselves is not a policy that TV shows follow *for the purpose of being funny*. There is a general lack of self-reference in TV shows of all sorts, whether funny or not. While self-reference in *30 Rock* and *Arrested Development* achieves humor through the violation of an expectation, the violated expectation is not one that arises from the audience's familiarity with the comedic pattern being employed in its violation.

In order for self-referential humor to become metahumor, a more subtle strategy is needed. This is what *30 Rock* provides. In order to illustrate this strategy, a final example of self-referential humor that is not yet metahumor will prove instructive. Near the beginning of “Pilot,” we hear a Broadway-style song being sung as Liz walks through the streets of Manhattan. The song seems, at first, to be about her. As it turns out, the song is being sung by Jenna, in rehearsal for a scene from *The Girlie Show*, and is about the character that Jenna is playing, an “overly confident, morbidly obese” woman (season 1, episode 1).

Despite the fact that the song is ostensibly about a character from *The Girlie Show* played by Jenna (and not a character from *30 Rock* played by Tina Fey), the music from the song is typically played in later episodes when Liz is the only character onscreen. A character from *30 Rock* is being identified, through music, with a character from *The Girlie Show*.

Once the audience notices this identification, parallels between Tina Fey and Jenna, the actors who portray the two characters, are hard to miss. Jenna is an NBC television star who is often overshadowed on her own show by her male costar, Tracy, a much more famous actor who achieved his greater fame by starring in several popular movies. Tina Fey is an NBC television star who is (or was, at any rate, when the *30 Rock* first came out) often overshadowed on her own show by her male costar, Alec Baldwin (who plays Jack), a much more famous actor who achieved his greater fame by starring in several popular movies. What the musical identification of Liz with the overly confident, morbidly obese woman makes clear is that *30 Rock* does not merely parallel *The Girlie Show*; it does so self-consciously (and with a healthy dose of literary irony).

This creates a set of specific expectations in the audience. The audience expects, for instance, that to the extent that a character played by Jenna parallels a character from *30 Rock*, the character in question will be Liz. But when Jenna lands a part in a play requiring her to eat large amounts of pizza onstage (season 2, episode 1: "Seinfeld Vision"), the competing expectation is created that it will be Jenna, not Liz, who becomes morbidly obese. As usual, *30 Rock* violates one set of expectations in order to meet the other. The fact that Jenna does, in fact, become obese (and, as it turns out, correspondingly over-confident) as a result of eating pizza onstage is funny, in part at least, precisely because it is at odds with the way that *30 Rock* self-referentially draws parallels between itself and *The Girlie Show*.

The joke just described depends for its success on an incongruity with one typical pattern according to which *30 Rock* achieves self-reference. The joke I am about to describe depends for its success on an incongruity with the typical pattern according to which *30 Rock* achieves humor. It is an instance of metahumor.

In "Do Over," Jack receives what is tantamount to a serious demotion when, after a period of time away from NBC, he is offered a job in the mailroom by his replacement (Devon Banks, played, as already mentioned, by Will Arnett). Desperate to regain his previous position through any means available, Jack accepts the job offer, hoping to work

his way up to a higher position on the corporate ladder. This establishes a comedic situation. Jack's character leads to a set of expectations greatly at odds with his current position. A savvy viewing audience therefore expects humor to arise in the ordinary way: either Jack's character should be compromised in order to square with the environment of the mailroom, or the mailroom's environment should be brought into conformity with Jack's character. Either option would provide numerous satisfactory opportunities for humor in accordance with the basic pattern *30 Rock* follows.

However, facts about the way that *30 Rock* self-referentially characterizes itself create a competing set of expectations. "Do Over" begins with a conversation between Jack and Liz, in which we learn that during Jack's absence, things have changed somewhat on the set of *TGS with Tracy Jordan*. Under the new vice president, Devon, established patterns of behavior (such as "when to have cake for employees whose birthdays are over the weekend") have not been maintained.

In a subsequent scene, Jack confronts Devon about several rumors he has heard. Devon responds thus:

DEVON. Well, you know what they say about rumors, Jack: they make a ru out of mor and s.

This comment is funny precisely because, by making it, Devon fails to make a well-known joke about assumptions. Given the way that *30 Rock* uses *The Girlie Show* to talk about itself, Liz's comments about the recent changes around *TGS* create the expectation that *30 Rock* will also be deviating from established patterns. As the example about Jenna becoming obese shows, this expectation will be a familiar one to a savvy audience; *30 Rock* often makes jokes by breaking its own established patterns. The fact that Devon, the man responsible for the recent changes at *TGS*, successfully makes a joke precisely by failing to follow a well-known formula suggests to a sufficiently savvy audience that *30 Rock* might violate established comedic expectations in an analogous way.

In short, the comedic situation surrounding Jack's demotion creates the expectation that *30 Rock* will use a set of incompatible expectations arising from Jack's position in the mailroom in order to create humor. However, the way that *30 Rock* self-referentially characterizes itself earlier in the episode creates the expectation that *30 Rock* will not be following ordinary comedic patterns. These two sets of expectations cannot both

be fulfilled in the mailroom. And *30 Rock* exploits this fact to make a joke: Jack is immediately promoted; we never see him performing his newly assigned job.

In making this joke, *30 Rock* violates one set of expectations in order to meet another. The joke thus follows the basic pattern that so many other jokes in this paper have followed. But, as in an earlier example of second-order humor, the set of expectations that are violated in the making of this joke are precisely the expectations that arise from familiarity with the pattern that is being followed in violating them, i.e., the expectations that arise from familiarity with *30 Rock's* basic pattern for creating humor. Moreover, the violation of these expectations is successfully achieved by fulfilling a competing set of expectations based on *30 Rock's* self-referential characterization of itself. This allows *30 Rock* to make a joke by, in effect, not making any joke at all. This is not merely an instance of second-order humor; it is also an instance of self-referential humor. It is an instance of metahumor.

Of course, this explains why the joke is not actually funny. *30 Rock* creates humor successfully by following a basic pattern. When the pattern is not followed, or is not followed very well, the result is typically a bad joke. Paradoxically, *30 Rock*, by employing metahumor, uses the recipe that would otherwise create humor as a means to not using that recipe at all.<sup>6</sup>

## V

The plot structure of episodes of *30 Rock* is often comic. *30 Rock's* comic plot structures generate incongruities by failing, in violation of our expectations, to make jokes by exploiting comedic situations even (and especially) after carefully setting them up. Consequently, its comic plotlines are successful by virtue of the fact that they often leave well-crafted jokes untold. This, I think, is part of why *30 Rock* can so successfully entertain while (successfully) not being funny.

The comic plot structures of *30 Rock* are much more sophisticated and, in my mind, much more interesting than the equivocal or improbable comic plotlines described by Carroll. They are more interesting and sophisticated because they depend, in interesting ways, on our implicit understanding of how humor works, and they take advantage of that understanding to make jokes that reveal some of the more paradoxical elements of it. If *30 Rock* were philosophically interesting for no other reason, it would merit our attention for this alone: in *30 Rock*, it is often

not the story itself that creates the incongruities in its plot structure, but the fact that a story composed so entirely of comedic situations could be told in a way that leaves so many incongruities out.

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1. Noël Carroll, "Two Comic Plot Structures," *The Monist* 88.1 (2005): 154–83.
2. Deborah Brown, "What Part of 'Know' Don't You Understand?" *The Monist* 88.1 (2005): 11–35.
3. Though Carroll himself thinks of the incongruity theory as an adequate general theory of humor; see pp. 162–66.
4. Peter Cave, "Humour and Paradox Laid Bare," *The Monist* 88.1 (2005): 135–53.
5. Compare, as just one example, *The Office's* "Initiation" (season 3, episode 5) to *30 Rock's* "Sandwich Day" (season 2, episode 14).
6. For a host of other cases where paradox and humor coincide, see Cave.