

“Cut the Shitcom”: Meta-television in *Entourage*, *Extras* and *30 Rock*

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a number of fictional TV series *about* television and film production. These television shows – including the ones to be analysed here: *Entourage*, *Extras*, and *30 Rock* – relocate the process of creative revitalization *in front of* the camera. Meta-television, as I understand it here, then is television about the media industry and, more particularly, about the production and quality of film and television itself.¹

The three above-mentioned television programs present *contemporary* writers, actors, directors, etc. working on movies and television shows. Especially *Extras* and *30 Rock* offer a critical overview of how television formats are produced, and they significantly do so in a period of time during which the working conditions for television-makers have fundamentally changed. In a most general sense, the criticism that these shows purport works on two levels. First, as we will see further on, there is an *explicit* criticism implied in the way the TV shows at hand present the making of a TV show. Thus, there is for instance Andy Millman, the protagonist of *Extras* about whom I will have more to say later on, who *clearly* states his dissatisfaction as a disillusioned actor/writer:

ANDY: I wanna do something that I'm proud of. And I won't be proud of shouting out catch phrases in a stupid wig and funny glasses. [...] So basically, I'm not going to prostitute myself anymore or my work, ok? (*Extras* “Orlando Bloom”, 21'30”)

In a very outspoken way, the programs in question take stock of television's outworn creative standards and its resulting mediocrity. Accordingly, one goal of this paper is to tease out meta-television's exposure and analysis of the factors that prevent quality television from being produced.

The second aim of this paper is to establish to what extent the *practice* of meta-television implements its own explicit criticism. As I have suggested earlier, these TV shows came into existence during a period in which the television series as a genre was being fundamentally reconceived. Consequently, the critical distance from earlier quality standards is not only discussed *within* the shows. It can be expected that the (re)assessment of conventional television is reflected in the production of these shows themselves, that is, for instance, in the originality of their concepts, writing, art design, and their sociocultural relevance or commitment. In this way, my analysis of the *tensions* between the content (explicit criticism) and the practice (implicit criticism) of meta-television aims at contributing to the scholarly occupation with new quality

¹ Besides the shows analysed here *cf.* also HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–present) and *The Comeback* (2005) as well as NBC's *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006–2007).

narratives on TV.

Let me add a last preliminary remark on ‘meta-research’ in general: One can easily observe a pronounced increase of interest in all things ‘meta’ over the last few years.² The merit of this considerable body of work is that the involved scholars unanimously pursue a transmedial approach in order to study meta-phenomena across various media, including TV series.³ The research that has been conducted so far is predominantly and avowedly theoretical⁴ and provides a number of useful tools for the interpretation of meta-phenomena. An important aspect of these approaches is their emphasis on the oft-neglected and most varied *functions* of meta-structures (e.g. Gymnich, 2007: 127). In my subsequent readings, I will try to answer this call for a more differentiated exploration of the functional potentials of metareference and, hence, go against the habit of stressing the de-naturalizing, anti-illusionistic and comic effects of meta-phenomena.⁵ All the three series from the corpus are, admittedly, self-reflexive comedies. I claim, however, that the decisive difference between these and earlier “self-reflexive comedies” lies in the ways in which meta-reference is *functionalized*. It is by virtue of recent meta-television’s critical functions that it distinguishes itself from post-modern self-reflexivity. In *30 Rock*, *Entourage* and *Extras*, television does not (only) talk about television in order to disrupt its fictional illusion or mock itself. I will try to show that, instead, the self-referential structures of these shows serve to critically assess television’s status within today’s mediascape from both a systematic and an historic perspective.

The Proliferation of Guest Appearances: Beyond Postmodernism, Authenticity and Double Standards

One striking similarity between the programs at hand, which therefore I would like to use as the starting point for my reflections, consists in frequent guest appearances of celebrities. In order to properly assess the significance of these cameos in contemporary meta-television, it is important to not regard them merely as occasional instances of anti-illusionistic self-mocking and entertaining gimmicks for fans and, instead, to recognize in them a structural principle of the shows themselves (Savorelli, 2010: 15). In fact, the guest appearances of celebrities playing

2 See, for instance, Nöth & Bishara (eds.) 2007, Hauthal et al. (eds.) 2007 and Wolf et al. (eds.) 2009. I refer here to major collective endeavours to theorize self-reference and metareference in general. Individual studies on this theoretical issue as well as on specific types of metareference (such as metalepsis) are far more numerous. A number of them will be referenced below.

3 For this claim to transmedial applicability cf. Hauthal et al., 2007: 16; Wolf, 2007: 29; Withalm, 2007: 128f.; Wolf, 2009: 5ff. See also Nünning, 2004: 12, who has a more specific focus on what he terms ‘metanarration’. For metareference in television series see Gymnich 2007 and García Martínez 2009.

4 Cf., for instance, Hauthal et al., 2007: 3. It should be noted, however, that the ambitious project of theorizing metareference often leads to heuristically questionable classificatory endeavours: Time and again, one is offered “systematics” (Hauthal et al., 2007: 13; Wolf, 2007: 29f.), “typologies” (Nünning, 2004; Nöth, 2007: 14), ‘cartographies’ (García Martínez, 2009) and ‘continua’ (Nünning, 2004: 20, 40; Hauthal et al., 2007: 9). Interestingly, Hauthal et al., 2007: 17 regret the ‘divide between a differentiated formation of theory and concepts on the one hand and the in part remarkably plain analyses and interpretations on the other hand’ (my translation).

5 Despite *theory’s* call for interpretive frameworks that go beyond the postmodern, metafictional paradigm, analyses and interpretations very often remain limited to exactly this paradigm: One is continuously reminded that meta-structures tend to ‘create media-awareness’, ‘undermine the illusion of realism’, ‘call attention to the artifice’ or ‘constructedness’ of the artefact (cf. for instance, Olson, 1987: esp. 284-289; Wolf, 2007: 42ff.; Tous Rovirosa, 2009: 182 and all of García Martínez, 2009). In her analysis of one specific TV show, Withalm 1995 *grosso modo* denies that the program in question might have any considerable critical impact: the meta-television show she analyses unmakes (rather than pursues) the critical issues it raises (Withalm, 1995: esp. 139-142).

themselves⁶ in *30 Rock*, *Entourage* and *Extras* are so numerous that the quantitative abundance entails a qualitative shift in the employment of this device. The guest appearances in these TV shows need to be distinguished from the sporadic appearances of celebrities in earlier shows, such as Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts and Bruce Willis on NBC's *Friends*. Here, guest appearances were, as a matter of fact, rare season highlights and stood out as attention-grabbers. Admittedly, each guest appearance in *30 Rock*, *Entourage* and *Extras* is in itself surprising and entertaining; it also adds a certain 'celebrity value' to the respective episode. However, these cameos are no longer the exception but the rule. The concerned television programs depend on these appearances as an integral conceptual component. In my view, the importance of these guest appearances includes but surpasses mere entertainment and self-parody. Moreover, I hold that, in contrast to García Martínez's argument, these cameos and guest appearances do *not* disrupt the fictional illusion (2009: 6). Consider García Martínez's own example which may serve as a case in point for my argument: he describes *Entourage* as the 'long meta-filmic voyage' of its protagonists ("el periplo metafílmico"). This may be an adequate description to the extent that the show is about the film business and tells the lives of its actor/agent/manager/publicist protagonists in Los Angeles. However, the guest appearances in *Entourage* have few of the attributes that García Martínez associates with metatelevision: they are not necessarily ludic (for the guest appearance of Sasha Grey, see below) and they leave the fictional illusion fully intact most of the time. Why would a successful (albeit fictional) Hollywood actor like *Entourage*'s protagonist not work with director James Cameron? Why would he not date fellow actress and singer Mandy Moore? The appearance of these real stars in *Entourage* might just as well be said to reinforce the fictional illusion (instead of disrupting it) inasmuch as it locates its fictitious characters within the 'real' world. But that is not the point I am trying to make.

My point here is that the image of the 'broken mirror' ("espejo roto", García Martínez, 2009) and the implied binary between 'fictional illusion' and 'disruptive metareference' is inadequate for the analysis of these television programs. I hold that the TV shows in question purport an *indifference* to this distinction; that it simply does not matter much whether we are seeing the *real* James Cameron or 'merely' James Cameron playing James Cameron. In fact, the television shows in question not only disregard the distinction between fiction and reality, they also undermine the conventional divisions between celebrity culture and amateur art as well as the received separation of various media industries.⁷ In this way, they reflect on contemporary media culture

6 To name only a few of the celebrities who play themselves: There are Brian Williams, Cindi Lauper, Elvis Costello, Jerry Seinfeld, Oprah Winfrey in *30 Rock*; Ben Stiller, Kate Winslet, Orlando Bloom, David Bowie, Ian McKellan and Germaine Greer (!) in *Extras*; Mark Wahlberg, Sarah Silverman, Scarlett Johansson, James Cameron, Dennis Hopper, Whoopi Goldberg, Martin Scorsese and Sasha Grey in *Entourage*.

7 One of the aspects of this increasing indistinction which I cannot explore further in the context of this paper concerns the temporality of the meta-television series at hand. In her paper on meta-television, Anna Tous Rovirosa claims that 'timelessness' ("intemporalidad") correlates with high art and 'quality television' (Tous Rovirosa, 2009: 181). By this she does not mean the 'timelessness of the work of art' but the disconnection of events in the fictional world from events in the real world. Besides the fact that this equation between temporal indetermination and high art seems somewhat arbitrary, I actually observe a developed temporality in contemporary television shows that blurs the lines between fictional and real time. To give an example from this paper's corpus: *30 Rock*'s fictional world is repeatedly and markedly contemporaneous to the real world. As most conventional television shows, *30 Rock* has Christmas and Valentine's Day episodes that are themed around the respective holiday. But it goes much further to suggest what one might call 'hyper-contemporaneity' with 'real time': In the episode "Khonani" (season 4, episode 18), an employee consults Jack Donaghy about a contract coming into effect on April 22,

in general and negotiate television's position in a new media dynamic. By virtue of their numerous guest appearances, meta-television remediates its medial environment, including itself (Bolter & Grusin, 1999); it takes a stand on current media convergences and on the value hierarchies that these bring into play:

Nowadays, equally unknown and untrained people can become overnight media celebrities; television provides the platform for the convergence of formerly distinct spheres of public life. In casting shows such as *American Idol* (and its many international franchises), *Popstars* or *So You Think You Can Dance*, ordinary people aspire to questionable (because often short-lived) stardom. Programs like *Big Brother* have turned the everyday experience of confined living among a group of average people into a matter of public interest.⁸ Interestingly, this 'upward mobility' of the medially and artistically inexperienced runs parallel to a downward movement of celebrities into the realm of the ordinary. It seems that reality game shows have become the central forum for these shifts: While amateur artists occupy an increasingly significant part of the music and film industry, many formerly famous 'entertainers' eke out an existence as game show contestants on, say, *Celebrity Big Brother*, *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* and *Dancing with the Stars*.⁹

Ricky Gervais' *Extras* addresses these processes head-on by reversing the hierarchy between Hollywood's leading actors and minor amateur actors. The first episodes of *Extras* focus on the work of two background actors, Andy Millman (Ricky Gervais) and Maggie Jacobs (Ashley Jensen), who have minor appearances in big studio productions. Suffering from their marginal status as (self-proclaimed) underestimated talents, they wish for nothing more than a speaking line in a movie (*Extras* "Ross Kemp", 5'30"; "Samuel L. Jackson", 4'00"). Each episode of *Extras* features a famous actor who stars or directs the fictitious movie in question. These guest appearances do, of course, attract attention and make up a considerable part of the show's charm. It must be noted, however, that *Extras* is consistent in putting background actors and backstage workers centre-stage, those workers, that is, who are most likely to be forgotten or overlooked in the final movie. In return, the roles of celebrities are reduced to bit parts: When Robert de Niro plays himself, his part is literally restricted to admiring the magic of a nude ballpoint pen (*Extras* "Jonathan Ross", 24'40"). More explicitly still, British comedian and actor Les Dennis is presented as a victim of the convergences in today's mediascape and celebrity

2010, five years after the signing. "[Subhas, the employee:] You signed it on April 22, 2005. – [Jack Donaghy:] Ok. In my defense, every April 22nd I honor Richard Nixon's death by getting drunk and making some unpopular decisions" (30 *Rock* 4.17, 7'20"). April 22, 2010 is not only the sixteenth anniversary of Richard Nixon's death, it is also the airing date of the episode in question. There is thus a pronounced will to construct temporal parallels with the extra-fictional world in order to suggest that the episode that airs on a given day tells events that take place on that very day. This is everything but temporal indetermination and is nonetheless compatible with a show that I would identify as quality television. Colin Irvine demonstrates that these temporal references are a structural feature 30 *Rock*'s comedy (Irvine, forthcoming).

8 Cf. the 30 *Rock* episode "MILF Island" (season 2, episode 11) for a critical stand on this kind of reality television.

9 This dynamic cannot only be observed in the mainstream media but affects a number of different industries. Kevin Esch and Vicki Mayer, for instance, detect a very similar development in the porn industry, where long-standing production companies struggle to stay afloat despite a new competition due to the "vanishing line between amateurs and professionals" most visible on the internet (Esch & Mayer, 2007: 108). In case this reference to the porn industry seems fortuitous: my argument will turn to porn star Sasha Grey's guest appearance in *Entourage* soon enough.

culture: Trying to escape “the shit that was flying around” (the media coverage of his real-life divorce), Les Dennis actually did become a ‘housemate’ of *Celebrity Big Brother* (*Extras* “Les Dennis”, 4’05”). Anxious about getting to the bottom rung of the ladder of fame, he even calls *Heat Magazine* to report himself to the “Celebrity Spotted” section (*Extras* “Les Dennis”, 5’00”). Furthermore, the episode is about him, the *fallen* star, and Andy Millman, the *aspiring* amateur, starring together in a stage version of *Aladdin*: Dennis’ desperate attempt to regain public favor. Note the intricacy of Les Dennis’ self-portrayal which, in my view, goes far beyond a mere self-parody: *Extras* presents Dennis as a formerly successful, *professional* film actor, whose *private* life has been exploited by the yellow press, who then makes the supposed ‘descent’ into a *reality television* program and tries to rehabilitate himself doing amateurish children’s *theatre*, hoping that it might lead back to “TV, maybe even Hollywood” (*Extras* “Les Dennis”, 14’10”). In this way, the show comments on and questions the hierarchies of prestige that govern the contemporary mediascape: reality TV and theatre linger at the bottom; fictional television ranges somewhere mid-table; film and Hollywood cinema head the ranking. However, these medial relations are – significantly – negotiated *on television*. *Extras* may present the big studio film as every actor’s dream and the loathed extra work as an inconvenient starting point; but in doing so, it contributes to the creation of a genre of the television series that critically assesses its own medium and, by virtue of this criticism, reinvigorates and innovates television’s production standards. (In the following section, I will explore how this is done exactly.) Perhaps then, the current popularity of meta-television does not only lie in its ‘predominantly entertaining’ function and its comic effects but also and more importantly in the new perspective it takes on medial conventions. Self-awareness here is not a playful end in itself nor a means to ‘break the mirror’; it is the precondition for a critical evaluation of television’s status quo and potential. The concerns of metareference have shifted.

This preoccupation with the relations between media also and maybe even more clearly shows in *Entourage*. Far from giving its viewers only those cameos which they might enjoy and find entertaining, the show actually uses guest appearances to challenge the habits of media-usage and to provoke its audience. As I have mentioned earlier, in season seven of *Entourage*, the protagonist Vincent Chase starts dating Sasha Grey, who becomes his girlfriend for the second half of the season; the very Sasha Grey who, born in 1988 as Marina Ann Hantzis, has appeared in more than 200 adult film productions since 2006 (*IMDb: Sasha Grey*, 2010). On the show, she is introduced as an almost regular, slightly intellectual girl who makes pancakes for breakfast and invites her actor-boyfriend Vince to a “Godard double feature” because, she says, he “could use some culture” (*Entourage* “Bottoms Up”, 6’20”). However, Vincent and Sasha’s relationship is increasingly problematic, the more the public and the media pay attention. When the porn actress becomes a serious publicity issue for Vincent, his friends advise him to “lose her” (*Entourage* “Sniff Sniff, Gang Bang”, 12’30”). After all, this is not just a relationship between a guy and a girl; it is a date between Hollywood and the porn industry, nicely set up by television. In my view, it is this confrontation of two conventionally distinct media industries that is at stake

here. And, despite its being ‘merely’ fictional, this confrontation loses none of its controversy.¹⁰

Sasha Grey’s guest appearance in *Entourage* brings about a clash between Hollywood film and the porn industry. It does not cater to a public that seeks parodic entertainment but proposes a serious and provocative comment on the media industry. As fan reactions and critics’ reviews show (see above, note 10), *Entourage* brings together two domains of the media industry that are not supposed to meet. Within the show itself and among its audiences, this tête-à-tête between Hollywood and porn is unacceptable because the two rely on entirely different value systems and quality standards; furthermore, the porn industry and its celebrities are taboo in the world of the big studio film. *Entourage* challenges people’s habits of media-usage to the extent that it forces them to conceive a functionally whole and integrated network of media that is *conventionally* constructed as consisting of distinct segments. In a sense then, Sasha Grey’s guest appearance “test[s] and push[es] the limits” of mainstream media (*Shades of Sasha Grey*, 2’05”). Moreover, it shows that (cable) television can easily moot these limits and, to a certain extent, overcome them. Mainstream television, it seems, has established itself as a platform on which it is possible to engage in a sustained critique of media and media-usage. While other mainstream media, such as narrative film à la Hollywood, *might* engage in media criticism in much the same way, there seems to be a certain reluctance to do so (Gymnich, 2007: 128, 132). It is television that, over the last decade of its own institutional reconfiguration and aesthetic reorientation, has most actively and persistently (re)assessed its own artistic, social and moral values and those of other media. With respect to *Entourage*’s seventh season, critic S. J. Snyder speaks of the “fearless implosion” of the show (Snyder 2010). In the context of this paper, I suggest that it is not so much the show itself that implodes; rather, the entire film industry implodes *within* or *into* *Entourage*. Television here incorporates cinema, its production standards and limitations as reference points for its own reorientation.

Let me conclude thus far that the guest appearances in meta-television series like *Extras* and *Entourage* serve functions that go far beyond the received notion of the ‘entertaining, self-parodying, anti-illusionistic cameo’: While, in *Extras*, celebrity appearances such as Les Dennis’ shed light on the convergences of various media and genres, on the volatility and mutability of a medial relations, *Entourage* draws attention to the entrenched moral values that underpin today’s mediascape by inviting celebrities against their viewers’ taste. Thus, meta-television becomes a platform for negotiating medial relations: it creates a critical distance to other media, especially

¹⁰ Note that, once again, the aesthetic illusion and its potential disruption are of little relevance to *Entourage*’s artistic project. Within the show, Sasha Grey is probably the public figure that best exemplifies the fundamentally ambivalent ‘authenticity status’ of celebrities nowadays. In fact, the young actress talks about ‘Sasha Grey’ as a “persona” and thus distances herself from her alter ego, fully aware at the same time that this is who the public takes her to be (*Sasha Grey Interview*). Who, then, is Sasha Grey: a real-life actress, a ‘persona’, a fictional character appearing only on screen? On *Entourage*, she appears as all of them at the same time and indiscriminately. A look at *Entourage*’s fan websites and internet forums confirms this assumption: on a pragmatic level, viewers do not distinguish between the character, the persona and the actress; she is despised at every level and without any problematisation of the show’s fictional status: On 9 November 2010, the *Entourage* page on Facebook asked “Do you want to see more of Sasha Grey next season?” The majority of 4,100 responses is against her reappearance. When giving reasons, the naysayers move carelessly between the character’s role within the show, the actress’s poor talent and her past as a porn star, thus bringing together all the different levels and degrees of reality and fiction that can be attributed to “Sasha Grey” (<http://www.facebook.com/Entourage/posts/454731351686>).

Hollywood cinema, and debases them in order to trace out a new space for itself among today's mainstream media. This enables television to cross the lines that it identifies as the creative boundaries of film- and television-making.

“Selling Out” For a “Shitcom”: Meta-Television’s Self-Criticism and Improvement

This, however, is only half the story and therefore only half of my analysis. As we have seen, television liberates itself from the gridlock it has been held in by mainstream cinema for decades. In addition to this, meta-television also gives a critical judgement of its own production standards. The process of remodelling television necessitates a revision of the formats and generic conventions that have hitherto determined network programming. Cable television with its relative liberties concerning budgets, advertisement and innovative concepts has been the driving force in this process of self-improvement.

The meta-television series under scrutiny are cases in point: they represent the production of TV programs and thus let the viewer know how television works or, rather, how it used to work. At the same time, the aesthetic standards of the shows themselves differ greatly from the ones *represented* in them: *30 Rock* and *Extras* actually *avoid* the very same conventions and aesthetics that they represent as being the standard of television-making. Certain tendencies of the new ‘quality TV’ can thus be inferred from the tension between the older, outdated format of the show-within-the-show and the conceptual and aesthetic foundation of the meta-television shows themselves. It is interesting to see that, furthermore, the shows experiment with these divergent standards and, in this way, add yet another layer to the critical assessment of their precursors. One of the most interesting experiments of this kind is probably the *30 Rock* “Live Show”, which I will shortly address in more detail. Before, I would like to lay out the basic critical impetus of meta-television series by turning once again to *Extras*.

In *Extras*, Andy Millman starts out as an unsuccessful background actor who dreams of becoming a big star. His chances increase considerably when the BBC decide to pick up the script for a comedy show that he submitted and produce it with Andy as the lead actor. Consequently, the second season of *Extras* is about the – disappointing, as we will see – experience of doing comedy under dire working conditions within a *public* network and by outdated aesthetic standards. So, while the first season settles the scores with the film industry and carves out a space for television within a wider media economy, the second season of *Extras* is about getting even with television and overcoming its entrenched, yet obsolete conventions.

Throughout the entire second season, the BBC are charged with constantly disturbing the creative and artistic process and thereby ruining the product:

ANDY: “It [i.e. the show]’s not exactly how I meant it to be. Because the BBC have interfered and sort of chased rating and made it a lowest common denominator sort of comedy. Catch phrases and wigs. I think I’ve sold out, to be honest.” (*Extras* “David Bowie”, 24’30”)

Due to the broadcaster's interference, Andy's show *When the Whistle Blows* becomes a sitcom shot in front of a live audience; the 'proper' laugh track is added in post-production; the show's comic effects depend largely on "catch phrases and wigs". To this, one may add the "funny glasses" Andy has to wear as well as misplaced, silly costumes and the occasional "pie in the face" gag (for both see *Extras* "David Bowie", 1'30"). The protagonist concludes: "It's a shitcom" (*Extras* "David Bowie", 2'40"). If Andy Millman could not avert these compromises, it is for several, related reasons all of which are addressed in the show itself. First of all, the base humour of the show is due to the format of the sitcom itself. Deeply rooted in a theatrical tradition, sitcoms cannot escape the pressure of the audience (Savorelli, 2010: 29f.). Evidently, the importance of the audience – measured, for instance, by the viewer ratings mentioned in the above quote – should not be underestimated for any genre of television series. It is interesting however to note that, in traditional sitcoms such as *When the Whistle Blows*, the audience is present *during recordings* and interferes as an important factor even *before* the final episode-to-be-aired is edited in post-production. The protagonist of *Extras* is confronted with this pressure when a fan of his show explains his appreciation by repeatedly referring to "the wig, the glasses, the catch phrase" (*Extras* "David Bowie", 13'15"). In this way, the sitcom's live audience and its avatar, the laugh track, install a "measure and control system" for the comedian's work that keeps viewers' habits in check and inhibits a more sophisticated humour (Savorelli, 2010: 30). *Extras* thus explicitly criticizes the constraints of traditional television comedy in the story it tells. At the same time, the aesthetics of the show itself avoid all of the above-mentioned practices. No studio audience, no laughter track, neither silly wigs nor funny glasses; not a single pie in the face; not even 'proper' opening credits. That however is not to suggest that, in order to make *good* comedy, one has to rid oneself of a dim-witted and therefore *bad* audience. In fact, Andy Millman has a fundamental trust that there is an audience for a new and different kind of television comedy: "This is not the comedy I set out to do. I wanted to work on something real that people would relate to" (*Extras* "Orlando Bloom", 4'03").

Rather, the show's criticism of the sitcom must be related to the institution of the television network. This institutional framework has installed a virtual television audience, symbolized among others by the laugh track, whose tastes and expectations are assumed to be low- if not lowest-brow. So, for instance, the agent Darren Lamb tries to allay his client Andy's concerns about the show in these reassuring words:

DARREN: I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: "Oh, you know, the script's not funny, it's crass, the lowest common denominator." And, you know, you're right. But don't worry about it! Because people will watch anything, alright? Particularly if it's after *EastEnders* and they haven't got to change the channel. Those sort of morons will help us win the ratings war. And, uh, you know, ratings in the end are what count. And merchandise." (*Extras* "Orlando Bloom", 4'15")

In the scene that Darren's rejoinder is taken from, *Extras*' criticism of the television industry comes most clearly to the fore. Darren is concerned about the show's market-value. Consequently, he cares about viewer ratings; in order to win the "ratings war", one must appeal to the *highest*

number of potential viewers; and for that purpose, the “*lowest* common denominator” of comedy will do just fine or, in any case, better than what Andy has in mind. Darren’s scale for measuring artistic value is thus fundamentally quantitative; in this, he agrees with the BBC’s producers who want to “milk” the show (*Extras* “Series Finale”, 39’20).¹¹ Andy, in contrast, at first *seems* to stand in for quality television. But when told by his (second) agent that the choice between “fame and fortune” and “integrity and respect” cannot be avoided, he chooses to be “rich and famous” (*Extras* “Series Finale”, 67’40”). Ironically, Andy’s hubris is the cause for his imminent and steep descent: Clinging to his status as a C-celebrity, he shares Les Dennis’ fate and participates in *Celebrity Big Brother* (*Extras* “Series Finale”, 68’38”). What *Extras* ultimately represents in this way is the double bind that keeps the creators of network television in its thrall. It represents the complicity between a “sick” celebrity culture, economic pressures and low production standards on television:

ANDY: I’m just sick of these celebrities, living their life out in the open. Why would you do that? It’s like these popstars who chose the perfect moment to go into rehab. They call their publicist before they call a taxi.” (77’00”)

ANDY: And fuck you, the makers of this show as well. You can’t wash your hands of this. You can’t keep going “Oh, it’s exploitation but it’s what the public want.” No, the Victorian freak show never went away. Now it’s called *Big Brother* or *American Idol*, where in the preliminary rounds we wheel out the bewildered to be sniggered at by multimillionaires. And fuck you for watching this at home. Shame on you. And shame on me: I’m the worst of all. (78’00”)

Yet, the move to the meta-level allows for a critical assessment of television’s shortcomings and for a revision of these practices in the production of the show itself. In a quasi-performative contradiction, *Extras* overcomes the binary that it constructs between artistic integrity and economic success. Besides the above-mentioned aesthetic innovations that *Extras* exemplifies, Ricky Gervais demands viewers to check their expectations and habits, he demands networks to acknowledge the lack of quality in their programming. Moreover, he is ready to “kill[] the cash cow” (*Extras* “Series Finale”, 39’15”): While, for instance, there have been twelve episodes (plus a Christmas special) of Gervais’ success *The Office*, the show’s US version has made it to 125 episodes as of December 2010. *Extras* itself consists of twelve episodes and a 90-minute series finale. With regard to its aesthetics, the latter is a ‘film for TV’ rather than a ‘final episode’ as it includes, for instance, long opening shots and a score. In this way, the show performatively overcomes the divide between ‘serious film’ and television comedy that it constructs on the level of content. It is the “cool TV, American TV” that Andy always wanted to do but never got around to doing (*Extras* “Series Finale”, 38’40”). *Extras*, a co-production of HBO and the BBC, furthermore consolidates the qualitative gap between cable and network television. Ridding itself of a number of network television’s constraints, it also manages to escape the double bind of quantifiable success and quality standards.

However, meta-phenomena and ‘quality’ have found their way into network television as well.

¹¹ Cf. the way in which the BBC’s responsible person dismisses Andy’s misgivings: “[...] I’ve been in this business a lot longer than you, and my opinion will be heard because I’m the man with the *money*. [...] I’m entrusted to make sure that it’s *spent correctly*” (*Extras* “Orlando Bloom”, 20’20”; emphasis added).

My last exemplary reading will therefore focus on NBC's *30 Rock* and, more particularly, on one of its experimental episodes. The title of the show refers to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, which is the address of NBC's New York studios. In these studios, the show's protagonist Liz Lemon and her team produce the fictional sketch comedy show *TGS*.¹² Both on the level of content and aesthetics, *30 Rock* resembles *Extras* in various ways: both are filmed-on-set series about comedy programs with studio audiences (a sitcom and sketch comedy, respectively); the departure from the represented, theatre-based and restrictive production standards allows in both cases to develop a new aesthetic as well as a new sense of humour. A striking difference between the two shows is however that, while *Extras* scathingly dismisses the sitcom, *30 Rock* entertains a less tense, almost endearing, nostalgic relationship to its 'show within'. This complex relation to its forerunner also produces a negotiation between various comedy formats that is more complicated than *Extras*' clear rejection of the sitcom.

In season five, *30 Rock* has produced an episode called the "Live Show". The idea is to perform an entire episode live in front of a studio audience (!) *and* broadcast it live on TV (!!). Because of the different airing schedules for the East and West coasts, the experiment had to be carried out twice; the two versions of the "Live Show" thus also reflect the distribution aspect of US television.¹³ Apart from their event character and their parodic, comic effect, these episodes and their specific format also enable a critical consideration of television's production standards and aesthetics. This would be another similarity between *Extras* and *30 Rock* if it weren't for the different *modes* in which various TV conventions are negotiated. *Extras*, as I said, made its criticism of the sitcom very explicit and additionally proposed a *quasi*-performative critique in that it goes beyond these outdated sitcom standards in its own practice. In the *30 Rock* "Live Shows", however, the tension is no longer between the representation and the represented; it is no longer between meta-television's new aesthetic and the dated comedy format that it depicts. Here, meta-television *travesties* as sketch comedy/sitcom shot in front of a studio audience. The focus is still on the aesthetic gap between the two formats; but, more importantly, it explores in a truly performative way what kinds of effect the different production standards and generic conventions enable and/or preclude. In fact, the criticism as well as the comedy of these episodes arise from the fact that *30 Rock* tries to maintain its aesthetic standards in the "Live Show", an effort that is bound to fail. This enforced 'failure' hints also to the developments in style and humour that the last decade of television comedy has seen. It becomes clear that the "Live Show"/studio audience experiment cannot or only provisionally convey *30 Rock*'s specific comedy concept:

30 Rock's humour relies, for instance, on short inserts that show a character's past or memory or thought. These mini-flashbacks are difficult, if not impossible to reproduce in a live performance in front of a studio audience as they require the transposition of actors as well as quick scene and costume changes. However, these flashbacks *are* included in the live show by virtue of –

12 *30 Rock* was created by Tina Fey (alias Liz Lemon) who had previously worked as head writer for *Saturday Night Live*. Liz Lemon's work on *TGS* may thus be assumed to be loosely based on Tina Fey's work for *SNL*.

13 As of November 2010, both versions can be viewed on the *30 Rock* homepage: <http://www.nbc.com/30-rock/episode-guide/>. My quotes and time specifications refer to these versions.

surprise – a guest appearance. Julia Louis-Dreyfus (known as Elaine from *Seinfeld*) plays Liz Lemon in those scenes in which the actress Tina Fey cannot appear for reasons of time shortage and spatial distance. It becomes obvious that *30 Rock*'s original concept, which excludes the studio audience and includes a vital editing/post-production process (much like that of *Extras* and *Entourage*) allows for temporal and spatial complexities that neither a sitcom nor a live sketch comedy show can produce. The show thus demonstrates to what (absurd) lengths it has to go to maintain the standards of its original format within a traditional sitcom set-up.

Despite this insistence on its original stylistic devices in the live format, *30 Rock* seems to give in to the 'pressure' of the live audience. While the character Liz Lemon refuses to do "cheap" comedy on her show, the show includes a number of gags that can be described as slapstick (*30 Rock* "Live Show, East Coast", 6'30"): Liz Lemon has a verbal encounter with her boss's assistant; when the latter gets sassy, she asks: "Really? You want to play this game with a comedy writer?" (*30 Rock* "Live Show, East Coast", 2'50"). However, instead of the particularly witty repartee one might expect at this point, she takes a bottle of water and spatters its content over the assistant. Later in the episode when Liz Lemon meets her boss in his office, he pulls a garland from her mouth; the studio audience laughs. The *30 Rock* live show thus caters to a simple sense of humour but, at the same time, clearly marks these gags as low-brow. In this way, the live show performs the various standards of comedy (and, hence, embraces them for the sake of the experiment) but also critically distances itself from some of them. The comedy in the above-mentioned scene, for instance, arises as much from the water-spattering itself as from the preceding remark that clearly marks the following gag as unworthy of Liz Lemon's comedy standards.

If all the meta-television series at hand are unwilling to provide *straightforward* slapstick humour, they are equally reluctant to adhere to the popular sitcom tradition of showing outtakes of actors' mistakes and slips of tongue. None of the television series under scrutiny provide so-called 'bloopers' at, say, the end of an episode. In the *30 Rock* live show, this aspect of sitcom or sketch comedy is directly addressed: Tracy Jordan, one of the *TGS* cast members, is adamant about falling out of character instead of reciting his lines. Liz Lemon objects: "What you're talking about is called breaking. And, sure, audiences love it when something goes wrong. [*Picture frame falls from the wall.*] But we don't do that here, okay? It's cheap. So, no breaking!" (*30 Rock* "Live Show, East Coast", 6'20"). Subsequently, Tracy Jordan ruins one sketch after another by unconvincingly staging mishaps during the recording of the show, 'cracking up' and commenting: "This is a funny mishap. This is live" (*30 Rock* "Live Show, East Coast", 15'40", see also 9'50"). This plot strand once again brings into play the mediality of the show and the twisted logic of liveness. It emphasises comedy's contingency to its medial set-up: The sitcom format caters to outtakes and "bloopers" because of its ambivalence concerning liveness. It is precisely because it is *recorded* in front of a *live* studio audience that the sitcom can provide both a post-produced, edited and airable version of an episode *and* add a number of deleted scenes as a bonus for television viewers. In this way, the traditional sitcom demarcates its strange status as a

television program that is firmly grounded in theatre: The TV episode is edited ‘into shape’ as if to leave no trace of, say, changes of costume or settings and of the occasional ‘breaking’. Almost paradoxically, however, theatre obviously remains a reference point and, by virtue of blooper sequences at an episode’s end, the sitcom’s performance character is *edited* back into the recorded broadcast. In these various ways (laugh track, outtakes), the sitcom oscillates between liveness and recording instead of claiming an obsolete, “clear opposition” between the two (Auslander, 2008: 43f.). What, then, does the *30 Rock* “Live Show” achieve by engaging in a discussion of this convention? Once again I hold that, despite the live format, this episode of *30 Rock* insists on the standards of post-network and post-sitcom comedy as it tries to reproduce a seemingly edited and post-produced broadcast in the *live*. In fact, it seems as if the *30 Rock* “Live Show” – more than any of its regular episodes – wanted to leave behind the sitcom and its theatrical character.¹⁴ Note that the live episode is *not* a ‘live recording’ (as a traditional sitcom would be) but an actual live broadcast (Auslander, 2008: 61). In this way, the live format forces its cast and crew to produce a flawless performance. As in *real* theatre (but in contrast to the sitcom), ‘breaking’ or ‘falling out of character’ would ruin the episode.¹⁵ Ultimately, then, the ambiguity between liveness and an edited recording is more salient than in the sitcom, the “oscillation” between these “two poles” is far more perspicuous and meaningful: The *30 Rock* “Live Show” avoids falling back into the sitcom’s pseudo-liveness and thereby also avoids one more of its generic conventions that television has left behind over the last decade. Instead, *30 Rock* embraces the *constraints* of the live broadcast and integrates it with the aesthetic exigencies of the regular, recorded *30 Rock*. From within these conceptual restrictions, *30 Rock* manages to re-affirm its aesthetic standards and its claim to sophisticated comedy. At the same time, the compromises that are necessary to make the “Live Show” meet the show’s comedy standards identify the creative limitations of the studio-audience format. In this way, this meta-television series assesses and asserts the quality improvements that television has recently made. In conclusion, it can be said that, while the live episode undoubtedly brings the show into the unfamiliar situation of performing in front of a studio audience, the episode holds on stronger than ever to its conceptual and aesthetic standards, to the advances in quality it has made.

Conclusion

As we have seen, meta-television goes beyond mere self-parody in various complex ways: The television shows that have been analysed here – *Entourage*, *Extras* and *30 Rock* – represent a whole range of mainstream media and media products: movie shoots, theatre, reality television, sitcoms, sketch comedy, etc. Meta-television identifies its ‘relatives’ not as stable entities of a fixed mediascape but as parts of a mutable network of medial relations. The series furthermore address the increasing instability of conventional distinctions such as public/private (reality TV), professional/amateur (game/casting shows) and high-brow/low-brow (cinema vs. television). In critically assessing their own media environment, these series clear a space for a renewal

14 One example of this is the above-mentioned interpretation of Liz Lemon by two actresses, which allows for quick spatial and temporal changes of setting in order to simulate scene editing in post-production.

15 In the West Coast version of the “Live Show”, the actor portraying Tracy Jordan actually does miss his cue once, which causes only mild amusement (*30 Rock* “Live Show, East Coast”, 6’40”).

of television itself. This renewal is however not an anticipated future development; the meta-television series themselves are part of this reconceptualization of television across the cable/network divide. While, on the level of content, they provide an explicit critique of outdated modes of TV production, their criticism inscribes itself in the implementation of enhanced quality standards that these shows adhere to. In this way, meta-television at once critically assesses its own medial past and goes beyond it.

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