INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE COMMONPLACES:

30 ROCK AND THE NEW SITCOM

by

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ABSTRACT

Sitcoms have recently undergone a transformation. A once stable genre tracing its roots to the beginnings of television itself, sitcom has taken on new and dynamic formal and generic characteristics in response to changes in media distribution. To better understand these changes, this thesis first briefly looks at sitcom in the Network era, particularly focusing on the influence of earlier media in the shaping of generic “cues” that helped early viewers identify and understand the genre, and then, secondly, contrasts these traditional genre cues with those found in the sitcom of the Digital era, cues that have been transformed by changes in media regulation and distribution. Then using 30 Rock and its extensive use of flashback as a case study, I will ultimately argue that this new sitcom, like so many others contemporary sitcoms, works to revise audiences’ understandings of intertextuality and the shaping of genre by not only acknowledging its own use of intertextuality but critiquing intertextuality itself.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Rodney Herring
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When I was in fifth grade, my teacher nominated me for a student of the month “award.” I use scare quotes because the prize was lunch alone with the principal, a hulking man of 6’3” who always dressed as Frankenstein on Halloween for obvious reasons. Since the award was a surprise, when the principal came to the classroom to retrieve me, I immediately came to a very different conclusion, that he had somehow discovered it was me who had stolen Tiffany’s ice-cream-cone-shaped eraser two days prior, and I promptly took a frantic dive behind a barricade of desks. Once the confusion had been cleared up (and no, Tiffany never did find out what became of her eraser), on the way to lunch, Principal Frankenstein asked me what was my favorite thing about school. “Making people laugh,” I replied without hesitation.

Likely he was hoping I’d say “Science” or “Civic Studies.” But while it may have made him sigh with exasperation, for me, that answer has been one of the truest things I’ve ever said: all throughout my childhood and adulthood, making people laugh has been my favorite thing; considering what might make them laugh occupies much of my time; and figuring out how my surroundings—especially the texts I encounter—are funny and how they’re read as funny (or not) has been a continual source of curiosity. All of which has followed me to my graduate studies in rhetoric and composition. First loosely exploring the intersection of humor and rhetoric and then more closely examining an assortment of humorous texts (as well as interrupting a few lectures with
my own jokes and incurring yet more exasperated sighs), I have spent much of my time continually investigating the intersection between humor, rhetoric, and culture.

But it wasn’t until I was binging on the latest episodes of *30 Rock* streaming on Netflix that my curiosity was fully piqued. Here was a show that, yes, made me laugh, but was doing so using some intriguing methods. There were flashbacks, so many flashbacks, each only seconds long, sporadically interrupting the episode’s narrative to take the viewer on sojourns to various pasts. These were different than the flashbacks I’d seen on other sitcoms; those were rarely used and typically extended in length, functioning as the primary narrative of an episode. The flashbacks on *30 Rock*, on the other hand, were consistent but brief interludes to characters’ childhoods, bad stand-up and stage performances, even to mere moments earlier in the episode. And many of these flashbacks were laden with the traces of other texts, humorous references to other televisual and filmic texts. Again, recognizing these traces in a sitcom were nothing new; previous sitcoms had also referenced other texts: *The Simpsons* parodied and quoted scenes and characters from other shows and films—*Family Guy* as well, with so many dizzying references a viewer could hardly keep up. But besides not being an animated comedy, *30 Rock* and its quotations and parodies were different. The function of these references—this *intertextuality*—seemed to be doing more.

After shaking off any suspicions that my interest in studying *30 Rock* was a thinly veiled excuse to watch TV for homework rather than instead (it wasn’t, I swear!), I dived into a close examination of these flashbacks and their intertextuality, laying it against humor, rhetoric, media, and cultural studies. What I discovered was: first, the show had
been primarily studied as a feminist text\(^1\) with very little dedicated investigation into its unique comedy structure or how that structure related to other new sitcoms playing with the genre’s form; and that second, within the scholarship on sitcoms, most of the published materials had yet to fully consider the implications of the recent changes in media distribution on the sitcom and on audiences of the sitcom. This was mainly because how people receive their media is quickly evolving: take, for example, a 2012 report by Nielsen, which revealed that among the 28,000 global respondents, watching video content on a computer screen was now just as popular as watching video content on a television.\(^2\) Compared to findings from only two years prior, in which respondents reported watching more content on their television sets than on their computers, the migration of content once only found on televisions to now other devices can only be expected to gain even more momentum. In light of this, the need to understand how genres—particularly for this thesis, the sitcom—are evolving and how audience’s perceptions and expectations are responding to this new Digital era is necessary.

30 Rock serves as a particularly fitting sitcom to examine more closely: premiering in 2006, when many technology and industry standards changed, and running through the beginning of 2013, this sitcom witnessed—and reflected—many of those changes in its form and content. While few scholars have fully engaged these


changes and their relationship to 30 Rock—something this thesis sets out to
accomplish—many other television, media, and rhetoric scholars have examined related
topics and themes.

To help us understand how they’ve done so, we can think of 30 Rock in two
ways. The first is as a container for humorous subject matter. The second is as a
revolutionary example of the sitcom genre. As a delivery vehicle for humor, 30 Rock
would seem to call for analysis in the field of humor studies. This field is
interdisciplinary, comprising sociological, philosophical, psychological, cultural, and
rhetorical investigations of humor. The more rhetorical of these investigations have
examined the form of humorous moments as an attempt to explain how humor (that is,
humorous effects or, more plainly, laughter) is created using symbolic means. Some
early studies primarily worked to categorize these moments. Both Arthur Asa Berger
and Jerry Palmer, taking inspiration from such works as Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of
the Folktale, attempt to provide a thorough inventory and map of humorous techniques
or criteria by which an audience determines something to be humorous. While Berger’s
An Anatomy of Humor is very much a catalogue (with entries in alphabetical order) of
what we might call the available means of humorousness, Palmer’s Taking Humour
Seriously functions more as a complex re-reading of humor devices as rhetorical devices.
In particular, Palmer conceives the joke as a kind of logical proof. He argues, in essence
that the joke is a syllogism. However, while the traditional syllogism moves from a
generally recognized principle (the major premise) to an empirical observation (the

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minor premise) to the final conclusion—which is the logical deduction of the two—a comic syllogism is actually composed of two contradictory syllogisms, one that is logically plausible and the other which is implausible. For it to be funny, the scale must tip to the implausible, and it is this imbalance—or, as Palmer refers to it, “the logic of the absurd”—that produces the comic surprise.

If there is a certain synchronicity to Berger’s and Palmer’s approaches, Simon Critchley and Diane Davis both begin diachronically from the observation that humor is necessarily tied to the social and historical conditions in which it arises. Not only do both examine closely how humor has changed through time, they also are most concerned with audience response, specifically with how laughter complicates subjectivity. Critchley notes that each of the major humor theories imply the possibility of making everyday phenomena absurd, making the familiar unfamiliar, and presenting people with what they already know in a new way. The defamiliarizing effect of humor, according to Critchley, jolts one out of the comfort of a settled subjectivity, causing subjects to recognize themselves simultaneously as the teller of the joke and the butt of the joke. Davis extends this by considering humor—specifically, the laughter it produces—as a means with which to challenge normative power structures. Rather than

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5 Palmer, 44.
7 The major humor theories widely recognized in humor studies are: superiority, or humor that reinforces a group’s dominance over another; incongruity, or humor derived from discrepancies between what’s expected and what happens; psychoanalytic (or relief), or humor as masked aggression derived from or releasing our desires. For more, see Berger, *An Anatomy of Humour*, 2-5.
8 Critchley, 86.
9 Critchley, 24.
looking to the humor theories for evidence of breaking free from subject/object binaries, then, Davis looks at the response itself, at how breaking free is found in a laughter that “laughs us.”

It is here, she believes, that one may break up the “rhetoric of totality” through a “giving laughter,” a language that laughs, because, Davis suggests, it “can’t be anchored; it is, rather, bound to disrupt, disperse, disseminate.”

Laughter, therefore, not only happens (in ways that can be explained); it can effect other political aims.

Of course, none of these studies in the rhetoric of humor is particularly interested in interpretive or analytic work with specific texts. Not surprisingly, more work on sitcoms has come from the rhetoric-and-communication than the rhetoric-and-composition field. Among the scholars interested in the sitcom are Brett Mills and Antonio Savorelli. The former examines the generic features, production practices, and reception conventions common to the sitcom. Much like Berger’s catalogue of humorous strategies, Mills’s work considers various genre “cues,” elements found in sitcoms that indicate to audiences the text should be read as funny. This attempt to push beyond the assumption of an intrinsic funniness in the sitcom amounts to an interest in cataloguing the various means by which humor is effected, specifically in situation comedies. The containers in this catalogue Mills takes to be fairly stable. Savorelli, on the other hand, attends to the evolution of the genre. He looks at four

10 Davis, 2.
11 Davis, 95.
specific series, *Scrubs, The Office, The Comeback*, and *Ugly Betty*, as instances of television series that reflect the changing conventions of the sitcom genre.

Although the texts Savorelli considers demonstrate some awareness of the genre’s conventions, as he sees it, the role these texts play in an independently occurring evolution is beyond the scope of his work. It shouldn’t be. As rhetorical genre theorists have been observing for several decades, the function of genre is both to set constraints and to set the conditions for innovation, a point to which I will return below.

Though more grounded in historical, cultural, and media studies than rhetorical studies, three other works—David Marc’s *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik’s *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, and Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder’s *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*—offer up thorough analyses of sitcoms and their humor, examining how their comedy serves as a reflection of the cultural moment in which they are situated. Each does so using different approaches: Marc through a chronological ordering, starting with the beginnings of comedy in America (rather than the beginnings of television) and then linking comedy to the medium’s evolution; Neale and Krutnik with first a survey of comedy’s diverse forms and modes and then a survey of the comedic trends in both film and television; and the articles found in Dalton and Linder’s anthology first historically situating the conventions of the genre, then examining some primary recurring themes such as representations of gender, race, and sexuality, and finally ending with a look at the genre’s ideological implications. As most of these texts were published on the cusp of the digital revolution, their insights go no further than the Cable era; however, in
their considerations of how the form of the sitcom has adjusted to changing social conditions and, in turn, has affected social changes, Marc, Neale and Krutnik, and Dalton and Linder’s contributions do more to consider the genre within the social, historical and cultural matrix that surrounds it.

Any discussion of television, however, must begin with the most famous school for analysis of that cultural form: the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. With the rise of television studies as a discipline, scholarship moved away from general conjectures about media and toward studies that looked at the specifics of television texts, genres, audiences, and industries. The works of Raymond Williams and Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch were foundational in shaping how scholars came to read specific televisual texts. All recognized a paradigm shift in reading television: rather than adapt methods from other media, they recognized that television required its own unique set of skills. To do this, Williams coined perhaps one of the most commonly used terms in television studies: the concept of “flow.” In his 1974 study, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams recognized that unlike other forms of media that could be experienced as distinct units, whenever a consumer chose, television was composed of a flow of material. For example, the first act of a sitcom is followed by an interval of advertisements, which is followed by the second act of the sitcom, which is followed by another commercial interruption, etc.; the sitcom is also part of a scheduled block of programs, whose meaning and content affect the audience’s perception of the sitcom; and the scheduled block of programs is further

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situated in a whole day’s worth of broadcasting.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, television flowed in a single direction (from broadcaster to viewer). Urging others to analyze this flow more closely, Williams also recognized that flow is inextricably linked to the specific culture in which it is situated and, as such, requires researchers to also consider audience in their analyses.

But for Newcombe and Hirsch, Williams viewed the audience as too passive an element in the televisual medium. So they proposed the “cultural forum” as a metaphor for understanding television. On television, they noted, more than in any other medium, the conflicts found in the American social and cultural experience are presented in ways that initiate discussion.\textsuperscript{14} Because flow suggests a continuous, unidirectional stream, it doesn’t account for the ways that viewers receive and—in their own way—respond to television, an activity that Stuart Hall calls decoding (in opposition to the encoding that authors and directors perform).\textsuperscript{15} Television, in Newcombe and Hirsch’s view, offered a site for public debate and discussion; it presented complex and contradictory ideas colliding with one another in the space of a “viewing strip.”\textsuperscript{16}

The direction scholarship in television studies has taken in the years since the work of these original cultural studies theorists reveals the influence of the field’s founders in its continued focus on the (televisual) medium of delivery. A recent special issue of the \textit{Journal of Popular Film and Television} is illustrative. The issue brings

\textsuperscript{13} Raymond Williams, \textit{Television: Technology and Cultural Form} (New York: Schocken, 1975).
\textsuperscript{16} Newcombe and Hirsch, 567.
together the work of a handful of scholars that looks at the “radical upheavals affecting the television business from many different perspectives, from the producer to the consumer, trying to determine the implications of this dramatic technological transformation.”\(^\text{17}\) From Victoria E. Johnson’s examination of the way regional identities, particularly the mythology of those identities, can shape network promotion,\(^\text{18}\) to Alisa Perren’s exploration of how television and film divisions of the media conglomerates have used historical relationships and long-standing business practices to negotiate the new challenges of online distribution,\(^\text{19}\) to Daniel Chamberlain’s look at the new interfaces of television (screen-based displays and menus) and how they function as interactive sites where customization, navigation, and control are invested and contested,\(^\text{20}\) each contribution seeks to better understand how television is being read differently due to the rapidly changing technological conditions that surround it.

Likewise, Jason Mittell’s *Television and American Culture* and Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz’s *Television Studies* discuss television in the context of changing media of delivery in the digital age, as well as the new media literacies audiences bring to the text. In Gray and Lotz’s work, each chapter ends with a “What Now and What Next?” section that provides readers with a discussion of new trends in programs, audiences,

\(^\text{17}\) Ron Simon and Brian Rose, “Mixed-Up Confusion: Coming to Terms with The Television Experience in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (2010), 52.


industries, and contexts. For instance, in their “Institutions” chapter, Gray and Lotz note that one discrepancy between general industrial studies of television and television studies’ analyses of industry is that the former takes a simplistic view of the text and assumes broad commonalities.21 Mittell closes his study with a chapter that looks at “Television’s Transforming Technologies,” which, in 2010, consists of high definition television, digital video recorders (DVRs), DVDs, pay-per-download video, the mobile screens of iPods, and the rise of YouTube.22

Many of these studies were situated in the shift in television from a broadcast medium to a cable medium. The more recent transition has been from cable to what we might call “delivery on demand.” The advent of the DVD in the 1990s did not make video available for the first time (the 1980s were, after all, the decade of VHS), but it did mark the origin of conveniently packaging entire seasons of television series for consumption outside of cable delivery. Indeed, if anything interrupted the unidirectional and continual flow of televisual material, it was persuading consumers that they could start, stop, or re-view a video at any time they chose.

Of course, delivery on demand has only exponentially grown with the advancement of new streaming and downloading capabilities, and in thinking about medium as a delivery device for particular messages, it is crucial to understand Marshall McLuhan’s foundational essays from the 1964 collection Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. McLuhan called for a re-examination of how audiences “read”

22 Jason Mittell, Television and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 422-33.
media, pointing out that it was more important to understand the meaning behind how content was transmitted than it was to understand the content itself. Identifying two different categories of media, “hot” and “cool,” McLuhan went on to categorize television as “cool” because it required viewers to participate if they wished to determine the meaning of what they watched. That is, rather than an immersive, “hot” technology such as print media, which fully captures the visual attention of its reader, television was detached—or at least detachable. More than 20 years later, Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* took up McLuhan’s thesis with one major revision: for Postman, “form excludes the content.” In other words, only certain media could sustain certain messages. Television, according to Postman, was a medium that could only deliver entertainment content; thus, even televised news could consist only of fragments of stories quickly interrupted with advertisements, all of which “abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction.” For Postman, televisual delivery affected other media, with newspapers taking on the qualities of televised news, as well as viewers’ literacy levels: the fragmentation and non-logic-ruled packaging of content led audiences to be highly opinionated and *dis*informed.

But with on-demand delivery and the emergence of the internet and web resources, surely there is reason to think consumers are not so limited by what television has to offer as Postman drearily described. In any case, the sudden explosion

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24 Postman, 105.
of personal computers (and computing devices) has caused scholars to reconsider the place of television as a sort of hub for various cultural practices surrounding and encompassing it.\textsuperscript{25} Henry Jenkins’ \textit{Convergence Culture} is one of the first studies to do that, offering a re-reading of media culture as one of \textit{convergence}, or “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”\textsuperscript{26} He uses \textit{American Idol} as an illustrative example: the show requires audience participation through its phone-voting system and website; it cross-promotes the final “idol” through radio, CD and iTunes; and during its off-season, it maintains fan loyalty with a concert tour. In this way, convergence media re-shapes audiences’ interaction with and reading of texts. For the generation that has grown up with these technologies, they no longer see a clear delineation between online and real-world participation, and while Jenkins sees great promise in this (the possibility of a more democratic civic engagement), he also recognizes the dangers: participation in convergence culture is unevenly distributed, leading to dialogue that can be racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic.\textsuperscript{27}

Still, if the delivery of media has changed over the past several decades and new genres (“reality TV,” for instance) have emerged, old genres persist. Perhaps chief among these is the situation comedy, a genre we see exemplified almost any night of the week across network television. The conventions that define most of these sitcoms

\textsuperscript{25} Gray and Lotz, 135.
\textsuperscript{26} Henry Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide} (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
\textsuperscript{27} Jenkins, 291.
(such as Two and a Half Men or The Big Bang Theory, to take two popular examples) are largely the same conventions that defined I Love Lucy or Happy Days. However, the feature I have found most interesting about 30 Rock is its interest in challenging, parodying, and reinvigorating these conventions. I don’t want to suggest that 30 Rock is unique in doing so, but the series does present an interesting case study for seeing how genre works both as a set of constraints and as what Anis Bawarshi describes as a site for invention.\(^{28}\)

This observation about the operation of genre is not Bawarshi’s alone. Rhetorical scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defined genre in 1982 “as dynamic fusions of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements and as constellations that are strategic responses to the demands of the situation and the purposes of the rhetor.”\(^{29}\) The interplay of these “fusions” and “strategic responses” is essential. Rhetors come upon a situation that calls for response; they seek an appropriate form to use as a guide, a form with various attendant conventions; and they strategically adapt the form to suit their purposes. They are neither free to adapt without restraint nor presented with unmovable constraints, and so some scholarship that has emerged from this recognition concerns questions of rhetorical agency.\(^ {30}\)

\(^{28}\) Anis Bawarshi, Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2003).


Other scholarship is interested in how rhetors negotiate between adaptation and constraint. Carolyn Miller, for example, begins with the understanding that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish.”\(^{31}\) This shift in emphasis from form to action means that if rhetors are to recognize a rhetorical situation, it will only be because they are already participating in a genre, and so genre itself shapes the rhetor’s reading of a situation. As Amy Devitt argues, “Genre not only responds to but also constructs recurring situation.”\(^{32}\) Devitt then wonders what implications this conception of genre has for illuminating, for instance, the cognitive processes writers undergo as they draft and revise or the formation of (discourse) communities. The point of understanding genre this way, then, is that it helps clarify some of the resources rhetors use—and, thus, can better use—when they construct rhetorical interventions. For composition instructors, the value is pedagogical.

Bawarshi puts it plainly: “It is the genred positions, commitments, and relations that writers assume, enact, and sometimes resist within certain situations that most interests me. In particular, I am interested in the way these positions, commitments, and relations inform the choices writers make during the scene of invention.”\(^{33}\) The upshot of this is the ability to use genre in the teaching of invention to student writers. But if we understand genre to function in this way, then we can apply it as an analytic


\(^{33}\) Bawarshi, 45.
lens for understanding a variety of texts. Bawarshi observes that literary critics have focused solely on literary texts in their use of genre theory. He then determines to use genre as an apparatus for understanding social action as a whole: we should “identify genres not only as analogical to social institutions but as actual social institutions, constituting not just literary activity but social activity, not just literary textual relations but all textual relations, so that genres do not just constitute the literary scene in which literary actors (writers, readers, characters) and their texts function, but also constitute the social conditions in which the activities of all social participants are enacted.”

But if this understanding of genre is put immediately toward the end of teaching students the art of invention, have we lost other opportunities?

In fact, such opportunities might be further expanded if we explore the close relationship genre bears to intertextuality. Perhaps often overlooked in rhetoric scholarship because of its origins in literary studies, intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva, defined by her as “the transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another.”

Vincent Leitch, in his look at deconstructive literary criticism, further clarifies this: “The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts. Its system of language, its grammar, its lexicon, drag along numerous bits and pieces—traces—of history so that the text resembles a Cultural Salvation Army Outlet with unaccountable collections of incompatible ideas, beliefs, and sources.”

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34 Bawarshi, 31-32.
And in his study of intertextuality, Graham Allen adds, “Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext.” Common to all these definitions is a reconsideration of both the autonomy of a text and of the author. Just as “writers act within and are acted upon by the social and rhetorical conditions that we call genres,” so too is the intertext—and by extension, the authors of those texts—likewise shaping and being shaped by other texts. If genre informs invention, then intertextuality is yet a more nuanced way of considering that process: as an author creates a text, she does so by configuring her text within a constellation of other texts and authors so that no longer is her work an autonomous text but an intertext. As all three of these theorists make plain, their focus is, yet again, on literary texts and authors. Bawarshi’s call for a re-examination of other social actors and texts rings true once more.

Despite intertextuality’s entanglement with literary studies, a few scholars have considered the relationship between intertextuality and rhetoric. One of the first to do so was James E. Porter, who observed that many prevailing composition pedagogies too often romanticized the role of the writer as a solitary, creative genius, inventing in a vacuum. Introducing the concept of intertextuality, on the other hand, avails students of this notion, instead shifting their attention “the sources and social contexts from which

39 Bawarshi, 7.
[their] discourse arises.” He further points out that these sources and contexts are further constrained by discourse communities, a term he borrows from Patricia Bizzell to describe “a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated.” Thus, according to Porter, a successful writer—and for him more particularly, a successful student writer—both recognizes the intertextual traces present in her writing and also knows how the discourse community to which she writes and of which she is a part further regulates these traces.

This thread tying together intertextuality and rhetoric has more recently been picked up by Frank D’Angelo, who hypothesizes that the field has continued to overlook the connection due not only to intertextuality’s close ties to literary studies, but also because of the field’s narrow view of what is properly rhetorical. Hoping to give teachers and students new strategies for understanding and producing discourse, D’Angelo proceeds to chart five rhetorical strategies used to create intertexts: adaptation, retro (or recycling), appropriation, parody, pastiche, and simulation. From these, he then investigates their implications for rhetorical theory and criticism, recognizing how intertextuality can further shape the rhetorical situation, how it can be a “fresh source” of invention, how it can be a new way of considering genre, how it

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41 Porter, 38-9.
42 D’Angelo, 33.
43 D’Angelo, 43.
might offer new ideas about arrangement, and how it can offer new ways of considering the effects of texts and intertexts on audience.

Both Porter and D’Angelo, much like Bawarshi, consider the possibilities of intertextuality mostly within the walls of the composition classroom. They see it for its pedagogical possibilities, as a way for students to reconsider and recompose their own texts. But just as only considering genre’s relationship to invention for the teaching of writing limits the possibilities of considering it in relation to other rhetorical situations and rhetors, we might again wonder if there are yet more lost opportunities in limiting intertextuality’s scope to discussions of only students navigating discourse communities and their texts and intertexts? Might intertextuality inform discussions of other rhetors inventing other texts, of navigating other communities? Indeed, this question opens up others: what can we learn when we observe writing that is less a semi-private act of composing to address an exigency than an extremely public act of composing for entertainment? What if the writing, such as that on 30 Rock, doesn’t merely negotiate generic conventions but criticizes those conventions, ridicules them, makes them the very means of their own apparent demolition? And what if it does so intertextually, further complicating and expanding understandings of genre and invention? It is these questions that I take up in this thesis.

To do so, I examine 30 Rock as an instance of the sitcom genre, as a text that adopts and adapts the sitcom’s conventions, and as a text that responds to the changing conditions of media consumption and production in the twenty-first century. I consider the shape of 30 Rock’s humor as a rhetorical intervention in the very mediating role
played by those conventions. To do this, the first section of this thesis will provide a historical overview of the Network era’s social and cultural conditions that shaped the classic sitcom and its cues that, in turn, shaped audience expectations of the genre, followed by a look at the recent changes to production, distribution, and consumption of televisual texts in the Digital era that has resulted in a fragmenting of audiences and flow, all of which has shifted the sitcom’s generic cues. Third, using 30 Rock as a case study, I will closely analyze the characteristics of its unique cues, particularly its use of flashback to, finally, show how the flashbacks are intertextually formed and how that intertextuality self-consciously calls attention to 30 Rock’s process of invention.
CHAPTER II
FROM THE NETWORK TO THE DIGITAL ERA: CUING THE SITCOM

Though much of its technology was developed prior to WWII, television blossomed in the postwar boom years when the broadcast companies could once again focus their energies on developing a standardized broadcast system. Much like the women who were no longer needed for the war effort, it too found its place in the home, nestled in the living room, its bulky components camouflaged with cabinetry, looking more like a piece of furniture than a piece of advanced technology. It became the new hearth, the “electronic hearth,”\textsuperscript{44} around which the family gathered—indeed, around which much of the nation gathered. What came to be known as the Golden Age of television, the Network era not only began at a key turning point in American history, but fused together three other modes of entertainment: radio, theater, and cinema. And, indeed, television in this era carries with it traces of all three. The spontaneity of live performances, the communal act of “tuning in,” the flow of scheduled programming and advertisements: each of these came to define the viewership practices of audiences, the content development strategies of networks and studios, and finally, the shaping of genres.

\textsuperscript{44} Mittell, 166.
As one of the first television genres to stabilize, the sitcom clicked with audiences. Just like viewers at home, early sitcoms were made up of families who gathered in living rooms and who sat on couches and talked about their day—only the typical day of a sitcom family was always just a little wackier, a little zanier, and above all else, a lot funnier. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the traditional sitcom, paying special attention to how the media that preceded it and the technology that shaped it gave rise to specific cues that helped differentiate the genre. At a time when television was characterized by simultaneous national broadcasting—when the whole nation was tuning in communally—embedding cues that helped audiences quickly categorize texts was imperative.

The traces of previous media such as radio and theater can be found in various aspects of the sitcom, perhaps most obviously in the domestic tendencies of its narratives. Prior to television broadcast, the domestic was just that—a narrative tendency. It existed latently. Before it was fully teased out, the humor adapted from radio to television focused more on dialect humor. For 15 to 30 minutes, once a week, audiences could tune in to a handful of “sitcoms” such as The Goldbergs and Amos ‘n’ Andy, which derived much of their humor, similar to vaudeville, from the dialect of their stars—Gertrude Berg’s thick Jewish accent and Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll’s grossly stereotyped African American English. Dialect humor was well-suited to and,

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therefore, well-received on the aural medium of radio. But the changing social milieu of postwar America (the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement; the push for assimilation as more immigrant and White families moved to the suburbs), at the beginning of the Nework Era, means that ethnic and racial differences became less a source of comedy and more a source of embarrassment. *Amos ’n’ Andy* was cancelled two years after its debut (1951-53), but *The Goldbergs* managed a longer run of six seasons, mainly because the show’s creator and star, Berg, moved beyond dialect humor and into the richer comedic territory of family life in the suburbs.

Indeed, it was Berg’s decision to emphasize the domestic and to re-situate *The Goldbergs* in the suburbs that led to her show’s success over that of *Amos ’n’ Andy*. As other successful radio-to-TV adaptations show, the sitcoms that embraced narratives situated in the suburban domestic space were likewise successful. For example, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, which, on the radio, had been both a variety show and a comedy centered on the domestic life of the title couple, eliminated much of the direct-address of the variety show and developed the domestic comedy for its television adaptation with the addition of two adopted children and an elaborate set designed to resemble the Burns and Allen’s actual residence in Beverly Hills; the show enjoyed an eight-year run. Conversely, *The Honeymooners*, which featured a working-class couple living far away from the suburbs in a Brooklyn tenement, only aired for one season. The narrative origins of early sitcom, then, might have started with dialect humor but evolved to emphasize the suburban domestic; in other words, the antecedent genre
constraints were modified to accommodate the changing rhetorical situation of the postwar Network era.

Eventually the evolving sitcom innovated story lines by including more than the domestic life of the suburban nuclear family. As time went on, the make-up of that conventional family evolved to include superhuman members (The Munsters, The Addams Family, I Dream of Genie) and people of color (The Jeffersons, The Cosby Show). Similarly, families ceased to be as complete as they had been (The Andy Griffith Show, My Three Sons), or they were no longer quite families (Friends). The sitcom also began to offer more risqué social commentary (All in the Family, M*A*S*H, Roseanne), to wander into the workplace (The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Murphy Brown) or the places people go to escape it (Cheers), and to examine nothing at all (Seinfeld). Despite the revision to the genre’s narrative conventions, what remained consistent was the limited numbers of cast members, each representing a consistent “type,” all gathering every week to solve a generally mundane problem that finds resolution by the end of the episode (with the “to be continued” cliff hanger serving as a rare exception). These mundane problems—meeting the in-laws, spousal quarrels, sibling quarrels—typically concluded with a sentimental message, a lesson learned, or moral growth

48 Antonio Savorelli, Beyond Sitcom (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2010), 28-30. As Savorelli explains it, the sitcom’s plot works to counterbalance the euphoric with the dysphoric: an initial euphoric state encounters dysphoria, and the remainder of the episode works to re-establish the euphoric state.
extended story lines (typically revolving around an ever-simmering love affair as in *Cheers*, *Friends*, and *Wings*). But these exceptional twists never disrupted the stasis.

Along with the above-mentioned narrative cues, the traditional sitcom also codified very specific visual cues, these too shaped by the evolution of television’s technology and elements of the theater. Initial broadcasts were performed live in small, hot studios\(^49\) since the technology for film transfer was not yet existent. One of the first experimental broadcasts done by W2XAD used three cameras positioned at the “fourth wall” of a three-walled, theatrical set, all motionless, all shooting close-ups.\(^50\) The three camera approach (or *multicam*) became the standard for live broadcast, with a control room dictating instructions to the various camera operators via headphones; by cutting from camera to camera, editing and shooting could be done “live.” But as episodic television grew in popularity and the choreography required for set changes, costume changes, and edits grew in complexity, sponsors and producers began to question the efficiency of the approach; not only were production costs skyrocketing but also the possibility of error was an ever present threat. Dramas, on the other hand, had already made the migration to “telefilms,” or productions filmed in the same studios used by major motion pictures. By filming, telefilmmakers could execute multiple takes and shoot various sets at a fraction of the cost.

\(^{49}\) Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 90. The camera technology for early telecasts required odd, green and purple makeup to counteract the oddities of early black and white filming, while the lighting needed to properly illuminate performers produced so much heat that it stung the actors’ skin.

\(^{50}\) Barnouw, 61.
Most dramas accomplished this using a single camera approach (numerous shots taken from various setups, the action out of sequence), but when sitcoms made the switch (most famously done by Karl Freund on *I Love Lucy*\(^{51}\)), they stayed true to their theatrical roots by maintaining the three-walled set and using multicam cinematography: still rigidly positioning three cameras along the fourth wall and shooting action simultaneously and chronologically, with editing now done in post production.\(^{52}\) In other words, a scene could be done in several takes, with each of the cameras filming the ensemble of actors and the editor later cobbling together the best takes. Thus programs were freed from the snafus, complications, and costs of live broadcast. Indeed, the multicam method remained popular throughout the 50s,\(^{53}\) though by the 60s, preferences turned more to the cinematic, single camera approach, particularly as programs featuring an extended number of cast members, different locations and sets, and fantastical elements came into vogue.\(^{54}\)

Not only did theater shape the visual cues of television, it also shaped the way space was configured. The traditional sitcom’s three-walled theatrical sets limited action to only a handful of spaces, though only one room typically served as the primary site of action. Those spaces were enclosed by three walls, with the “fourth” the transparent perimeter occupied by the cameras, and behind them, a live studio audience. Due to traditional sitcoms’ focus on the domestic, this room was almost always the family’s

\(^{51}\) Mills, 39.  
\(^{52}\) Mittell, 166.  
\(^{53}\) Though single camera sitcoms could still be found—*Leave it to Beaver*, for example.  
\(^{54}\) Hartley, 66.
living room, and the couch served as the focal point.\textsuperscript{55} In the early days of television sitcom, this one-room set had served the needs of the barely mobile filming equipment, but even when technology allowed for multiple sets and locations, the living room remained the primary location of most action (for example, although \textit{The Cosby Show} took place in multiple rooms of the house, the Huxtable’s living room retained its position at the top of the spatial hierarchy). Later, when sitcoms ventured into spheres beyond the domestic, the living room evolved into the living \textit{space}, taking the form of shared work areas, diners, bars, or coffee shops\textsuperscript{56} with other pieces of furniture (such as desks, counters, or the bar itself) serving as the focal point.

Because of the couch’s importance as a key visual and spatial cue of the sitcom, though, it warrants further discussion: a piece of furniture that can accommodate multiple persons, with the set design of most sitcoms revolving around it, and its position parallel to the fourth wall, the couch denotes not only the comfort of home, but also the very place where most families congregate to watch these sitcoms. On the one hand, the couch is where one might receive one’s neighbors, and the intimacy of this neighborly relationship came to characterize the viewers’ attitudes toward the families they observed. But at the same time, while the “family” of characters gathered on a couch, facing the cameras, families at home gathered on theirs, facing the television. This dynamic created a metaphoric/symbolic shared living room, a place

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Honeymooners} was one notable exception: the working class Kramden’s antics mostly take place in their kitchen.

\textsuperscript{56} Though in this case, the couch could be incorporated, creating a faux-living room (e.g., Central Perk in \textit{Friends}).
where the familial everyday of the sitcom could become intertwined with the familial everyday of the audience. This familial imperative of the sitcom—the centralization of the living room, the emphasis on the domestic—was a requirement of viewer satisfaction for the genre, indicating that from the sitcom’s beginnings, its viewers were addressed as members of the metaphoric sitcom family. And this made sense in the Network era, when content was simultaneously broadcasted by only three national networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC); families across the country gathered around their televisions, on their couches, tuning in as a national “family.”

Admittedly, the couch, the live studio audience, the focus on the family, the limited number of sets are not the sole province of the sitcom. Individually, these elements could all be equally observable in other traditional television genres such as drama or variety shows. For instance, numerous day-time and late-night talk shows, such as NBC’s *The Tonight Show*, have a live studio audience and a couch as the primary focal point; many dramas’ story lines revolve around the domestic everyday problems of a limited number of characters, such as ABC’s *Life Goes On*, a popular 90s drama that examined the lives of the Thacher family. It is tempting, though, to differentiate the sitcom from these other genres solely through its comedy. Doing so, however, inevitably leads to further differentiating sitcom comedy from comedy found in other genres (for example, the late-night talk show also contains moments of humor). And to do this, one might be further tempted to use the three humor theories. Using the superiority theory, the relief theory, the incongruity theory—or any combination of the three—allows one to analyze the anatomy of a sitcom’s jokes. But there are two major problems with this
approach. First, because the three humor theories are primarily concerned with the joke, it assumes a sitcom’s humor can be found in discrete moments and ignores the numerous other factors contributing to a show’s funniness, such as the surrounding narrative and aesthetics. Second, while it may offer insight into a joke’s intended funniness, it doesn’t take into account how or why an audience might accept the joke as funny.\footnote{Mills, 93.}

A better approach to understanding humor’s relationship to the genre is by considering how the aforementioned cues signal audiences to read the sitcom as a humorous text. In this way, moments that audiences might not have accepted as funny can still be read as comedic via the cues signaling the sitcom’s intention to be funny. Indeed, one of the traditional sitcom’s most familiar cues and one that hasn’t been discussed yet is the laugh track. While the convention of having a studio audience present during a broadcast (and later during filming and taping) can be traced to theater and radio, the need for that audience’s laughter was solidified in the first live broadcasts, when technology made cutting between multiple cameras difficult and forced cameras to “play it close.” With performers shot in close-up delivering their jokes, and without the ability to cut to reaction shots, the studio audience’s laughter recorded on the soundtrack became the primary cue that signaled home audiences to read the moment as funny. As Antonio Savorelli has observed, the studio audience’s laughter served as a “measure and control system of the comic effect.”\footnote{Savorelli, 30.} Indeed,
performers adapted the delivery of their jokes to make room for the laughter of the audience, pausing to create a build-up for the punchline or waiting for the laughter of one joke to die down before delivering the next. These joke rhythms and pauses served to strengthen the cue. In this case, then, more so than any other televsual genre, the traditional sitcom relies on an audience within the text.\textsuperscript{59} Even when technological developments led to the revival of single-camera sitcoms that scrapped live-studio audiences, a laugh track maintained this measure: synthetic laughter served as a manufactured cue for home viewers.

Considering how audiences read the laugh track cue further reveals how traditional joke structures of the sitcom interacted with these cues. While live broadcast and television’s earliest cameras placed greater emphasis on the punch line, the development of more technologically advanced equipment that allowed for easy cross-cutting between cameras and the filming (or taping) of shows opened up another space of humor: the reaction shot. Instead of only signaling the humor of the moment by shooting the joke-giver delivering the punch line and recording the studio audience’s laughter in response to that punch line, the use of multicam and post-production editing enabled the cut to the reaction of the on-screen joke-receiver, which allowed for yet another eruption of studio laughter. In this way, the cue could occur multiple times: the studio audience both laughs at the punch line and at the reaction shot. Both forms depended upon embedding an audience into the genre itself. The point is not, of course, that the actual extra-textual audience of sitcoms was unable to find humor for itself, but

\textsuperscript{59} Mills, 101.
rather that when viewers tuned in, they experienced little confusion; they quickly identified a text as a sitcom based on these cues. As soon as they heard the laughter of a studio audience, or saw the theatrical, three-walled set or a group of characters gathered on a couch, viewers could quickly deduce they were watching a sitcom.

But with the emerging prominence of cable and satellite programming in the 1980s and the growing popularity of streaming content online in the 2000s, the Network era and its emphasis on simultaneity, the communal act of tuning in, and genres strongly marked by familiar cues, was disrupted. With the radical changes to media distribution, production, and consumption, it became increasingly rare to find families gathered together in front of their “electronic hearths”; instead, the explosion of programming choices and increasing number of screens on which to watch that content led to viewership practices that were less communal and more fragmented. And networks and advertisers were keen to this change. As early as 1969, executives were noticing that even though their network might not have captured the largest share of all viewers, they were capturing certain sectors of the market, each with highly specific traits and tastes that could be made appealing to advertisers. The widespread adoption of cable and the multitude of channels it brought placed a new emphasis on niche programming (and, of course, niche advertising), allowing networks to cash in on these traits and tastes. This narrowcasting approach has strongly impacted all facets of television programming, including the sitcom. While the Network era’s strategy to

capture the largest share of all viewers resulted in “safe” programming—or programming that recycled successful tropes and formulas to appeal to the lowest common denominator—the multiple channels and choices of the Cable and Digital era pushed the sitcom to innovate, to move beyond the established genre constraints. This can most clearly be seen in the changing shape of cues and the evolving relationship with intertextuality. To better understand the causes and effects of these changes, I’ll first provide a brief overview of the policies and technologies that reshaped television in the Cable and Digital eras and then move on to more specifically analyze how this manifested in a wave of recent sitcoms, revealing how the new modes of media consumption has led to a re-envisioning of one of the most stable television genres.

**Fragmentation, Timeshifting, and Placeshifting**

The passage of the Telecommunications Act in 1996 decisively closed the door on the Network era’s model of content development and distribution. The networks’ strategy that had prioritized reaching the maximum number of viewers was already flailing in the face of cable, and with the passing of new legislation that effectively broke down regulatory barriers between various telecommunication sectors, the competition for viewers’ attentions would grow even more fierce. Now not only were the networks competing against cable channels but also online content. This of course didn’t mean that the three major networks would disappear anytime soon. Cable, broadcast, local and long-distance telephone, direct broadcast satellite (DBS)—and perhaps most importantly, production studios—were all made available for commercial consolidation
thanks to the provisions of the act. This actually extended the networks’ reach with the formation of the major media conglomerates (the Big Six)—NBCUniversal (now Comcast/NBCUniversal), News Corp/21st Century Fox, the Walt Disney Company, CBS Corporation/Viacom, Time Warner, and Sony Corporation of America. It also shifted priorities: rather than hope to achieve the largest market share through one channel, the new paradigm emphasized profits spread across multiple channels, capturing highly specific market shares, or, to put it another way, reaching increasingly fragmented audiences. While these conglomerates had already consolidated their interests across cable and broadcast networks, the Telecommunications Act allowed them to consolidate yet another piece: the production studios.

To understand the importance of this change and its ultimate effect on the sitcom, one must understand the evolving relationship between the studios that produce the content and networks that license and syndicate that content. In a system established during the Network era, the studios produced content at a deficit with the hopes that a hit show would recuperate all the costs through the extreme profits of syndication (the “fin-syn” system). The importance of these syndication profits—profits so great that just one successfully syndicated show could counteract the losses of numerous other unsuccessful shows—led to not only a limited number of major studios that could bankroll such a system, but also limited innovation in content since proven formulas leveraged the gamble.⁶¹ Further, because little regulation existed to monitor

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the relationships between studios and networks, the latter increasingly impinged on the
former’s syndication profits, which, by the 1970s, led to the enacting of fin-syn rules
that allowed independent studios to enter the market. With the influx of these smaller
studios during this time, television content—especially the sitcom—experienced a
rejuvenation in content: here was the era of The Mary Tyler Moore Show and it’s
subsequent spinoffs; Norman Lear’s All in The Family, The Jeffersons, and Good Times;
and M*A*S*H, an “edgier” major studio production created in response to the
competition from the independents.

But by the early 80s, with the rise of cable and new independent networks FOX
and UPN, enforcement of the fin-syn rules dwindled until by 1995 implementation had
all but disappeared. Soon after, the smaller studios once again found themselves
unable to compete in the market, this time rivaled by not only the larger budgets of the
major studios but the major budgets of the conglomerates who owned those studios.
Fully vertically integrated thanks to the Telecommunications Act, the networks primarily
picked up programs produced by their own studios, agreeing to license shows made by
other studios only with heavy syndication stipulations. With both networks and studios
equally invested in the success of a show’s first run, by the end of the 90s, the gamble of
creativity began to wane again, resulting in “a glut of unpopular programming” that
couldn’t find profitable second life in syndication. However, by 2005, as cable channels
matured and their growing budgets could subsidize original programming of their own,

62 Lotz, 86.
63 Lotz, 90.
the demand for innovation and creativity once again waxed. HBO was one such channel that successfully produced its own original content. Though it began this practice in the early 80s, it wasn’t until the popularity of *Sex and the City* and *The Sopranos* in 1998 and 1999, respectively, that HBO’s content came to rival that of the major broadcast networks. Part of this was due to flaunting the norms established by those networks: instead of airing a 22-week program season, HBO’s series ran for 12-18 weeks; instead of airing original programming on multiple nights a week, HBO only aired its shows in a block one night a week. The other part of its success was due to the high quality associated with these shows; because the channel was subscription-based, more challenging content and sophisticated aesthetics could be used, a risk the majors wouldn’t and couldn’t take due to censorship rules and broadcast economies of distribution and reception.

HBO’s strategy gained momentum with subsequent, award-winning successes as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Entourage* (2004-2011), and most recently, *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) and *Girls* (2012-present). This led to the “HBO effect” with other cable channels soon following suit, such as AMC, with its *Mad Men* (2007-present) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and FX, with its *Rescue Me* (2004-2011), *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-present), *Louie* (2010-present), and *American Horror Story* (2011-present). But while the three major networks couldn’t broadcast the same edgy content as the cable channels, that didn’t mean they weren’t responding to the creative imperatives of the cable channels’ original programming. By

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64 Lotz, 105.
roughly 2005, there was indeed a push to innovate and include similar “quality” elements in the major networks’ programs. Soon, many of the shows the major networks introduced (which I will discuss in more detail later) began to include aesthetics similar to those found in their cable counterparts.

Besides changes in regulation that caused creativity in programming to wax and wane, the late 90s to early 2000s also brought other disruptions to the Network era model, namely that of *timeshifting* (a viewer’s ability to control when they watch content). While VCRs had first heralded the phenomena early in the Cable era, digital video recorders (DVRs), introduced in 1999 but only gaining a foothold in the market by 2006 with TiVo’s growing popularity, swept the Digital era. Devices were found in 25 percent of homes by 2008 and approximately 60 percent of homes in 2013. With DVRs, viewers could easily record episodes and then watch them at their own leisure, fast-forwarding through the commercials, much to the dismay of advertisers. While still subject to the network’s or channel’s scheduling prerogatives in that viewers had to wait for the initial scheduled airing, once recorded, viewers could then watch episodes to best fit their needs. This timeshifting pattern was similarly found in the growing popularity of television series released on DVDs, with some programs that had floundered during their broadcast run finding newfound success (*Family Guy* was so popular, in fact, that it inspired Fox to bring the series back). Just as the DVR provided

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65 Mittell, 426.
67 Mittell, 424.
viewers with freedom to access content at their leisure, television series released on DVD also gave viewers more control over how they interacted with the text: rather than encounter it as part of a scheduled lineup, episodes could now be watched one after the other.

The rise of DVDs and DVRs had profound effects on content development. The ability to consecutively screen episodes meant writers could include multiple story lines and extended arcs, something previously not attempted due to the flow of the Network era that made such complexity impossible.\(^{68}\) If viewers could only catch the newest show once a week at its regularly scheduled time, the details remembered from one week to the next had to be simplified. Furthermore, the additional profit window of DVD release also complicated the fin-syn model and affected the creative possibilities of a show. No longer was syndication—a gamble that also required a show hit the 100-episode mark\(^ {69}\)—the only way a studio could hope to recuperate production costs; the success of a DVD release could occur with as little as two seasons if it captured the attention of a small, highly devoted audience. A less conventional program—one that featured more detailed and complex narratives, that appealed to niche audiences—had increasingly better odds of being produced by the mid 2000s.

Another timeshifting advancement that affected content development was the emergence of network (broadcast and cable) websites streaming episodes originally

\(^{68}\) Mittell, 424.
\(^{69}\) One hundred episodes was the equivalent of approximately five to six seasons; considering studios operate at an average deficit of $200,000-400,000 per episode for an hour-long series, the syndication gamble was astronomical. For more, see Lotz, 84.
aired on their television channels. Users enjoyed even more freedom in viewing content: no longer completely at the mercy of programming schedules, with a click of a mouse, users could watch an endless stream of various episodes broken up only by streaming advertisements; in other words, their access to content was at their command, or, rather, on demand. On-demand access to media was further revolutionized in 2009 with the website Hulu, a joint synergy venture of NBCUniversal Television Group, Fox Broadcasting Company, and Disney-ABC Television Group. On it, viewers could access both recent content from affiliated channels and networks as well as programs and films from those affiliates’ past catalogues, such as The Mary Tyler Moore Show or The Twilight Zone. Viewers could also interact with their favorite shows, linking viewing preferences to their Facebook pages, tweeting what they were watching, and leaving comments for other Hulu users. Here was a strange hybrid of conventional and unconventional viewing practices: conventional in the sense that Hulu content bore more similarities to the Network era flow (a program was broken into segments separated by advertisements), and unconventional in that the program was delivered via a website with other interactive opportunities and hyperlinks to still other programs, websites, and users surrounding it.

Though Hulu was a service engineered by the conglomerates themselves, another major player in on-demand content, Netflix, was borne from the video rental market as first a flat-rate DVD mail-order rental service that later expanded to include a

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70 However, viewers often have to wait a few days after an episode’s initial network broadcast to access the content online, and that content was typically made available for only a limited time.
online streaming subscription service. For a fee, subscribers can access a vast catalogue of movies and television series, all without commercial interruption. Unlike Hulu, which still carries some traces of Network era’s flow paradigm, Netflix’s model bears very few traces: here, users have total control of when and how much of a program they watch in one sitting, all without any commercial interruption or restrictions. Moreover, as one of the first successful Digital era pay-for-content models, Netflix bears traces of one of the most successful Cable-Era, pay-for-content channels: HBO. Just as the cable channel set itself apart by bringing premium original programming to cable, so too has Netflix recently produced critically acclaimed programs such as *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black*.

The implications of this new on-demand model are two fold. First, because Hulu, Netflix, and individual channels streaming their content offer yet another window of opportunity for independent studios to distribute unconventional, edgier programs, the creativity often quelled by the traditional network fin-syn system can be reasserted. For example, the first season of *House of Cards*, which was produced by Media Rights Capital, an independent studio operating outside of the conglomerates, garnered numerous prime-time Emmy nominations including one for outstanding drama series; none of the major networks’ programs received nominations that year. Secondly, these on-demand channels allow audiences to access greater and greater stores of studio backlogs. Whereas before a viewer might only stumble upon re-runs of, say, *The Rifleman* on network or cable syndication, the on-demand model offers, around the clock, the series’ entire five-season catalogue, available to viewers at their discretion.
With access to this series and the hundreds of other obscure, forgotten programs comes a more sophisticated understanding of televisual and filmic tropes, conventions, and formulas, far more sophisticated than a Cable or Network era viewer possessed. Thus, the increasing creative possibilities afforded by the on-demand model and the access to a seemingly endless library of programming have affected both what a viewer expects in a program and what networks can assume about their audiences. Broadcast, cable, and broadband providers are more likely to produce unconventional programming for their highly fragmented audiences. In other words, the rhetorical situation has changed and the constraints of genres and the expectations of audiences have been reconfigured.

Yet another technological development closely related to timeshifting and also reshaping the rhetorical situation is the phenomenon of placeshifting, or users’ ability to access their media “on the go.” While streaming services offered by Hulu, Netflix, and other cable and network websites—and the downloading services offered by Amazon and iTunes—were first reserved for computer screens, not only did new devices bring the content back to television screens but also the development of applications for smartphones and tablets brought it to handheld screens. Watching televisual content now no longer required the television set nor did it require a living room and a couch. Instead, a user can, for example, watch the latest episode of Breaking Bad on her smartphone during her commute home and, later, stream an episode of Glee on her laptop while lying in bed. The presence of more and more screens on which to access on-demand content, then, means that viewers are finding more opportunities to

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71 Edgerton, 419.
watch—and to personalize—that content. This strongly differs from the Network era, which was characterized by simultaneity and community: families across the country tuned in at the same time to watch the same content. The Digital era, instead, is characterized by fragmented audiences with highly specialized and sophisticated tastes watching content when and where they choose.

The Evolution of the Sitcom in the Digital Era

These changing conditions have clearly manifested in the sitcom. While traditional sitcoms can still be found,72 a recent shift in their content and form has taken place alongside the changes in media consumption and distribution. Comparing NBC’s lineup of 1985-1992, in which Cheers, The Cosby Show, Golden Girls, and Seinfeld dominated, to that of its 2005-2009 lineup, composed of such shows as My Name is Earl, 30 Rock, The Office, Scrubs, Parks and Recreation, and Community, reveals just such a genre shift. While the programs in the 1985-1992 lineup contain many of the cues of the sitcom in the Network era (live studio audiences, multicam cinematography, the primacy of the living space), those of the 2005-2009 lineup all but ignore those cues. With the fin-syn model no longer exerting such a stranglehold on creative innovation and with the rise of viewers streaming and downloading on-demand media on portable screens, the sitcom has responded both through its content and form.

72 These are found primarily on CBS with Two and a Half Men, The Big Bang Theory, and the recently canceled Two Broke Girls.
In response to the on-demand model’s disruption of “safe” programming practices, the “HBO effect,” and the ability for viewers to timeshift, many of these new sitcoms feature more unconventional and complex story lines and narratives. They include an expanded number of main characters, each with their own complicated plot line and/or extended story arcs and jokes that span not only multiple episodes but also multiple seasons. For example, Arrested Development features nine primary characters, each a member of the Bluth family (one by marriage) and each the protagonist of their own plot lines, which occur in a quickly rotating, interwoven order. These subplots also interconnect with larger plot lines, such as George, Sr., the family patriarch, and his thwarting of federal prosecution and George Michael (the grandson of George, Sr.) and his hidden love for his cousin, Maeby. The recurring jokes and gags, furthermore, are so extensive that a whole website (recurringdevelopments.com) is devoted to tracking each joke’s and gag’s occurrence in each episode. These subtleties and complexities would have been unfeasible in the Network era—especially for a show that only enjoyed a three-season network run (and a fourth on Netflix)—but thanks to DVRs and broadband channels Hulu and Netflix, viewers can repeatedly “binge” on episodes, taking notes and picking up on a slew of interrelated references.

Besides influencing the structure and content of a sitcom’s narrative, timeshifting and placeshifting have also affected audiences’ engagement with the traditional formal cues of the genre. The laugh track, the multicam cinematography, the centralization of the couch, the three-walled set: all of these were cues that quickly signaled to viewers that what they were watching was a sitcom. But these are cues of a
certain type. Brett Mills, drawing on the work of anthropologists, offers this helpful distinction: *setting-specific* cues occur when no pre-established relationship exists between the joker (or joking text) and the audience, while *category-routinized* cues occur when such relationships do exist. The cues of the Network era were primarily *setting specific*. This was especially necessary during the early years of television when the sitcom as a genre was settling into a set of constraints. Before there were on-screen guides or DVD menus or apps that clued viewers in to what genre they might be watching, the cues of a studio audience laughing, a central couch, and the cross-cutting of multicam cinematography was quick shorthand. Since no pre-established relationship between the program and the viewer existed, the cues helped to ensure the text was read as humorous. But in the Digital era, audiences no longer depend on such cues to make sense of the genre. They now not only can quickly and easily identify what they are watching via the extra-textual cues of on-screen guides, etc., but also have been exposed to and can access so many traditional sitcoms in the ever-expanding digital online libraries that there are few generic “surprises.”

These conditions prioritize category-routinized cues. Audiences who have previously encountered the text or elements of the text often are the only ones who can “pick up” on this type of cue, and with the screening of each new episode, are rewarded again and again for their familiarity with it. In other words, it is the “inside joke”—such as all the subtle references, gags, and jokes found on *Arrested Development* and charted on recurringdevelopments.com—that gains prominence in these new sitcoms, while

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73 Mills, 95.
setting-specific cues are almost nearly absent. The shift to category-routinized cues implies a shift in what audience the show is appealing to: the viewers that timeshift their viewing patterns, that watch a slew of episodes, one after the other, that have Netflix or Hulu or an iTunes account and have a sophisticated understanding of filmic and televisual tropes are the ones who are more likely to read the category-routinized cues. Viewers expecting the setting-specific cues of the traditional sitcom, on the other hand, might be confused and alienated by sitcoms that omit such cues. *Parks and Recreation, My Name is Earl, The Office, Community, Scrubs, Louie, It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia, Ugly Betty,* etc. are all sitcoms that have abandoned either some or most of the traditional sitcom cues, and run the risk of distancing these audiences.

However, while these shows may have abandoned setting-specific cues, their use of category-routinized cues does follow a certain tendency: self-consciousness of form. Either through cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, or the narrative itself, many of them signal their funniness by directly acknowledging their textuality, their very constructedness. This may consist of characters breaking the fourth wall by addressing the camera (and audience), narratives playing with temporal structure (flashforwards, flashbacks) and commenting on that structure, or references to other texts, tropes, formulas—or even its own tropes and formulas. The American version of *The Office* serves as a helpful illustration: the mockumentary aesthetics of the show comprise both action/dialogue sequences and “talking head” interview sequences, but also includes
such humorous visual moments as “candid” shots—views through windows or from behind various other obstructions that catch the cast of characters in compromising or secretive situations—and covert glances, in which a character peripheral to the main action will share a quick look of disbelief or exasperation with the camera. For example, one of the main protagonists, Jim Halpert, will often sneak incredulous glances at the camera as if he’s in cahoots with viewers at home, nudging them and saying, “Can you believe this is happening?” The self-consciousness of form here is multi-layered. By first emulating documentary conventions, The Office is referencing another genre’s tropes; by breaking the fourth wall, the characters draw the audience’s attention to the apparatus itself. Of course, these constraints are so ingrained, they no longer need reinforcing; their purpose is not to help viewers recognize the show’s generic affiliation—in fact, they do quite the opposite; unfamiliar viewers might be momentarily “tricked” into thinking they’re watching a documentary. Rather, it is a push toward a new set of constraints that emphasizes the inside joke. Their purpose is to reinforce a viewer’s familiarity with The Office’s joking structure. That is, the cues reward viewers who already have strong ties to the show and who recognize the funniness of such moments.

Unlike setting-specific cues that remain constant within a genre, category-routinized cues can fluctuate from situation to situation—or show to show—hence it is more fitting to call this self-consciousness of form a “tendency” rather than a well-defined category. Therefore, while The Office is a mockumentary and often breaks the

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74 Savorrelli, 67.
fourth wall, *Arrested Development*’s self-consciousness of form is very different. Rather than emulating the documentary, the show emulates the aesthetics of reality shows, or, as the series’ cinematographer, James Hawkinson, describes it, the *cinema vérité* style.\(^7\)

*Arrested Development* also employs unconventional visual gags such as its use of the zoom: a shot begins with a medium shot of two characters discussing a third character, often in unfavorable terms; the camera then zooms out to reveal that the third character is actually present though hopelessly oblivious to the conversation. *Scrubs*’ self-consciousness also differs: the main protagonist, J.D., will not only occasionally break the fourth wall, speaking directly to the camera but also, in a few episodes, overtly reference the very conventions the program refutes. An example of this is can be found in “My Life in Four Cameras” (season 4, episode 17). When J.D. discovers he is treating a former writer of *Cheers*, he begins imagining what his life would be like if it were a sitcom. And then the episode impersonates those very tropes the series has so clearly rejected: a laugh track, multiple cameras, high key lighting, etc.

To better understand how these category-routinized cues function, a closer look at one particular sitcom and its unique self-consciousness of form will reveal in more detail how the changes to viewership practices and the disruption of the fin-syn model ultimately affect the possibilities of the genre, the function of the cues, and the audience’s interaction with the text.

\(^7\)James Hawkinson, “Filmmaker’s Forum: Breaking Rules on *Arrested Development*,” *American Cinematographer* 85, no. 2 (2004): 107. There are, of course, similarities between documentary aesthetics and reality show aesthetics as Hawkinson’s “cinema vérité” reference indicates. But the expectations viewers bring to each are quite different: while the latter is often considered sensationalistic and motivated by pure entertainment, the former is considered one of the “sober discourses” and associated with education, cultural elitism, and seriousness.
CHAPTER III

CASE STUDY: 30 ROCK AND THE FLASHBACK

Tina Fey, moving on from her nine-year stint with Saturday Night Live (seven as its first female head writer), developed 30 Rock for NBC, with the first episode airing in October of 2006. The pilot episode sets up the ongoing premise of the series, namely that Liz Lemon (Fey), the head writer of the floundering The Girlie Show, a live, sketch comedy series on NBC, meets Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin), the new head of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming. In his effort to revamp the network’s offerings, Jack decides to make The Girlie Show more profitable by bringing in the outrageous and controversial Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan) and renaming the show, TGS with Tracy Jordan. This change not only threatens to usurp Liz’s autonomy but also infuriates Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski), the former “star” of the show and an insatiable narcissist, who feels as though the spotlight is being diverted to Tracy. To show her displeasure, she finds countless ways to act out, much to Liz’s chagrin. Further compounding this, Tracy himself is a self-absorbed, irrational buffoon who Liz also struggles to control. The central antagonisms are thus put into place: Jack versus Liz, Tracy versus Jenna, and Tracy-Jenna versus Liz. Of course, it isn’t so simple as that: as the series progresses, Jack and Liz develop a “mentor-mentee” relationship, with Jack helping Liz to refine her managerial skills and put her personal life in order and Liz helping Jack temper his devotion to corporate interests and develop functional relationships. Alliances between Jenna, Tracy, and Liz are also forged or dissolved, with
the antagonistic force shifting between the three characters, depending on an episode’s plot line.

Alongside these major characters and central antagonisms, 30 Rock’s rather large ensemble cast also consists of semi-regular characters such as TGS’s writers, Frank Rossitano, Toofer Spurlock, and J.D. Lutz (Judah Friedlander, Keith Powell, and John Lutz, respectively), and writer-and-occasional-cast-member, Josh Girard (Lonny Ross), the show’s producer, Pete Hornberger (Scott Adsit), Liz’s assistant, Cerie Xerox (Katrina Bowden), Tracy’s “entourage,” Walter “Dot Com” Slattery (Kevin Brown) and Warren “Grizz” Griswold (Grizz Chapman), and the NBC page, Kenneth Parcell (Jack McBrayer). Their story lines revolve around the conflicts of the major characters; though occasionally and temporarily, their story lines come to the foreground. Through this constellation of characters and conflicts, 30 Rock forged a strong following through the seven years of its run, winning an Emmy for outstanding comedy series for its first three seasons and receiving nominations for every other year.

Perhaps part of this may be attributed to one of the unique formal characteristics of the show that emerged in those first few seasons: the flashback. While not the first to use flashback for comedic ends, 30 Rock was one of the first to regularly use a flashback cut signaled with clear cues. The flashback cut is a rapid flashback, typically only lasting for 7-15 seconds. This is distinct from the prolonged flashback found on, say, How I Met Your Mother, where only the framing narrative occurs in the present.

76 Arrested Development, How I Met Your Mother, and Family Guy also make use of the flashback cut.
Much about 30 Rock’s narrative is still traditional. There is still the presence of a pseudo family, the roles each character plays easily equated with traditional family members. Jack is often configured as the patriarch, the father figure who swoops in to solve a crisis: in “Rosemary’s Baby” (season 2, episode 4), Jack, the voice of reason, advises Liz how best to manage her money and how to bring order back to TGS after she unwisely hires a guest writer. Liz is the at-times responsible mother-figure: in “Jackie Jomp-Jomp” (s3e18), after a suspension from work, Liz returns to scold her naughty pseudo-children, Tracy and Jenna, for the trouble they’ve caused in her absence, and in “Khonani” (s4e18), when Liz comes to the cast and writers’ rescue, Frank declares her their mother because she solves all their problems and doesn’t throw fun parties. And at other times, Liz is the kooky, misbehaving wife: in “The Problem Solvers” (s4e5) Jack offers to help Liz develop a new talk based on her recent book, but instead, Liz decides to explore other offers. Both realize, though, how much they want to work with each other, and in a closing scene reminiscent of two unrequited lovers finally confessing their feelings for each other, Liz and Jack fortuitously meet in Rockefeller Plaza and admit their wrongs. Tracy and Jenna are the squabbling children in constant competition with each other: in “Tracy Does Conan” (s1e7), Jenna is one-upped by Tracy when she is bumped from Conan and replaced with Tracy; in “Secrets and Lies” (s2e8), Tracy is jealous of Jenna’s award for her performance in Mystic Pizza: the Musical.

These characters fit traditional familial roles, of course, though they do so not by being those traditional characters but by performing those traditional roles. But even this kind of performative substitution wasn’t new with 30 Rock. Perhaps the most
famous example of familial role substitution was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*,\(^7\) which grafted the roles onto stock workplace characters—Mary Richards (Moore) as the warm mother figure, Lou Grant (Ed Asner) as the gruff father figure, Tex Baxter (Ted Knight) as the dim-witted and temperamental child. But while *30 Rock* still remains traditional in some respects, it is the presence of decidedly nontraditional elements and the absence of the setting-specific cues that mark it as a new sitcom.

It is in its visual elements that *30 Rock* most clearly abandons setting-specific cues. Like *Scrubs*, *30 Rock* employs a single camera rather then the multicam approach prevalent in traditional sitcoms, giving a polished, cinematic aesthetic. (In fact, the head cinematographer, Vanja Černjul, began in film.\(^8\)) The show’s single camera approach allows for easy cutting between multiple characters, sets, and locations. *30 Rock*’s large ensemble cast and numerous sets and locations makes this approach a necessity: the camera wanders from Liz’s office to the writers’ room to Jack’s office to Liz’s apartment to Kenneth’s page desk to Jenna’s and Tracy’s dressing rooms to Liz’s apartment to a myriad of other random locations called for by the narrative. The numerous locations and the large cast are yet another instance of the show abandoning the cues of the traditional sitcom. For *30 Rock* the camera isn’t confined to interior shots of three-walled sets. As the series’ name emphasizes, *TGS* is filmed in Rockefeller Center, the historic location of NBC’s East Coast studios. The Midtown Manhattan locale, then, is


\(^8\) John Silberg, “Laugh Factory,” *American Cinematographer* 89 no. 7 (2008), 64.
almost a character in its own right, with many exterior shots included throughout the show’s run. Indeed, the pilot opens with Liz buying a hot dog in the plaza, and, in season two, one of Jack’s greatest failures is a fireworks show around the building not long after September 11.

Besides freedom of movement, the post-production editing of the single camera technique also enables *30 Rock* to move through time, particularly through the flashback. Unlike *Arrested Development*, in which the flashback appears only sporadically, the flashback of *30 Rock* is a visual staple, occurring at least once in nearly every episode and as often as seven times. These flashbacks become a consistent element of *30 Rock*’s structure, a type of cue that viewers familiar with the series easily “pick up” on, a category-routinized cue. To better understand how this rhetorical feature works and the purposes it serves, in what follows, I’ll chart the evolution of the flashback cue and the visual and auditory elements that signal its start and end, and the stable form those elements ultimately take.

Perhaps because the new sitcoms were evolving alongside the evolving conditions of production, distribution, and consumption of televsual content, *30 Rock* likewise evolved its use of category-routinized cues. This can be seen in the development of the flashback’s form. Though the flashback is present from *30 Rock*’s beginnings, the transitions into and out of those flashbacks remain inconsistent until the third season. Starting with the first seven episodes, flashbacks are only signaled by a straight cut with no aural or visual effects. The very first flashback in the pilot episode, for example, cuts from Jack’s office, where Jack explains to Liz and Pete that “Tracy’s
had his problems in the past,” to simulated local news footage (the NBC peacock logo and the headline, “BREAKING NEWS: TRACY JORDAN ON THE 405” appears on a news ticker across the bottom of the screen). The flashback shows Tracy running down an interstate in his underwear, holding a light saber and screaming, “I am a Jedi! I am a Jedi!” Another straight cut brings the viewer back to Jack’s office as he utters the line, “The important thing to remember is that [Tracy] was never charged with a crime. It’s not illegal to fall asleep on your neighbor’s roof.” Perhaps because these straight cuts into and out of the flashback are so subtle, the aesthetic of the flashbacks themselves are oftentimes explicitly different than that of the scene they interject. The grainy footage of the “newscast” and the ticker at the bottom of the screen in this case are in clear contrast to the crisp, naturally lit scene of Jack’s office. Again, in “Jack-tor” (s1e5), a flashback to Jack’s childhood emulates the shaky, amateur footage of a super-8 home movie, clearly distinguishing it from the smooth, cinematic footage of the primary narrative.

As the series progresses into the latter half of the first season and into the second, the simple cut becomes rarer and rarer, replaced with such dynamic cues as dissolves (“Greenzo”), tilts (“MILF Island”), and, even more abundantly, various forms of the wipe. Because they occur with some profusion, I’ll elaborate on a few to illustrate the diversity of their form. In “The C Word” (s1e14), the shift from Liz chatting with Pete and Frank is signaled with a barn door wipe: i.e., the wipe begins on both sides of the screen and moves toward the center, until the two edges meet and “flip” the frame. In the same flashback (it’s composed of multiple scenes), a wipe in the form of the hands
of a clock rotate around until the scene transitions into the next (this occurs twice). In “The Collection” (s2e3), a shot of Jenna telling Liz about a new perfume she’s promoting transitions to mock footage of Jenna’s perfume commercial through a circular wipe. Because they draw such attention to themselves, such wipes today are mostly uncommon in televisual and filmic texts (and perhaps because they are so uncommon, they call especial attention to themselves as a transition); however, they were abundantly used in the silent film era and, during the sound era, in serials, low-budget thrillers, and promotional trailers.79

By late in the third season, the transition seems to have become less important than the content of the flashback, and so for the rest of the series’ run, the transitions into and out of the flashback stabilize and become uniform: a rapid pan to the right or to the left—so fast that the frame blurs—accompanied by a pronounced “woosh.”80 For example, in “Retreat to Move Forward” (s3e9), after Liz tells Jack how she and Jenna used to perform at corporate retreats when they were a part of an improv troupe, the camera rapidly pans to the left, blurring the frame and masking the cut to a shot of a man on a stage at the retreat announcing Liz and Jenna’s performance. As the flashback draws to a close, the camera rapidly pans to the right, blurring the frame again and masking the cut back to present-day Liz. As this example shows, the movement of the pans are typically mirrored—panning in one direction at the start of the flashback and then, at its conclusion, panning in the opposite direction. While the cuts from one shot

80 This transition does appear sporadically in the first season; the scene described in the opening of this thesis marks its first appearance.
to the other are masked by the blur of the pans, the transitions very much call attention
to themselves. Rather than use a soft dissolve that might subtly waft the flashback into
the present moment of the narrative, the flashbacks of 30 Rock are obvious stutters to
the narrative flow. They interrupt. The audience, in the midst of understanding the
interaction between Liz and Jack in the present moment, is suddenly thrown into
reverse, quickly transported to the past, and then just as rapidly shifted into first gear
again and whisked back to the present moment. Through this process, the viewer “is
made aware of the threshold and the process of transversing it”;
the divide between past and present is made vigorously obvious. And the sound effect complements the
transition as well, the “woosh” an exaggerated sound of an object rushing past, as
though the movement of the camera’s pan is so fast, the air streams past.

Sometimes, too, a flash of light can either occur at the beginning or end of the
pan or in lieu of the pan. An example of the latter can be seen in “Christmas Special”
(s3e6): after Jack explains to Liz why he’s avoiding his mother who’s come to stay with
him after he accidentally hit her with his car, a woosh and a flash of light cuts to Jack’s
living room where his mother, Colleen is lying on the couch, cruelly—though
hilariously—battering him. At the conclusion of the flashback, another woosh a flash of
light brings the viewer back to present-day Jack. This flash of light can also occur with
the pan and the woosh: in “Flu Shot” (s3e8), Liz warns Kenneth not to get her sick
before her big vacation. The woosh, rapid pan to the left, and flash of light transport the
viewer to a scene of Liz sitting in a beach recliner, reading a book, licking an ice cream

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81 Maureen Turim, Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History (New York: Routledge, 1989), 16.
cone, and wearing sandals and socks. A woosh and a flash of light conclude the flashback and return the viewer to the present. As this last example shows, there doesn’t seem to be any logical motivation behind the use of the flash of light: while a flash of light was combined with the woosh and the pan for the transition into the flashback, only the woosh and the flash of light are used for the transition out of it. Unlike the pan, which almost always bookends the flashback, the flash of light is less consistent. But while these elements may fluctuate, what remains consistent is that these wooshes, pans, and flashes of light call attention to themselves, building an audience’s familiarity with \textit{30 Rock}’s use of flashback. In other words, they reinforce the \textit{routine} of category-routinized cues.

So routine are the wooshes, the pans, the flashes of light, that even when \textit{30 Rock} experimented with the production of the show, writers and producers worked hard to maintain the woosh and the pan. In both season five and six, Fey returned to the very roots of television itself and to her \textit{Saturday Night Live} beginnings by broadcasting live shows. Season five’s “Live Show” and season six’s “Live from Studio 6H,” were shot live twice for both an East Coast and West Coast airing. In the season five episode, while Liz chats with Jack in his office, a flashback is inserted. Rather than a pan inserted during post-production as is typical of the filmed show, the camera quickly spins to the right, blurring the shot and allowing for a camouflaged cut to another camera, also in the process of spinning. A woosh also accompanies the spins. The camera abruptly stops on Liz (here played by Julia Louis Dreyfus) and Frank chatting in the \textit{TGS} backstage hallway. At the flashback’s conclusion, another woosh and spin brings the viewer back to Jack,
who asks Liz-as-Fey, “Why are you better looking in your memory?” Only a minute later, another flashback occurs, and the strain of maintaining the visual and auditory initiating elements can be seen: in the East Coast broadcast, the initiating spin accidentally and momentarily stops on another camera and its operator, revealing how tricky live broadcast can be. Rather than splice in the blur of the pan, shooting the show live required the show’s producers to improvise with spinning cameras, an improvisation that led to errors. Indeed, another error is found in the East Coast taping of “Live from Studio 6H”: one of the final flashbacks is missing its opening woosh (which has been used for all other initiating transitions and for this flashback’s closing transition). This effort to construct a flashback in real-time, which requires tricky in-camera editing, timed sound effects, and the use of other actors to stand in for various characters, reveals 30 Rock’s commitment to the category-routinized cue of the flashback, a commitment that extends even to reconstructing its complicated visual and aural elements for difficult production situations.

While the formal components of the flashbacks clearly reinforce the significance of the category-routinized cue, the content of those flashbacks also raises questions that suggest flashbacks are significant beyond their formal curiosity. Take, for example, the scene between Frank and Dreyfus-as-Liz in the flashback in “Live Show.” Because the show was live, Liz in the present couldn’t also be the Liz of the past, so producers recruited Dreyfus as a stand-in. And promptly, the show acknowledges this with Frank’s comment, “Hey, looking good, Liz!” Even after the flashback, when the viewer is returned to Jack and Fey-as-Liz, Jack asks, “Why are you better looking in your
memory?” to which Liz responds, “My memory has Seinfeld money,” a winking reference to Dreyfus’s turn as Elaine Benes on that hit NBC show. And just like the use of Dreyfus to put “Liz” in two places at once, in the season six live episode, one of Jack’s flashbacks features a handsome, well-toned, shirtless young man. These “better looking” selves in the flashbacks and 30 Rock’s pointed reference to them lead the audience to ask: are these flashbacks functioning to reveal the infallibility of memory? Are they there to call attention to the constructedness of narrative itself? Or, at the most general, what purpose does flashback serve in 30 Rock?

Closely reading the show’s numerous flashbacks indicates that the answer to this last question is threefold. First, flashbacks invoke the phenomenon of memory, and they do so in two ways: subjectively (the memory belongs to a character within the narrative) and objectively (the memory is attached to no single character and as a result seems authoritative, as though inscribed by an invisible authorial hand). Second, flashbacks can be either internal (returning to a past that remains within the temporal space of the episode’s narrative) or external (returning to an earlier point before the series’ narrative). Third, they can either be contextual (so the audience better understands the plot or a joke) or intertextual (as mentioned earlier, displaying a self-consciousness of form). Thus, to better understand how flashback is evolving as a new constraint and how it works in 30 Rock and ultimately the effects it has on audiences, I will look at each of these categories in more detail using a few flashbacks occurring throughout the series’ run as illustration.
The first way of thinking about 30 Rock’s flashbacks is by considering the question: to whom do the flashbacks belong? One answer is: the characters within the episode. The kind of flashback that inserts viewers into the perspective of a character I will call the *subjective* flashback. In such flashbacks, the dialogue, the narrative, and/or the camera indicate to the viewer that a particular character is the source of the flashback, and thus, it is his or her psychical space to which the viewer is made privy. For example, in “Jackie Jormp-Jomp” (s3e18), Kenneth admits he has a crush on one of the TGS dancers: “When I watch her dance, my heart skips a beat. And not because of my acute ventralitis.” A woosh and pan to the right brings the viewer to a shot of a woman dancing; she looks off to camera right, smiling. An object is blurred in the frame’s foreground, obscuring the shot slightly, and the angle is lower, as if she is on the raised stage, all of which imply that this is seen from Kenneth’s point of view. In this case, both Kenneth’s dialogue telling the audience that he watches her dance and the camera’s subjective angle indicate that Kenneth is the initiator and the agent of the flashback, that this is Kenneth’s memory the viewer is glimpsing.\(^{82}\)

Although Kenneth’s flashback is marked as his by the camera’s use of his point of view, the flashback needn’t take such a perspective to indicate its subjectivity. It can just as effectively represent a character’s memory even if the character himself or herself

\(^{82}\) Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1978), 8. Kawin defines this perspective as the “imitative angle”; it can be likened to what the character’s physical eye sees and is used to “achieve momentary identification between character and audience, or for shock effects,” and, because of technical reasons, is used sparingly.
appears in the flashback.\textsuperscript{83} In “The Break Up” (s1e8) Liz defends her on-and-off-again boyfriend, Dennis, against Jenna’s criticisms. The woosh and pan brings the viewer to a collection of these “good” moments: Dennis entering Liz’s apartment and proclaiming, “Hey, I’ve got donuts”; Liz coming home to Dennis offering her a freshly cooked pot of chili; Dennis waking Liz in the middle of the night to see if she wants to order cheesesteaks. A final pan and woosh returns the viewer back to Liz who mutters, “I guess [the good moments] were mostly food-related.” Here, Liz’s first line initiates the flashback and the camera centers on her face, followed by the pan and woosh, indicating the viewer’s entrance into her memory space. Interestingly, we can still see Liz despite the fact that what we are viewing are her memories and, thus, might expect to see \textit{through her eyes}, not to see \textit{her} through \textit{other} eyes. But while the audience is not looking through the eyes of Liz, she is the author of the flashback. The structure of the shots aligns the audience’s (literal) view with Liz’s (figurative) view: after Dennis walks in the door with the donuts, an eye-line match-cut reveals a reaction shot of Liz smiling with anticipation—the preceding shot showed viewers what Liz saw, and the subsequent shot shows how she envisions herself. This shot/reverse-shot technique cues the audience to the subjectivity of the flashback because it calls attention to the shift in perspective that occurs in the cut and, in doing so, foregrounds perspective-shifting as such.

\textsuperscript{83} But as Kawin notes, “When the image-maker appears within the field, the audience understands that this is [the image maker’s] imagined self-portrait” (12-13).
Some flashbacks, however, are never linked to any particular character. Instead, they appear to represent a kind of neutral, omniscient perspective, a perspective that does not align with any character who appears in the narrative. I adapt the term *objective flashback* to describe this type. In the episode “Fireworks” (s1e18), for example, Tracy insists, after learning from a DNA test that he is mostly white, that he “can’t be white. My whole persona is based on an in-depth analysis of the differences between black and white.” A woosh and a pan to the right transitions from Tracy’s dressing room to a comedy club where he performs his stand-up routine. His hairstyle is dated, and he explains the difference between “how black people dial the phone” and “how white people dial” (the former involves dialing with a kind of syncopated rhythm). The camera is embedded in the audience; the heads of audience members partially block the view. Then, another woosh and a pan to the left transition back to present-day Tracy. The point of this flashback is to illustrate for *30 Rock*’s viewers what Tracy means by his claim about the basis of his “whole persona.” Unlike Kenneth’s flashback I describe earlier, where Kenneth doesn’t even appear in the scene, the flashback to Tracy’s stand-up routine is solely a shot of Tracy. And although Liz appears in her recollection of Dennis, there are significant differences between her flashback and

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84 David Bordwell, “Grandmaster Flashback,” *Observations on Film Art* (blog), Jan. 27, 2009, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2009/01/27/grandmaster-flashback/. Bordwell describes objective flashbacks as belonging to an “impersonal narrating authority” because they are often signaled with a voice-of-god narrator or with a title indicating a previous date. In other words, flashbacks initiated by a disembodied voiceover or titles are authored by an omniscient agent. As described earlier, this is seen in *Arrested Development* and the show’s omniscient narrator, who frequently initiates the flashbacks. His voice leads the viewer into the memory—what might be seen as his omniscient, accurate memory—of an event that contradicts another character’s memory, words, or actions. His memories are unimpeachable, the truth against which other characters’ faulty memories are measured. In *30 Rock*, there is no such voiceover, but objective flashbacks can still be found when no dialogue or cinematography links the flashback to a particular character.
Tracy’s. No eye-line match-cut marks this flashback as Tracy’s, as the technique did for Liz. And moreover, there is no reverse-shot from Tracy’s perspective on the comedy club’s stage. This flashback to Tracy’s on-stage persona is meant to be understood as objective—an impartial, omniscient return to a past moment.

This past moment is important because it helps viewers understand Tracy’s reference to his work in stand-up; the flashback illustrates this kind of work and provides an opportunity to add humor. Most objective flashbacks function this way—as a way of providing background for jokes. Moreover, most flashbacks on 30 Rock serve this function of giving the audience insight into the past so that they can better understand the narrative’s present. What the flashbacks reveal about the present, however, changes with the perspective featured in the flashback. For the objective flashback, viewers are often placed in a position of privilege, meaning that they see information other characters in the scene do not see. For the subjective contextualizing flashback, typically both the audience and characters in the scene are granted access to the information—or, since the subject already had access to the context disclosed in his or her flashback, the audience simply gains access to information the subject already possessed.

Context flashbacks can be found throughout film and television history; they are a useful device to dramatize the narrative structure and to offer a helpful clue to solve a “mystery” set up within the narrative. Take for example the classic Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944), whose opening scene sets up the “mystery” of Walter Neff, insurance salesman, and the confession he records for his boss. While it seems as though the mystery is “solved” in these first few moments (he confesses to a murder in the first few minutes of the film, after all), the narrative sets up another mystery: who is Walter Neff and why would he kill someone? “It all began last May,” says Walter into a dictophone, as a dissolve transports the viewer to the past, to a flashback that will make up nearly the entirety of the film and that will provide all the context needed to solve the mystery. In 30 Rock, the use of flashback, though frequent, is always brief.
For example, consider the objective-contextual flashback in “The Break-Up” (s1e8), where Toofer chastises Tracy for dressing in drag for a TGS sketch. Toofer insists that such dress furthers derogatory representations of African Americans. "We never would have stooped so low on Black Frasier," he points out. Confused, Josh chimes in, “Black Frasier?” A straight cut transitions to “footage” from the fictional series, with the set from the actual NBC sitcom, Frasier, projected on a green screen behind two actors, a middle-aged black man and an elderly black man. A jazzy tune similar to the theme music of Frasier plays. Another black man resembling Kelsey Grammer’s Frasier enters and says, in a way reminiscent of Grammer’s snooty intonation, "Niles, this beaumolais is impeccable. It's both fruity and and precocious,” to which his father replies (imitating the surliness of Frasier's father, Martin Crane, played by John Mahoney), "That's not the only thing around here that’s fruity and precocious." With this line, studio laughter and applause erupts (the embedded sitcom’s laugh track), and a reaction shot of both black Frasier and Niles shows them rolling their eyes at their father’s ignorant, homophobic comment. A straight cut returns to Josh, still confused, who says, "I never heard of Black Frasier."

Because Black Frasier never really existed, the audience needs the “footage” to understand what Toofer is referring to. The flashback supplies that missing information; as the “footage” plays, the audience sees the very thing he mentions: a nearly exact copy of Frasier populated with black actors. The audience now has all the missing “clues”; it better understands the present moment (Toofer and Tracy’s views on representations of race) through the help of a past moment. Further, the audience gains
access to this information at the same time it recognizes that other characters do not: though viewers see the “footage,” Josh is left out. In addition to supplying information necessary to make sense of the characters (and their references) in the narrative proper, then, the flashback makes viewers aware of the relative privilege of their perspective.

By contrast, the subjective-contextual flashback formally appears in the narrative not as a glimpse of lost “footage” but as a glimpse into a character’s psyche or experience, a way to see a privileged subjective perspective that other characters can only hear. In “Fireworks”(s1e18), Jack tasks his assistant, Jonathan, with spying on the new upstart executive, Devin Banks, who’s hot for Jack’s job. Jonathan runs up to Jack in the halls of 30 Rock to report his findings: “As instructed, I was spying on Mr. Banks. And there's something you should know...” A woosh and a pan transitions to past-Jonathan lurking in a different hallway of 30 Rock; he rounds a corner to find that Devin has pinned Kenneth against a wall.

**Devin:** [Flirtatiously] So, what team do you play for?

**Kenneth:** [Confused but affable] Oh, it's not really a team. It's just a bunch of guys who like to do gymnastics.

**Devin:** You know, I'm gonna be in town for a little while. Maybe we could... get together [he brushes Kenneth's hair out of his eyes].

**Kenneth:** My, you’re friendly!

A pan and a woosh returns the viewer to Jack, who, in surprise, says, “Good God! Devin is gay. He’s even more powerful than I thought.” The dialogue that initiated the
flashback, Jonathan’s line, “And there’s something you should know...,” trailed off so that instead of listening to him tell the rest of the story, the audience gets to see what he saw. The content of the flashback serves as a more interesting way to provide the audience with important plot details, a way to exploit television’s visual storytelling capabilities. But it’s more than this: while the audience can see the flashback, the other characters are excluded from “seeing” it. As the woosh and pan transport the viewer to the scene of Jonathan running through the halls and eavesdropping on Devin and Kenneth, Jack stays behind and hears Jonathan relate the events the audience sees. And yet, unlike Josh in the Black Frasier example, Jack is still “in” on the story; he is not left baffled and ignored. Where the objective-contextual flashback excludes Josh, the subjective-contextual flashback includes Jack.

This inclusion/exclusion brings my discussion back to one of the important characteristics of the category-routinized cue: the reinforcement of a viewer’s familiarity with a text’s joking structure. For those faithful audience members who are familiar with 30 Rock’s consistent use of the flashback, they are just like Jack, “in” on the cues and, therefore, better equipped to receive the show’s humor. On the other hand, for those audience members looking for setting-specific cues, of laughter from a studio audience or the theatricality of a three-walled set, they are like Josh, hopelessly on the “outs.” Of course, my point here is not that the Black Frasier flashback is not functioning as a category-routinized cue; indeed, it is. My point more so is that the nature of the cues manifest in the narratives themselves. Just as 30 Rock sets up privileged perspectives, so too do the cues reinforce the privileged perspective of an audience.
versed in the comedic structure of the show. Alongside this demarcation of a boundary that decides who’s in or out, the category-routinized cue of the flashback also is characterized by a secondary intertextual function, an intertextuality built upon the countless references 30 Rock makes to other textual formulas, tropes, and styles.

That is because the show consistently demands its audience be familiar with a large store of televisual and filmic tropes. Such a familiarity—a media literacy—places audience members, once again, firmly “in” on the jokes. Take, for example, “Flu Shot” (s3e8), in which one of its flashbacks draws on a convention found in numerous romantic comedies: the dressing room montage. Flustered by a stressful day, Liz encounters Tracy and Jenna returning from a shopping adventure together and asks, “Where have you guys been?” Tracy responds: “We were out shopping together. We had fun, though,” and a woosh and a pan to the left bring the viewer to Tracy throwing open the curtains of a dressing room, dressed in a fancy blazer and snazzy fedora, with ZZ Top’s “Sharp Dressed Man” breaking onto the soundtrack. Suddenly, present- Liz interrupts the flashback (and ZZ Top) with: “Yeah, I get it, you went shopping. I don’t need the montage.” Liz’s interruption announces the intertextuality of this flashback. By disrupting the flashback, Liz indicates her familiarity with the conventions of such a montage. By referring to it as “montage” (rather than just an event or a memory), Liz reveals that she doesn’t need to see it because her familiarity with the convention allows her to anticipate its contents. She even registers her boredom with such a convention. Rather than play by the diegetic rules—rules that, by all rights, should exclude Liz from seeing the montage (the same rules that excluded Jack from seeing the
flashback initiated by Jonathan), and more logically allow her only to listen to the details of Tracy and Jenna’s shopping trip—the episode permits Liz a moment of metacommentary on the show’s attempt to use the montage, and even allows her to reject it. This self-consciousness of form, this winking reference to a visual convention of comedy also draws the audience’s attention to the convention as well. Her pointed reference to the montage makes it impossible to ignore.

The intertextuality, therefore, does not consist simply of Liz’s recognition of the conventionality of the flashback; it consists also of the assumption that the audience is aware of the convention too. Both Liz’s observation that it is a “montage” and the content of that montage flashback build on an audience’s familiarity with the convention of the dressing room montage. Such montages are typically found in romantic comedies and were established with Gold Diggers of 1935 (Berkeley, 1935) and National Lampoon’s European Vacation (Heckerling, 1985), and made particularly infamous by Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990)—later parodied in Dumb and Dumber (Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 1994). It features a character extravagantly shopping, trying on clothes, popping out of dressing rooms, every time in a different outfit, actions all accompanied by a particularly fitting song (such as Roy Orbison’s “Pretty Woman” in the last two examples). If the audience picks up on the flashback’s reference—it’s quoting—of these other texts, then they will be “in” on the joke, but they also will likely be rolling their eyes just like Liz at its conventionality.

Because the montage featured in this 30 Rock episode is not paying homage to the trope; it is expressing boredom with the trope. While an homage celebrates another
text by quoting it reverentially, in the example here, the text quoted is treated not with reverence but with frustration, so much so that the show itself calls an end to the montage (an exasperated Liz’s interrupting—or, perhaps better, quashing—the flashback with “I don’t need the montage”). It is this weariness that further characterizes the category-routinized cue of the 30 Rock flashback: not only does it signal to those who are “in” over those who are “out” (viewers familiar with the dressing room montage convention versus those who aren’t), but it also signals how intertextual references should be read (as overused and boring) and how the audience should react to them (with frustration).

This intertextuality runs through numerous flashbacks. The joke about Black Frasier, for example, depends upon an assumption that the audience has some familiarity with the actual NBC sitcom Frasier, which ran from 1993-2004. The joke works only because viewers recognize it as a smirking reference to the real sitcom that derived much of its humor from the juxtaposition of the culturally elite protagonist and his brother against their blue-collar father. The audience recognizes Toofer as motivated by the same desire for cultural distinction that characterized the Crane brothers. Although he frames his own superiority to Tracy as a matter of respectability, the flashback’s representation of Toofer’s tastes reveals them to be less about respectability than pretention to bourgeois status. In fact, the flashback reveals Toofer’s judgment of Tracy to be hypocrisy, since his criticism is that Tracy has somehow demeaned African American culture, while it becomes clear that Toofer’s visions of African American culture is of a culture imitative of the white bourgeoisie. 30 Rock’s exposure of Toofer’s
hypocrisy and, hence, of the very hollowness of his condescension toward Tracy is built on requiring its audience to recall its knowledge of Frasier and to recall a certain tiredness with that show’s humor.

In a particularly telling moment, 30 Rock even puts its very use of flashback under scrutiny as a way to critique that particular comedic convention. In this way, 30 Rock grants itself some immunity from self-rebuke by showing that it is self-aware enough to critique its use of those conventions. In “Klaus and Greta” (s4e9), as the four main characters return from their holidays, each character, via flashback, fills in the details of his or her vacation: Jack and his malodorous run in with spoiled, ancient wine; Liz and her drunken proclamation of her cousin’s homosexuality; Jenna and her encounter with James Franco’s publicist; and Tracy and his efforts to impregnate his wife. Of these flashbacks, the first three (Jack’s, Liz’s, and Jenna’s) function only as context, as a way for the audience to see what the characters only hear. But in the final flashback, the function shifts. The four characters, having piled into an elevator, listen to Tracy retell his holiday adventures: “My wife and I are trying for a daughter, and on New Year’s eve, I think I got Angie pregnant.” A woosh and a pan to the right, and then, quickly, another woosh and a pan to the left returns the viewer back to the elevator, where Jenna, Liz, and Jack all yell, “No, no, no, no!” to which Tracy responds: “Okay, but I was gonna describe it real good.”

As in the shopping montage, the flashback here is interrupted; the woosh and pan begins the transport to the past, but the adamant yells from the other characters reverses the trip, returning the viewer, with another woosh and pan, back to the
elevator. Even though Tracy’s flashback never gets an opportunity to run its course, the wooshes and pans still function as category-routinized cues that signal to audiences familiar with the show’s unique comedic structure that this moment—however brief it may be—should be read as humorous. In other words, the interrupted flashback still serves to mark who’s “in” on the joke, and who’s “out.” Furthermore, just as the dressing room montage flashback references other texts, so too does Tracy’s, albeit in a much more sophisticated way. Rather than referencing outside texts, the flashback is referencing its own textuality, its own constructedness, its own consistent use of flashback. And this acknowledgement is not done to simply exhibit the show’s ingenuity of form. Just as the dressing room montage and the Black Frasier flashbacks don’t simply pay an homage to other texts, neither is this the case here: this fourth flashback goes too far—or at least it would if it was allowed to continue, and just like Liz’s exasperated interruption to Tracy’s dressing room montage, everyone in the elevator abruptly puts an end to Tracy’s flashback, in this case, out of disgust.

*30 Rock*, through its flashbacks, is first demarcating who’s “in” on the joke and who is “out,” but while that may seem exclusionary, given the changing ways people consume their media, how the old distribution models are being disrupted, this boundary is far more inclusive than exclusive. In fact, many sitcoms are safely making the assumption that their audiences have grown bored with the conventions—the setting-specific cues—of the traditional sitcom. *30 Rock* makes that same assumption. With numerous jokes and gags that reference other filmic and televisual texts, *30 Rock* assumes its viewers are steeped in knowledge of these texts and rewards them for this
knowledge. But this alone isn’t what distinguishes 30 Rock’s particular take on intertextual flashback. Rather than only referencing other texts and rewarding viewers, it points to the inadequacy, the exhaustion, of such tropes and conventions and, instead, mines that exhaustion for humor. But while this helps to explain how 30 Rock performs this intertextuality, it doesn’t quite account for the why. Therefore, in the final section of this thesis, I will offer one possible explanation by examining the relationship between intertextuality, rhetoric, and the commonplaces.

As already discussed, the sitcom faces new challenges in the Digital era. As a moment marked by fragmentation and convergence, the Digital era is changing the viewing experience: with ever larger stores of televisual and filmic texts made available to viewers and more and more screens on which to watch those texts, sitcoms and their audiences are shifting. Viewers now possess an increasingly sophisticated media literacy, a literacy that demands innovation. And the genre is responding: its once reliable and familiar aesthetic and comedic conventions—its reliance on setting-specific cues—are disappearing, replaced by the various category-routinized cues that appeal to timeshifting viewers who “binge” on a string of episodes and who can pick up on more subtle and sophisticated jokes and formal elements, elements that often function intertextually. As my look at 30 Rock has revealed, though, these cues are doing more than quote, appropriate, or reference other texts; they are also critiquing this very quoting, appropriating, and referencing, and in so doing, are renegotiating the role of intertextuality in the sitcom. For 30 Rock and the New Sitcom, intertextuality is not only
a means of invention but also a critical lens through which an audience re-examines their understanding of the genre.

As I have shown, the sitcom can be seen as an intertext. Since, as rhetoric scholars Jamieson and Cambell, Bawarshi, and Porter (among others) point out, no text emerges from nothing (it begins in medias res, in the midst of things), so too is this true for the sitcom: from radio, the domestic narratives, the 30-minute run time; from theater, the arrangement of space, the staging of action, the live audience. These previous media—these textual forms—provided a stock from which sitcom creators could draw to help them shape the emerging genre. In other words, they invented intertextually. And as time went on, the stock became larger and larger, filled with the elements, the cues, that came to distinguish the sitcom from other television genres: there were recurring character “types,” mundane and easily solved conflicts, countless living rooms (and eventually living spaces), multicam cinematography, perfectly timed laugh tracks. Now sitcom creators invented new sitcoms based on these previous elements, repurposing and reconfiguring the successful textual elements found in other sitcoms to create yet more sitcoms, solidifying cues until they become recognizable by audiences. Once again, intertextuality shaped the invention strategies of sitcom creators. At its best, this invention did more than simply reuse the elements; it reconfigured them in new and exciting ways. As Porter points out, the successful rhetor invents intertextually by “borrow[ing] traces effectively and...find[ing] appropriate
contexts for them.\textsuperscript{86} Innovative sitcoms, then, didn’t merely situate themselves in the constellation of prior sitcoms by recycling the generic traits in some rote fashion, but they found new ways of configuring those traits—and in turn, pushed the genre’s boundaries. Thus, if intertextuality is a repository of forms from which rhetors draw to create new forms, the repository of the sitcom primarily consists of two things: the antecedent generic forms of previous media (radio, theater) and the generic traits established by successful sitcoms.

But while this thesis has discussed the intertextual repository of the sitcom, intertextuality itself still deserves further examination—especially if we are to better understand its function in \textit{30 Rock}. As mentioned earlier, a few rhetoric scholars have indeed recognized intertextuality as an invention strategy, even more specifically an invention strategy used by students in the composition classroom. By encouraging students to recognize the textual network from which their texts arise, teachers can not only de-romanticize the work of the writer (as Porter stresses) but also provide students with new rhetorical strategies to create intertexts themselves (as D’Angelo stresses). For both of these, though, the emphasis remains on the work of the individual student: while s/he may now recognize how her/his composition arises from a textual network, the value of intertextuality lies in \textit{individually} composing in a more informed way. I’ve already shown how intertextual invention isn’t solely the province of composition students but also of other rhetors (such as sitcom creators). But intertextuality isn’t only the concern of the rhetor; that is, it isn’t only an invention strategy. What perhaps

\textsuperscript{86} Porter, 37.
hasn’t been thoroughly discussed—in both the scholarship and this thesis—is the intertextual repository itself, how a textual network can not only influence and reshape a genre but also an audience’s expectations of that genre.

Porter briefly acknowledges how a stock of textual forms, a rhetor, and an audience interact: “Every new text has the potential to alter the Text in some way; in fact, every text admitted into a discourse community changes the constitution of the community—and discourse communities can revise their discursive practices...” In other words, he notes that rhetors draw from a stock of forms (the Text), that they contribute to and change that stock with their own intertexts, and that the stock shapes and reshapes rhetors and audiences. However, rather than flesh out each of these interactions, he quickly returns his focus to the work of the individual:

Writing is an attempt to exercise the will, to identify the self within the constraints of some discourse community. We are constrained insofar as we must inevitably borrow the traces, codes, and signs which we inherit and which our discourse community imposes. We are free insofar as we do what we can to encounter and learn new codes, to intertwine codes in new ways, and to expand our semiotic potential—with our goal being to effect change and establish our identities within the discourse communities we choose to enter. For Porter, much of the value of intertextuality lies in the role of the individual—the “self”—acknowledging his/her position within a discourse community and navigating

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87 Porter, 41.
88 Porter, 41.
the rules of that community to establish individual identities and to produce “acceptable” texts. But this neglects the stock of forms itself. Recognizing how one composes intertextually illuminates how one functions in a given community. If the acceptable discursive forms are constantly evolving and expanding to hold the traces, codes, and signs of rhetors, then a look at the repository is an opportunity to more closely examine the social nature of intertextuality.

Thought of in this way, intertextuality can be further enriched by connecting it to the rhetorical concept of the commonplace. The commonplace can be traced to ancient times, when it referred to the mnemonic device traveling poets used to fill out lines or images in the epic and lyric poems they recited. The commonplaces, from their beginnings, were thus fragmentary in nature and used to build new texts, a stock to draw from when necessary. This carried over into the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, when rhetors similarly memorized a stock of arguments that could be quickly adapted to any speech. Later, with the ready availability of written texts, commonplaces were notebooks where students of rhetoric copied and compiled various canonical texts such as quotes, poems, and speeches. These compilations were not journals or diaries; their main goal was not for reflection or introspection. Instead, the student’s commonplace was collections of examples and quotations, copied from other texts mainly for pedagogical purposes, a resource to help students compose their own rhetorical texts.

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89 Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students, 4th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2009), 118.
90 Crowley and Hawhee, 119.
Historically, then, the commonplace has functioned intertextually; it is a cache of rhetorical forms (texts) from and to which rhetors draw and add. Heinrich Plett, in his examination of the commonplace (the physical manuscripts), charts its various characteristics: its common-ness, i.e., its omnipresence; its typical ordering strategies (alphabetical or hierarchical); its epistemological function (moralizing, special topics); its multimodal and intermodal make up; and its conventionality—“[commonplaces] are not universals, but dependent on space and time, on culture and society, on class, education, gender, age and the context of communication. Above all they are part of shared beliefs and values in a certain community.”91 In fact, it is to this last point that Plett returns in his conclusion. Moving beyond the physical manuscripts and into the abstract concept of the commonplace, he notes that because the commonplace is composed of these shared beliefs and values, it “confirms the familiar, offers release from the unexpected,”92 and in this way can easily lead to a loss of critical distance. If the forms contained in the commonplace stagnate, if they only mutually reinforce each other, then the commonplace might also be seen as a dangerous apparatus that institutes a “pretended normativity”; continues Plett: “Commonplaces are stabilisers of social life and mutual understanding—and at the same time open and hidden persuaders.”93 For him, the way to prevent this stagnation is to radically question the commonplaces, to recognize interruptions to the comfortable flow of recognized forms. But while Plett’s argument ends there, I assert that for this questioning to happen, for

91 Heinrich F. Plett, “Rhetoric and Intertextuality,” Rhetorica 17, no. 3 (1999), 325.
92 Plett, 328.
93 Plett, 328.
discontinuities to emerge, the stock of forms must also be reinvigorated; it must be composed not only of *doxa* but also of *paradoxa*. In other words, it is important to look for discontinuities *and* to contribute discontinuities to the commonplaces. Thus, for the sitcom, we must examine its commonplace to both discover such contributions and to question how they interrupt the comfortable flow.

Such an interruption can be found in this Digital moment. Previously, as the sitcom became more and more entrenched in the Network era ethos of appealing to as many viewers as possible and increasingly shaped by the requisites of the fin-syn model, the commonplace—composed of familiar setting-specific cues—began to stagnate. Sitcom creators began drawing from it merely to quote, imitate, and recycle, an approach that valued “safe” programming instead of innovation and failed to dynamically contribute to the commonplace. This led to programming strategies emphasizing spin-offs, franchises, and recombinations.⁹⁴ For example, *Happy Days*—which itself was a spin-off of *Love, American Style* (1969-74), a comedy anthology that featured a rotating ensemble cast—was a sitcom that found widespread popularity, running for nearly 10 years (1974-84). Believing success would be assured by imitating and recycling the *Happy Days* formula, network executives then green lit seven different spin-offs (including 2 animated series): *Laverne & Shirley* (1976-1983), *Blansky’s Beauties* (1977), *Mork & Mindy* (1978-82), *Out of the Blue* (1979), *Joanie Loves Chachi* (1982-3), *The Fonz and the Happy Days Gang* (animated, 1980-2), and *Laverne & Shirley with Special Guest Star the Fonz* (animated, 1982-3). What this one example shows—

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and indeed, there are countless others—is that just prior to the rise of cable and digital technologies, the network paradigm led to a loss of critical distance, a confirmation of only the familiar.

But with the deregulation of the Telecommunications Act and the widespread adoption of cable and, later, satellite and broadband Internet services, the commonplace of the sitcom became reinvigorated, and this time in a whole new way. Whereas before the commonplace was first populated with the forms inherited from antecedent media and then again with the generic traits of successful sitcoms, the commonplace in the Digital era has been reinvigorated by sitcom creators drawing on those now stagnated forms and conventions of which audiences have grown tired, and instead of merely recycling them as the sitcom producers of the later Network era did, radically questioning those forms and conventions through parody and sarcasm, encouraging critical distance in the viewer. Whereas before audiences might have relied on those conventions—those setting-specific cues—to properly “read” the sitcom as a sitcom (and as humorous), the new and multiple ways people receive their media nullify that necessity. The setting-specific cues are merely doxa. The category-routinized cues are paradoxa. To invent intertextually, then, is a double-coded process: at the first level, the rhetor pulls from the commonplace to connect two or more rhetorical texts and at the second level, self-consciously comments on the overuse of such texts and formulas, contributing a discontinuous text to the repository. Through this, audiences are made aware of the commonplace and how it has languished, an awareness that allows for a
more critical understanding of intertextuality and for a more reinvigorated stock of forms.

For *30 Rock*, this double coding clearly can be found in its flashbacks. The numerous gags and jokes embedded in them, as already discussed, often assume an audience’s sophisticated knowledge of televisual and filmic texts, including their tropes, conventions, and formulas. At the first level of coding, the flashbacks bring in references to other rhetorical texts. This is evident in the *Black Frasier* example: the flashback not only reconstructs a *Frasier*-esque scene using similar dialogue and actors that resemble the original actors, but also uses a green screen to reproduce the actual set of the original show. The show uses intertextuality at this level by drawing on a store of previous forms (*Frasier*) and then combining its own form (the flashback) to create something that is both familiar and unfamiliar, that rewards viewers for their knowledge of tropes, formulas, and other texts. But the second level of coding moves beyond this form of intertextuality to one that is self-conscious of its very use of intertextuality—indeed, its overuse of intertextuality. The “easy” substitution of the original show’s all-white cast with black actors, the formulaic jokes, the canned studio audience laughter all combine to draw attention to the formulaic tendencies of the traditional sitcom which stand in opposition to the aesthetics of *30 Rock*. That Toofer is impressed with such recycling is part of the flashback’s joke: as a character on a sitcom that purposely avoids the formulas of traditional sitcom, and as a character known for his intelligence, the audience expects him to recognize the conventionality, and the fact that he doesn’t
while the audience so clearly does, only reinforces how obviously overused the convention is.

Through this interruption, this paradox, 30 Rock creates critical awareness of the commonplace. With each reference to the stagnant forms, the show asks its audience to see exactly of what the commonplace is composed, to see how uncomfortable the comfortable flow is. In so doing, 30 Rock also crucially contributes discontinuities to the commonplace. It is thus through both its contribution and its invitation to audience members to question the commonplace that warrants our attention: 30 Rock is a site of intertextuality, an intertextuality that reveals new things about the invention strategies of individual rhetors beyond the composition classroom and the evolving and shifting nature of the commonplace.
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