

The Sitcoms Have Become Self-Aware: A Discussion of the Current American Sitcom

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Who's Laughing Now?

An Examination of the Laugh Track in Contemporary American Comedies

Josh Radnor: I think we're gonna go to no laugh track on the whole show one day, aren't we?

Carter Bays: I don't know, I mean, if we stop being funny I guess, but ... I look at other shows, like I look at *The Office* and *30 Rock* and like, they're just not funny. I mean, you watch the show and you don't hear anyone laughing. Our show you hear a laugh like every five, ten seconds. I just can't believe all this – every single joke falls flat. That's how I know it's funny – that right there. (Bays, "Audio Commentary")

Carter Bays, executive producer of CBS's *How I Met Your Mother*, jokes that the laugh track is the only way to determine if his show is funny. No laughter means no humor. Bays is kidding, obviously, but he speaks about it in a way that requires the laugh track be a part of the text of the show for audiences to be aware that they are meant to laugh. So what do we make of the difference between sitcoms that utilize the laugh track versus sitcoms that do not? And if we speculate that sitcoms are becoming more self-aware, how does the removal of the laugh track reflect that?

From a psychological perspective, the mere presence of laughter incites audiences to join in. More culturally, the laugh track allows audiences to imagine they are part of a larger, collective audience, despite that they may likely be watching at home, alone. This is all obvious as the laugh track has sort of come to signify an outdated aspect of the sitcom format. While some of the most popular sitcoms still utilize the laugh track (*Two and a Half Men*, for example), it is no longer used by a group of comedies that most critics and academics recognize as hipper, smarter, or more self-aware. The mockumentary format utilized by comedies such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Arrested Development*, and *Modern Family* seems self-aware because of the conscious presence of cameras, talking-head interviews, etc. – the characters know they are being filmed. In this case, however, the characters seem to believe they are part of the documentary – not the sitcom. Characters discuss their feelings for explanatory purposes, not for comedy. With sitcoms that still contain the laugh track, the laughter forces the actors to pause, sometimes acknowledge the studio audience, and allow the laughter to subside before continuing to the next joke. The laugh pause that accompanies the laugh track creates a textual meta-awareness in which the role of actor, character, sitcom, laugh, and audience are all revealed. Literally the actor is pausing so the audience can hear the next laugh, the delay reveals the fissure between actor and character. To the audience, the character seems aware of the laughter; thus he must be aware he is part of a sitcom.

In examining the text more concretely, to both the home viewer and academic, the laugh track is as much a part of the text as the lines of dialogue. When watching a sitcom, the laugh track does not (or is not meant to) feel canned or extra-textual; it simply feels a natural response to a joke. Literally the text is laughing at itself. In laughing at

itself, the sitcom is aware that it is a sitcom. Here we have a more applied self-awareness, wherein the mockumentary, characters are aware they are part of a show; the laugh track acknowledges that the sitcom is aware that it is a show. As a result, the sitcom demonstrates that comedy is a self-aware art form. Humor theorists seem to concur with this concept given that any examination of humor or comedy assumes already that any object of study is indeed humor or comedy. We must all agree that we are discussing a comedy before we can analyze the comedy. Accidental jokes are the exception to this in everyday life, but the sitcom would not follow an accidental joke with canned laughter.

Coming back to Bays' comments about the laugh track, he jokes that laughter signifies humor and that jokes without laughter must not be funny. He determines this based on this same sense of comedic self-awareness present in all humor, comedy, and especially the sitcom.