

Theorizing TV Sound: Listening to TV Now and Later

Patrick Sullivan, University of Rochester

Inherited from radio yet adapted and proliferated by TV, the laugh track prompts a recalibration of theories of sound to television's aesthetic and technological particularities. The laugh track does not neatly fit within major theories of sound and image, largely established by film sound studies. Rather, its role to establish a sensuousness of liveness between the TV image and viewer does not have any audiovisual antecedent. Its precarious position in relationship to the image made it a source of great interest and disrepute. Audience and critic's criticisms continually undermined the laugh track's claims for liveness, a simultaneity and presentness between viewer and TV image. These critiques largely centered on the sound's production and labor, registering history that disrupts the laugh track's claims of presentness.

For all its ubiquity, the laugh track was a source of continual fascination for the network-era viewer. This fascination was largely concerned with its construction rather than its existence. The laugh track, though a times disputed, was pretty much a given for the network-era sitcom, but *how* it was made garnered continual attention. Three methods existed for producing the laugh track: prerecorded laughter, taped audience laughter from a screening, or taped audience laughter from the production of the sitcom. And, throughout the network era, much had been made of the differences between the production methods. At the outset of the network era, debates raged over if prerecorded, or as it was pejoratively called canned laughter, was honest or authentic or if comedians and writers were stealing laughs. This concern over production method was still ever present at the end of the network era. *Cheers* (NBC; 1982-1993) would be accused of using canned laughter to produce its laugh track, so starting midway through the first season each episode began with a different actor asserting via voiceover that the show was filmed in front of a live audience. The laugh track caught network audiences' ears. With their attention tuned towards its construction, it began to inherently raise issues of labor (as the notion of stealing laughs demonstrates), of its production—that of comedians, writers, and sound designers.

Yet the laugh track was not intended to draw attention to the construction of a show but rather just the opposite. The laugh track was a laborsaving technique that attempted to automate generic and affective responses in an industry predicated on a frantic production pace. It clearly represents an audible instance of the aesthetic ideology of the liveness that aimed to reduce mediation between the television set and viewer. Though as much as the laugh track might draw the viewer out of the show, it can be felt within the sitcom. This non-diegetic, even diegesis challenging or destroying, sound in its myriad of material forms—canned, screened, and live audience—is registered in the formal rhythm of the show. The laugh track influences the very visual and verbal rhythm of the sitcom, forming an alteration between laugh track and dialogue. The laugh track

weaves together the sitcom, but at the same time, these reproduced giggles pulled the viewer out.

This is the perplexing situation of the laugh track: envisioned to move us from one space (the living room) to another (a live audience); meant to reduce mediation but drew our attention to the medium and, with it, labor; and finally, was a non-diegetic sound felt persistently within the diegetic rhythm of the sitcom. The narratological concept of metalepsis may provide a fruitful avenue to rethink the persistent movement of the laugh track. Metalepsis refers to the eruption of non-diegetic elements into the diegesis and vice versa. The notion marks a transgression between levels and worlds of a fictional text. Common examples in literary fiction would be the author addressing characters or characters addressing readers.