»Brooklyn Zack Is Real«

Irony and Sincere Authenticity in *30 Rock*

FLORIAN GROSS[1]

Seeking authenticity in its numerous inflections has become nothing short of a fashion, and there can be little doubt that authenticity has turned into a commodity. In fact, according to Knaller and Müller, there is now an »authenticity industry« (»Authentizitätsindustrie« 8; my translation) which constantly attempts to »stage effects of authenticity,« and »authenticity, with its aura of realness, veracity, nativeness, immediacy, *Eigentlichkeit* has become a successful brand item and logo« since the second half of the 20th century (7; my translation).[2] Knaller and Müller's timeframe and the concomitant rise of postmodernism is of course indicative here, especially if we consider Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber's observation: »In Trilling's view, the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s was heir to both the Romantic and the modernist version of authenticity, combining ideo-

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2 »Authentizität mit seiner Aura von Echtheit, Wahrhaftigkeit, Ursprünglichkeit, Unmittelbarkeit, Eigentlichkeit ist zu einem erfolgreich eingesetzten Markenartikel und Emblem geworden. [...] In allen Sparten der öffentlichen Medienarbeit müht man sich darum, Authentizitätseffekte zu inszenieren.«

logical iconoclasm with subjective experiences of deprivation and marginalization as the sources of individual and collective resistance to the status quo« (12). Nevertheless, postmodernism, especially in its philosophical inflections, was often seen as authenticity's other (cf. Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 14), and postmodern culture as a culture of irony and the simulacrum that is fundamentally incommensurable with existential understandings of authenticity. And yet, in recent years, the quintessentially postmodern practice of ironically appropriating mass cultural products has nevertheless become a staple means of establishing authenticity, albeit of a different kind. In its »Fake Authenticity Issue« (1999), the philosophical magazine *Hermenaut* addresses a certain group of »Authentic Ones,« those who are both »obsessed with authenticity« and vintage consumer goods and yet keep it at arm's length by seeking ironic distance and a position somewhere between nostalgia and camp: »Undoubtedly you will recognize many of the names and places in these pages, though it will all seem *off* to you somehow, like maybe we take this stuff *too seriously*, instead of ›ironically‹ like you do« (Glenn, »Editor's Note« 8-9; emphases in the original). The fact that *Hermenaut* editor Joshua Glenn recently republished his introduction may hint at more than Glenn's attempt to keep his publications in circulation. It might speak volumes about the continued necessity to negotiate certain contemporary attempts at regaining authenticity, and the role that irony plays in this.

For Glenn, »[t]he misdirected quest for authenticity is an ugly thing,« with predominantly white, middle class people seeking the authentic in pre-aged furniture and clothing, exotic locales, nostalgic restaurants, organic food, or idiosyncratic art (»Introduction« 11). Consequently, these attempts pertain to the realm of »fake authenticity [...] that which is false, in the sense of ›counterfeited‹« (11). Opposed to the »fake,« which insufficiently tries to emulate an authentic original and thus retains the fundamental relationship between the two, the »fake authentic« does not even care any longer about an original and constructs an authentic artifact without any connection to reality, thus getting rid of any existential notion of authenticity in favor of commercialism (11-12; cf. Potter).[3] While the former is harmless »kitsch«

3 Potter's book *The Authenticity Hoax* is a case in point here, as he also outlines the fundamental problematic of seeking authenticity, but puts all responsibility on those seeking it, and not those selling it. Between Glenn

that can be made camp »by the lovingly ironic person,« the latter, with its attempt to construct the as-if real, is a disturbing simulacrum (12; cf. Baudrillard). Glenn ends on a by now familiar note:

> Irony, the engaged kind of irony which does not preclude real emotion, nor even seriousness, is still possible in a world of fakeness; but in a world where fake authenticity has triumphed, nothing remains but *sincerity* on the one hand, and a glib, mocking version of irony – *cheese* – on the other. (12; emphases in the original)

This dialogue between authenticity and irony is also a central aspect of the comedy show *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-), which both draws on the fake authentic and, in contrast to Glenn's assumptions, attempts to salvage authenticity by a reconciliation of its close sibling sincerity and the trope of irony. To understand this aesthetic strategy, it makes sense to recap an instance where the show directly engages with the blatantly fake authentic: In the beginning of the episode »Brooklyn Without Limits,« we see the show's protagonist, television writer Elizabeth »Liz« Lemon, in a young, hip boutique in Brooklyn. With her pretentious friend and colleague Jenna Maroney, she shops for jeans in the intentionally run-down store that still has strait-jackets on display because supposedly the building used to belong to a mental institution. Lemon's objection that the hipster store is »trying way too hard« is quickly diffused after she settles for a pair that is exceptionally flattering to her figure. Back at work, she tells her colleagues about the additional perk that it is made by the house brand of a Brooklyn-based company which offers pants that were »hand-made in USA« and has stores in the hip neighborhoods of »Gaytown, White Harlem and the Van Beardswick section of Brooklyn.« Brooklyn Without Limits is a store all about »fair trade, local artisans, and staying green« and thus fits well into her politically liberal and consumer-critical stance. When her boss Jack Donaghy later confronts her and tells her that she, as a writer for NBC, is an employee of the international corporation GE and therefore part of the capitalist system, Lemon claims that, technically, she is a freelancer who makes a difference by buying »quality, locally-made jeans.« However, Lemon gradually has to learn

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and Potter, I think that there is a third way of dealing with the nexus between the impossibility of and a continued strive for authenticity.

that the pants were manufactured by juvenile wage slaves in Vietnam. Even more, although she wants to believe that »Brooklyn Zack is real,« the cute and hip, supposedly owner-managed store is in fact owned by no other corporation than Halliburton, who needed an outlet for a surplus of waterboarding hoods. In a narrative of increasing satire, the episode thus debunks a pattern of consumption that attempts to signify authenticity by expressing criticism of consumerism and the demands of a capitalist consumer society. In »Brooklyn Without Limits,« *30 Rock*'s engagement with this form of authenticity is one of pure negation, exposing it as noble but naïve at best, and as a mere capitalist illusion along the lines of fake authenticity at worst. And it is of course directed at a particular social set of people: the contemporary hipster, the young, white, urban persona that aesthetically defies society's mores and yet is often perceived to be at the center of the commodification of life, and also at the heart of Glenn's »Authentic Ones.«[4]

30 Rock addresses the predicament of being unable to arrive at any form of existential authenticity as well as the danger for irony amounting to no more than jaded cynicism. In fact, what Glenn describes as »existential ›authenticity‹« comes very close to what I think is central to *30 Rock*'s engagement with authenticity: »that mode of existence in which one becomes ironically and radically suspicious of all received forms and norms, and in which one strives to lucidly affirm and creatively live the tension of human reality in all its contingency, ambiguity, and absurdity« (15). Yet, in the particular case of *30 Rock*, I think it makes more sense to conceptualize the show's engagement with authenticity as ›sincere authenticity,‹ as it develops a mode of authenticity radically at odds with those existential inflections traditionally related to authenticity. Opposed to existential notions of immediacy and primordial reality, it is a heavily constructed form of authenticity that highlights this construction as a conscious aesthetic strategy. Through its self-consciously ironic narrative as well as a complex and at times paradoxical negotiation with various layers of authenticity, the series constructs a figuration of authenticity as sincere authenticity,

4 In the following, when I refer to the hipster, I do not mean the historical hipster as coined most famously by Norman Mailer in »The White Negro« (1957), but rather its specifically contemporary inflection as defined for instance by Mark Greif.

laying claim to the desirability of authenticity at the same time that it renders existential authenticity impossible. In what follows, I will read *30 Rock*'s debunking of its own and others' fake authenticity in close relation to its simultaneous construction of sincere authenticity through an ironic take on visual style, biographical content, and meta-fictional illusion-shattering. *30 Rock*'s irony is part of a paradoxical aesthetics of authenticity that (at least at times) moves beyond the purely ironic, towards meta-ironic aesthetics that precariously negotiate with and thereby attempt to construct what seems to be essentially non-constructible: authenticity.

30 ROCK AND AUTHENTICITY

But why *30 Rock*, when there are many other, seemingly infinitely better examples to be found in the contemporary television landscape when it comes to authenticity? Most prominently, there is the gritty realism of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08), which has been praised for its authentic depiction of social struggle in Baltimore, and by extension the United States. Set and filmed in Baltimore, created and written by a former police reporter, and cast with actual actors from that area, it draws on several registers of authenticity. In slightly different terms, we have the historical realism of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-), which is celebrated for its authentic depiction of the 1960s. In effect, we are dealing here with two different though related modes of televisual authenticity through verisimilitude. *The Wire* presents us with a case of social naturalism and, for the lack of the better term, contemporary primitivism which rings true for a largely well-educated and affluent audience by showing how the other half lives (or rather, survives). In the case of *Mad Men*, it is a discourse of accuracy, be it historiographic, style-related, or in terms of its depiction of the decade's structures of feeling. This, however, is not without problems of its own. Both the socio-economic authenticity of *The Wire* as well as the historical authenticity of *Mad Men* need to resonate with certain assumptions, speculations, feelings, and memories, whose own accuracy is inherently precarious. As such, televisual authenticity along the lines of realism emerges as a linguistic convention that depends as much on its receivers as does the trope of irony, whose realization ultimately depends entirely on the interpreter (cf. Hutcheon, *Irony* 4, 116-40). Even

though authenticity is centrally concerned with immanence, individuality, and independence, it is also essentially in the eye of the beholder. Moreover, *The Wire* and *Mad Men* may be said to employ rather insincere forms of authenticity, because both present a highly stylized product as unadorned. In the framework of fake authenticity, it might be even more problematic for its relatively straightforward location of authenticity in the socio-economic, spatial, and/or temporal Other. In Thomas Frank's words:

> Perhaps the most offensive aspect of our craving for authenticity is our never-ceasing conviction that authenticity is enjoyed effortlessly and unproblematically by the Other: the class, race, nationality, religious group, or even gender who we are not. Under the guise of authenticity we tolerate all manner of essentializing and even racist entertainments without ever seeming to wonder about it. (»Green Hills« 79)

Compared to the *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, *30 Rock* is hardly ever mentioned in relation to authenticity, save with regards to its visual style, and this may speak volumes about its specific aesthetics of authenticity. *30 Rock* is a half-hour comedy which, together with a number of other recent workplace comedies, from *Scrubs* (NBC/ABC, 2001-10) to *The Office* (U.S.: NBC, 2005-) and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-), eschews the sitcom's traditional multi-camera setup and laugh track for a single-camera setup without canned laughter. This choice for documentary rather than theatrical visuals is further emphasized by a visual style that veers between cinematic and documentary aesthetics. The show's mobile camera work and frequent location shots distinguish it markedly from a conventional sitcom like *Two And A Half Men* (CBS, 2003-). Yet, in its embrace of a less artificial »comedy vérité,« *30 Rock* does not adopt the mockumentary format of *The Office*, but rather depicts its characters as being unaware that they are being filmed, akin to similar shows set in the world of entertainment production like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-) and *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992-98) (Mills 91). In a recent *Variety*-piece, Steve Heisler claimed fittingly that the recent upsurge in single-camera comedies is partially due to the fact that »[s]ingle-camera lends itself to authenticity. It's less like theater and more like film, employing closeups and sometimes documentary-style interviews to convey comedy at an intimate level. Actors play to the camera, not the studio au-

dience.« He also quotes *Modern Family*-producer Steve Levitan with the following words: »Audiences – maybe because of reality TV, maybe because of YouTube and the Internet – are longing for things that feel more authentic and real.« Out of this emerges the perception that *30 Rock*'s visual style conveys authenticity through aesthetic realism, by a strong endeavor to establish the illusion of objective, non-mediated viewing as well as a more direct audience address – and more freedom for the individual viewer who is not told any longer when to laugh. And yet, the fact that it uses a (by now) well-worn, conventionalized visual style and that audiences need to ›feel‹ the emerging authenticity brings us back to the question whether something can be authentic if it is adopted from something else and dependent on other people's attribution. Furthermore, *30 Rock*'s construction of authenticity through visual style seems to be at odds with its critique of the kind of corporate manufacturing of authenticity behind the fake authentic clothing store Brooklyn Without Limits. Enter self-conscious irony.

At the same time that the show rejects visual aesthetics that have become conventionalized and are increasingly deemed artificial, it uses another highly artificial set of aesthetics to signify authenticity – and makes us aware of it: One instance of this is evident in »Live Show,« *30 Rock*'s fifth-season episode that takes a bow to live comedy aesthetics by using a multi-camera setup, a laugh track, and cheap props for its live broadcast.[5] In the opening scene, Jack Donaghy recognizes that there is something different, and asks Liz: »Does it seem weird in here to you? [...] Everything looks like a Mexican soap opera,« which is accompanied by clearly artificial laughter. And in the end of the episode, when the camera filter changes to the usual one, he says: »That's more like it.«[6] I claim that this foregrounding of visual aesthetics typical for different approaches to televisual comedy goes beyond pure play for two reasons: First, it engages with and reflects on its own visual aesthetics of authenticity, and second, it mixes its meta-

5 This episode was shot and broadcast live; therefore, two slightly different versions exist, one for the East Coast and one for the West Coast.

6 Similarly, scenes like the one in which Lemon fails to crawl out of Donaghy's office and says that »this would work on *Ugly Betty*« further drives home the show's attempt at emphasizing narrative artifice (»Up All Night«).

fictional digressions with several autobiographical markers, thus furthering its paradoxical, multilayered play with authenticity.[7] *30 Rock* is a comedy show broadcast by NBC about the production of the NBC live-action comedy show *TGS With Tracy Jordan*; it is the simulation of a television show, a second degree imitation (cf. Wisnewski, »Introduction« 2). At the same time, it includes its own creator, co-writer, and executive producer Tina Fey, former star and head writer of *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-), in the role of Liz Lemon. Lemon has to juggle her private and professional live(s), conciliate the creative team she supervises and the economically driven corporation she works for, and all the while emerges more and more as a slightly skewed autobiographical version of Fey herself. Apart from general semblances, Liz Lemon's claim that »every Tina I've known is a real judgmental bitch« (»Gentleman's Intermission«) is just as blatantly self-referential as the show's frequent references to *Star Wars*, of which Fey herself is a very articulate fan.[8] Beyond the Lemon/Fey-nexus, we have the writer John D. Lutz appearing as none other than a television writer called John D. Lutz.[9] Furthermore, the entire aspect of a fictional NBC show at the center of an actual NBC program is, of course, also such a marker, while the fact that *30 Rock* is filmed in New York instead of Los Angeles, and thus practically on location, drives home this point.[10] On the more playful end of the spectrum, it is furthermore possible to read Alec Baldwin's character Jack Donaghy as a version of Baldwin's character Blake in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), thus linking intertextual play with biographical content (cf. Shaw 203).[11]

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7 For more on the sitcom genre's increasing digressiveness, cf. Simonini.

8 Cf. for instance her television interviews on *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.

9 This is of course also reminiscent of the postmodern literary practice of fictionalizing authors, most prominently done by Paul Auster.

10 Concerning the last aspect, *Scrubs* as a medical show filmed in a former hospital is another case in point.

11 Baldwin's career is also addressed in »100,« when (among many other allusions to his past) Jack tells Tracy about the hazards of walking away from a successful movie franchise, thus mirroring Baldwin's own exit from the successful Jack Ryan-franchise after *The Hunt for Red October* (1990).

This kind of metafictional twist is also present in »Brooklyn Without Limits«: When Lemon puts on the jeans for the first time and inspects her figure, she cannot but ask: »Is that really me?« Apart from expressing incredulity about her new great looks, this statement also hints at something else. As will become gradually clearer during the episode, we actually do not see Tina Fey's body in the mirror, but a body-double's. And when she speaks of »staying green,« she performs a hand gesture similar to her famous Sarah Palin impersonation, again conflating actress with character.[12] All of these instances go beyond the show's diegesis and self-consciously mirror and disrupt *30 Rock*'s own creation of a fictional illusion. Through this, the series ›confesses‹ its inauthenticity at the same time as it attempts to remain authentic through this confession. In this respect, the metafictional aesthetics of the television program *30 Rock* function similar to Patricia Waugh's conceptualization of metafictional literature's function of »laying bare« the illusion at the basis of fiction writing, thus merging creation and criticism (6). And yet, *30 Rock* does more than shatter the illusion of transparent fiction – it shatters the illusion that this illusion-shattering might bring you closer to reality. The fiction created and commented on in *30 Rock* is not only the obvious fiction of a fictive story, but also the ›fiction‹ of authenticity. This is meta-metafiction, both for its self-conscious adaptation of literary metafiction as well as its transfer to another medium, with its very own implications. As we will see, metafiction and self-consciousness in television pose problems of their own, especially when it comes to aspects of authenticity.

SINCERE METATELEVISION

By 2012, metafiction, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and ironic self-consciousness have become established parts of television, a medium that for many critics has always been postmodern, but was for a long time denied to be part of the wider philosophical and aesthetic phenomenon indicated by the suffix ›-ism.‹ The apparent postmodernization of television has been analyzed by critics since the mid-1980s (cf.

12 During the 2008 presidential election, Fey became internationally famous for her numerous impersonations of then vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*.

Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 44-56; Marc 129-66; Miller; Olson; O'Day). Early reactions to this range from Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi's celebration of self-reflexivity as a crucial characteristic of the very ›Quality TV‹-style they identify in MTM programs to utter despair in the work of Mark Crispin Miller, who identifies »preemptive irony« in self-reflexive programs through which »TV preempts derision by itself evincing endless irony« (14). He assumes that self-denigrating irony on television serves the function of preempting any criticism leveled against it. Its ultimate function is that of concealing consumption and commerce through mock-Enlightenment. Even more: in the hands of commercial programs and networks, it disinvents the formerly subversive tool of irony from all its liberating power, making it yet another means to enthrall the mass audiences of today's popular culture. David Foster Wallace, heavily influenced by this kind of reasoning, claims in his influential essay »E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction« that preemptive irony not only corrupts the possibility of criticizing television from the outside, but also the critical potential of (postmodern) literature. For him, the fact that self-conscious irony has become part and parcel of contemporary TV programming shows how this formerly liberating and enlightening rhetorical strategy has been co-opted and thus rendered ineffective by the culture industry. In its binary opposition of authentic literature and co-opting television, Wallace's logic neatly follows what Thomas Frank calls polemically

> the co-optation theory: faith in the revolutionary potential of ›authentic‹ counterculture combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that ›real‹ counterculture represents. (*Conquest* 7)

Even Frank himself, although he disagrees with the basic assumptions behind this theory of co-optation, directly connects cultural irony and the ironic quotation of cultural material across the spectrum as a jaded, ubiquitous, and ultimately fake strategy in order to conceal uncritical consumption of facile and commodified rebellion (cf. *Conquest* 230-33).

As these examples show, it is no exaggeration to claim that irony has become »a problematic mode of expression at the end of the twentieth century« (Hutcheon, *Irony* 1). Supposedly, this got even worse in the 21st century: In a post-9/11 piece Roger Rosenblatt famously

claimed that »the age of irony comes to an end,« that the intellectuals' ironic detachment which was a hallmark of the postmodern era was shattered in its defiance of reality by the very reality they were so fond of denying in their language games that took nothing seriously. Even though most people witnessed the atrocious attacks via exactly those televisual pictures that informed much of postmodernism's skepticism vis-a-vis real experiences, the apparent literalness of them supposedly put an end to postmodernism's »ironic inauthenticity« (Grossberg qtd. in Mayer 165). With his detraction of irony, Rosenblatt chimes into a critical stance on irony that had already suffused the 1990s and spanned from the leftist critics cited above to the conservative pundit Jedediah Purdy, who outlines irony and authenticity as antithetical concepts and reads irony as nothing but »a defensive response to a culture of inauthenticity« (O'Brien 157). It seems fitting in this regard when Wallace ends his famous pre-9/11 diatribe against postmodern irony with the following tentative prediction:

> The next real literary ›rebels‹ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ›Oh how banal.‹ To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. (82)

Of course, as the numerous levels of irony at the heart of his novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) testify, Wallace himself never followed his own prediction verbatim; and neither did most of his literary peers that began around the same time to work themselves out of the postmodern liter-

ary paradigm. Instead of opting for aesthetics that abolished postmodernism in a way Purdy would have approved of, authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, or Jonathan Lethem never claimed the possibility of returning »to a state of pre-postmodern innocence regarding language and the processes of representation« (McLaughlin 65, cf. Mayer 166). Even if they reinstated mimetic modes of writing, they always connected this with postmodern insights into the ultimate impossibility of stable signification. And Wallace himself tried to expose irony's end(s) through an exacerbating use of and negotiation with irony – meta-irony – and thus attempted to move beyond cynicism and towards sincerity (cf. Schneck; Boswell; Velmeulen and van den Akker).

Ironically enough, *30 Rock* uses a strikingly similar aesthetic strategy of generating sincerity and thus redeems Wallace's goal – even though it is seemingly the exact cultural phenomenon against which he developed his plea for naïve irony. At first glance, with the co-optation theory in mind, self-conscious irony on television is indeed everything but authentic: it is second-hand, copied, nothing more than a mass marketed version of the supposedly subversive self-consciousness at the heart of postmodern literature. Furthermore, considering post-Romantic notions of authenticity as being self-reliant and rebellious, television as a fully integrated part of the culture industry seems to be fundamentally incommensurable with this kind of authenticity as well. On the other hand, *30 Rock*'s self-conscious highlighting of artificiality and construction sublates one of the most central paradoxes of any aesthetics of authenticity: the moment you represent authenticity, you are already one step removed from it. Moreover, the series also metafictionally highlights its own capitalist incorporation, something which many authors in the postmodern canon never did, as well as its own metafictional treatment of postmodern self-consciousness. And while *30 Rock* features a dedicated mediation between creative and commercial, between individual and societal demands, it most blatantly presents itself as a highly commercial product that integrates narrative with commercials in ways even the most pessimistic cultural critic might not have dreamed of. In the very first episode, Jack Donaghy presents the (actually existing) GE Trivection Oven, the characters use Apple computers throughout, they eat at McDonald's, and they drink Snapple. However, while this kind of product placement is hardly original, the show's treatment of it certainly is, as for instance in

scenes when Liz Lemon, after talking at length about Verizon, asks into the camera »can we have our money now?« (»Somebody to Love«), or when Jerry Seinfeld promotes his *Bee Movie* (2007) by appearing as himself and telling the audience, again by breaching the fourth wall, that the movie is »opening November 2nd,« three weeks after the original broadcast (»SeinfeldVision«).[13] While these scenes combine product placement with the outright acknowledgment that the show does that, the following example goes even further. In the first season episode »Jack-Tor,« the integration of Snapple is addressed by the show in three scenes, in which the writers negotiate with Donaghy about the integration of products in their show. During the initial discussion, Liz strongly opposes product integration because it would mean »compromising the integrity of the show to sell« at which point she is interrupted by a succession of shots during which her colleagues (and eventually she herself) explicitly praise the beverage. Later in the episode, her refusal to be GE's »shills« is further ridiculed when Liz and her producer Pete Hornberger encounter a man in a giant Snapple costume, just as Liz claims that *TGS* is not a »commercial.« Eventually, the episode's A-plot explicitly addresses *30 Rock*'s self-consciousness:

Jack: What can I do for you?
Liz: So we wrote a product integration sketch, but we wanted to run it by you first because it's about how GE is making us do this. And we were kind of hoping that the GE executive in the sketch could be played by you.
Jack: Oh I get it. The whole self-referential thing. Letterman hates the suits, Stern yells at his boss, Nixon says »sock it to me« on *Laugh In*. Yeah. Hippie humor.

In this plot, *30 Rock* self-consciously addresses its own integration with capitalism and concludes it with a self-conscious comment on its own self-consciousness. Initially, this was celebrated by critics and

13 Jerry Seinfeld is of course also instructive concerning the actual originality of *30 Rock*'s product placement. With its blatant inclusion and metafictional treatment of Snapple beverages, his sitcom *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-98) has to be considered as a forerunner to *30 Rock*'s aesthetics. However, both concerning the frequency as well as the connection to authenticity, *30 Rock* emerges as a much more pronounced example for this.

often taken as evidence of the series' good writing, but by the third season, it also became subject to criticism (cf. Nussbaum). In the case of criticism on the series' explicit allusions to McDonald's (later called »McFlurryGate«) in »St. Valentine's Day,« Fey even responded herself:

> It gives me great pleasure to inform you that the references to McDonald's in last night's episode of *30 Rock* were in no way product placement. (Nor were they an attempt at product placement that fell through.) We received no money from the McDonald's Corporation. We were actually a little worried they might sue us. That's just the kind of revenue-generating masterminds we are. Also, the upcoming story line where Liz Lemon starts dating Grimace is just based on a recurring dream I have. Seriously, though, it's not product placement. Also, whoever is writing my Twitter account is pretty funny, but it's not me. (Graham)[14]

Over and beyond Fey's half-mocking response, *30 Rock* addressed this particular controversy also within its diegesis. In »The Ones,« an episode that aired two months after »St. Valentine's Day,« Liz is prominently wearing the branded blanket Slanket in her office. When Tracy walks in on her working in this domestic apparel, she responds in best fake authentic fashion that she is just »wearing it as a joke.« Later, when Donaghy sees her dressed like this, she claims that »it's not product placement, I just like it,« thereby taking yet another position on the inclusion of products. The series once more stresses the claim for an honest appreciation of this consumer item through the last scene featuring the Slanket. Lemon, now at home, is sitting on her couch in her Slanket and eating her »night cheese,« thus combining the Slanket with the most passionate habit of hers: food. In sum, this episode provides us with a number of possible reasons for the inclusion of branded products. And if we take *30 Rock*'s aesthetics seriously, it does not matter what the actual motive is – for this indeterminacy is the whole point, for better or worse. Here, TV critic Alan Sepinwall's question

14 Here, things get really complicated, for as Gillan has shown, Fey is probably not entirely honest here. While it seems to be true that the producers of *30 Rock* received no direct money for the integration, McDonald's nevertheless spent a considerable amount of money for commercials during the original broadcast of this episode (cf. 188-93).

about the motive behind the Verizon-scene is indicative: »Was the above [›Can we have our money now‹] just a dig at product placement, or was it a coded message from the WGA? You decide.« Even with commercial irony, we have to acknowledge its fundamentally unstable meaning, and therefore acknowledge that the Verizon-product placement might have been the vehicle for *30 Rock*'s statement on the 2007-08 WGA strike just as much as it was a blatant commercial.

FAKING IT BEYOND THE FAKE AUTHENTIC

30 Rock's aesthetics are based on a dialectics between fake authenticity and what I call sincere authenticity; for me, these two options represent two different ways of constructing the as-if real. Despite the choice of words, I do not believe that it is possible to ethically judge them per se; rather, it is striking how much the fake authentic foregrounds sincerity and how much the sincere authentic foregrounds fakery. Neither of the two assumes the existence of some sort of primordial authenticity it strives for. Rather, in both, authenticity emerges as an effect that sends up semblances of reality and truth. They both insist on the necessity to aesthetically construct it, and yet differ in their aesthetic means of arriving at this, and in their view on the ultimate desirability of authenticity.

Beyond its visual style, autobiographical content, and metafictional antics, *30 Rock*'s negotiation of (fake) authenticity also negotiates authenticity on the level of narrative and character. In the 100th episode, the current fetish of authenticity is shown to be an illusion when African American actor Tracy Jordan is interviewed on *The Today Show* by Matt Lauer about his trip to Africa to rediscover his roots. Lauer asserts in a stereotypical fashion: »It's because you didn't feel like your authentic self that you walked away from success. That's actually very brave, don't you think? [...] You fly free. I'm a bird in a cage [...] a true artist. He feels things we don't.« Before his appearance on *The Today Show*, Tracy already tried to wreck his reputation – for reasons too comically exaggerated to be covered here – by erratic behavior on *The Rachael Ray Show* and *Live with Regis and Kelly*. In the latter show, he even confessed that his trip to Africa was nothing but a ruse, only to be celebrated by Kelly Ripa for his »honesty.« These

three scenes ridicule the craving for authenticity on lifestyle television, but they do so with the help of those very television hosts that are caricatured in this episode of *30 Rock*. As a consequence, the television hosts also rise above their own diurnal fabrication of fake authenticity and lay claim to a more sincere approach to the authentic – through faking it and partaking in fabricated versions of their own shows. However, contrary to *30 Rock*, Matt Lauer, Rachael Ray, Regis Philbin, and Kelly Ripa's attempts are less grounded in a full-fledged narrative of (in)authenticity and therefore hardly reverberate beyond these isolated instances. With *30 Rock*'s weekly seriality, it is possible to reinforce the message time and again – but as we have seen with respect to product placement, this might also lead to conventionalized structures that have become inherently problematic with regards to their credibility.

Seriality is also a good transition to *30 Rock*'s (to date) latest interrogation of the hipster's ironic stance on authenticity. When Tracy Jordan was first introduced to *30 Rock*, we saw news footage of him running down a highway, shouting »I am a Jedi« (»Pilot«). In his attempt to damage his reputation, he does this again in the episode »100,« thus restaging something from the series' memory, the effect of which clearly points beyond the show's diegesis. More significantly still is the reaction of the (heavily stereotyped) hipster who sees Tracy's act: »Hey look, Tracy Jordan is ironically reappropriating his bad past behavior as a commentary on Fitzgerald's dictum that ›there are no second acts in American live.‹ I wanna make a picture of him with my old-fashioned camera« (»100«). This hipster's reaction thus again evokes the hybrid attempt to evoke authenticity through nostalgia and camp epitomized by Glenn's »Authentic Ones.« In this scene, *30 Rock* once more reaffirms the close proximity between irony and the fake authentic, and distances itself from it without claiming to exist beyond it.

The same episode includes a subplot in which Jenna admits to being »not that good at playing *la realité*.« And indeed, she is right. In »Brooklyn Without Limits,« she admits that, contrary to mentally unstable Tracy, she is »more aware« of what she is doing and should therefore be held responsible for her (egocentric, scheming, narcissistic) behavior – which is indeed what has already happened: In an earlier episode, staff writer Frank, a cliché hipster complete with logo trucker hats, nerd glasses, and general jadedness, calls Jenna a »pho-

ny« and a »fake,« and accuses her of having never done anything »real or genuine« (»Up All Night«). In turn, she accuses him of the same, of being a fake, of trying to act cool with his »thrift store T-shirts« and »big weird glasses« and motto trucker hats, spending »just as much time and energy trying to look weird as I do trying to look beautiful.« While both are clearly right, they can only arrive at a moment of authenticity when Jenna inadvertently flatulates, which is commented on by Frank as »the first time you've ever done something like a real person,« and which becomes a cathartic moment over which the two bond, as both usually work hard at upholding their respective acts. Apart from that, the characters display different ways of failing at being authentic: If Jenna is the endpoint of excessive artificiality, and Frank is the endpoint of hipsterdom's fake authenticity, the »literal-minded« (Dohnimm 8), anti-ironic Kenneth, the NBC page from Stone Mountain, Georgia – a character somewhere between idiotic »mouth-breathing« hillbilly and moral compass – clearly is the endpoint of naïve sincerity. He is so literal-minded as to be ridiculous. In-between these options, we find the equally paradox, but more affirmatively rendered Liz and Jack. It is their relationship that, amidst the comic exaggerations of their co-workers, comes closest to a ›realistic‹ one. Starting off as a relationship in which Donaghy soon assumes the role of mentor to his subordinate, this is among the only aspects of the show that indicate some depth and development. It is also the relationship that most clearly combines the two supposed binary oppositions of creative and corporate.

With respect to its paradoxical relationship towards capitalism and consumerism, *30 Rock*'s narrative representation of the conflictual relationship between creative and corporate factions is indicative. Between the GE executive Jack Donaghy on the one and Liz's team of writers on the other hand, a binary opposition is constructed that highlights aspects like hip creativity vs. square commercialism or working ethic vs. hedonistic pleasure.[15] Yet again, this connects the show to its more complex dialogue with authenticity. The program represents and – to a certain extent – promotes the countercultural defiance of corporate mainstream, yet all the while also ridiculing it (cf. »Brooklyn Without Limits«). Most crucially, it does so from a position simulta-

15 An aspect of the show I have analyzed in more detail elsewhere (cf. »Transnational Cool«).

neously within and without. Its irony is constantly veering between the jaded form of irony that is actually inoculating (perceived) capitalist mores, but also bespeaks the ironic stance of someone »who faces up to the historical contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires, and recognizes that these beliefs and desires don't refer back to anything transcendent« (Glenn, »Introduction« 15). At the heart of *30 Rock*'s sincere authenticity is a high degree of self-consciousness, and with it a high degree of self-conscious irony; and this may also explain *30 Rock*'s ire towards hipsters: First, because it recognizes itself to be not too different from them. But second, and even more crucial, it criticizes the hipster's ironic stance towards everything but him- or herself. This ironic stance toward its own ideological position is probably the most central aspect of the show, and with it the most interesting element of *30 Rock* to construct an aesthetics of authenticity. From the position of *30 Rock*'s aesthetics of authenticity, which is inherently removed from any existential authenticity, the show highlights its own artificiality as well as its awareness of it. It thus moves beyond pure metafiction and recursively harks back to an authenticity that has little to do with originality. *30 Rock*'s aesthetics of authenticity depend on the show's narrative negotiations with contemporary consumer culture just as much as on its interweaving of autobiographical and visually ›authentic‹ elements with anti-illusionist metafiction, which mimetically represents the impossibility of any unfiltered representation (cf. Funk in this volume).

Of course, this authenticity, as much as it is yearned for, can never be the primordial »unthinking« that an artist like e.e. cummings was rooting for as a crucial prerequisite of authentic art (cf. Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 9). It will always be a carefully crafted, fully conscious endeavor and therefore attempt to attain that which it can never reach with its specific means. Adding this to the fact that the show presents the individual's relationship to society more in a dialectical and less in a necessarily antagonistic relationship, the show replaces existential authenticity with sincerity (cf. Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 18). The contemporary reconfiguration of authenticity along the lines of sincerity was already noted by Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber, who, following Trilling, claimed that »[s]incerity is the convincing personal expression of a social or cultural convention« (11). Compared to the Romantic defiance of society, contemporary attempts at autonomous self-expression have become much more

a means than an end, given that they are performed in a culture in which the individual moves back and forth between the assertion of independence and the adherence to rules. Accordingly, the show evokes moments and desires of Romantic authenticity the very moment it thwarts them by convention, imitation, and incorporation. Vis-a-vis the dichotomy between authenticity and commercialism, *30 Rock* derives its authenticity precisely from its open acknowledgment of its involvement with corporate structures. This frankness is connected to the fact that the show is, after all, marked as highly self-conscious and, as we have seen above, autobiographical. Even though its specific aesthetic strategy, irony, per definition runs blatantly counter to Trilling's famous conceptualization of sincerity as »a congruence between avowal and actual feeling« (2), it continues something that Kelly has already identified in Wallace, who urges his readers to find a way of dealing with contemporary culture from within. Says Kelly, »One must begin by recognizing the lack of any transcendent, absolute, Archimedean point from which to judge the authentic from the inauthentic, the sincere from the manipulative, truth from ideology, and so on« (137-38). It is exactly this position taken by *30 Rock* – which is, considering Wallace's take on irony, quite ironic. In his essay, Wallace claims that through self-conscious irony, »[t]elevision's managed to become its own most profitable analyst« (30). For Wallace, television's self-conscious irony makes criticism from the outside (for instance by literary authors) impossible due to television's closed system. And yet, with *30 Rock*'s constant self-diagnosis, the exact opposite is the case: It opens up the text to its (perceived) inauthenticity, albeit on its own terms.

The show stands in line with the kind of aestheticized postmodernism that nevertheless asserts its political edge, as Linda Hutcheon already noted in her *Politics of Postmodernism*. For Hutcheon, postmodern aesthetics' »complicitous critique« (*Politics* 1), »a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless wants to analyze and maybe undermine« (4), was at the center of its aesthetics of »denaturalizing,« which, among others, depended on irony, intertextuality, and appropriation (2). Now, the next turn of the screw on display in *30 Rock* is certainly not its general »complicitous critique,« but rather its specific use of irony. Irony in *30 Rock* functions less as a tool of

de-naturalization but rather as a tool of authentication. Thus, it debunks the detaching power of irony and opts for a use that effects the exact opposite: further highlighting complicity. This however, is not necessarily the postmodernization of (parts of) a medium that Hutcheon herself still characterized as follows: »Most television, in its *unproblematized* reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox« (*Politics* 10; emphasis in the original). While Hutcheon ignores any self-conscious television, Wallace is uneasy with television's turn towards self-consciousness, because it is so clearly at odds with his conceptualization of television as mass cultural medium. But both inadvertently hint at a paradox in and of itself when it comes to contemporary television, parts of which work themselves out of the postmodern paradigm just like literature does.

CONCLUSION

30 Rock presents a multi-faceted, inherently contradictory engagement with authenticity. It is in fact the ironic, metafictional aspect of *30 Rock* that, in paradoxical combination with certain ›conventional‹ markers of authenticity like visual realism, autobiography, and a sustained negotiation with fake-authentic behavior, serve as the basis for its specific aesthetics of sincere authenticity. Instead of relating irony and authenticity in a mutually exclusive *or* inherently connected way, *30 Rock* puts these two concepts in a dialectical relationship that alternates between paradox, contradiction, and mutual dependency. To a certain degree, *30 Rock*'s conspicuously constructed, always obviously mediated aesthetics can be seen as a paradoxical, maybe even perverted approach to authenticity. It uses conventionalized aesthetics of authenticity at the same time as it debunks them as mere (inauthentic) convention. *30 Rock*'s sincere authenticity wears its thinking, its limitations, its incorporation, on its sleeve – and yet does not engage in cynicism or pure play, nor does it necessarily evade the fake. This does not, however, mean that this is ethically unproblematic; it may well serve as a potent vehicle for the commodification of dissent (cf. Frank and Weiland). However, opposed to much consumer-critical literature, it does not imagine its own narrative as being outside or be-

yond commodification. Another authentic option beside the longing for the primordial, direct, unfettered experience, it is the only option left when all experience has become represented, mediated, and commodified over and over again. Simultaneously using and moving beyond the postmodern arsenal, sincere authenticity highlights its incorporation in contemporary capitalist structures, while at the same time keeping a critical and non-identical position.

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