Dis-placing Laughter in *30 Rock*. Beyond Corporate Comedy or Back to the Funny Female's Modern Roots

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Abstract:
The significance of *30 Rock*'s TV comedy for gendered laughter can only be evaluated fully if historical and theoretical perspectives are combined: Between Liz Lemon and her Boss Jack Donaghy a socially pre-modern comedy of carnivalesque reversal and familiarization clashes with a type of ambiguity that results from the different systems within modern society as described by Niklas Luhmann. While the corporate man's sense of humour is tied to institutional hierarchies the funny female character may have become an institution – as head writer and star comedienne –, but her metafictional ironies are used to risk and secure follow-up in a way that shows awareness both of the change in social organization and the established status of women in comedy today. Even if the conditions of being subversive are not the same as in earlier waves of feminism and modernity, *30 Rock*'s arrangement of comic modes owes its sophistication not simply to media intertextuality, the history and gender politics of comic communication turn out to be more structurally revealing.

1 The TV comedy show *30 Rock* is currently celebrated for seizing positions of media establishment for the comedienne: Starred, written and produced by Tina Fey it features Liz Lemon as head writer of fictional TGS (= The Girly Show), modelled after Saturday Night Live (= SNL), an institution in American TV comedy, where Fey used to be head writer before starting her own *30 Rock*. That women have achieved celebrity status in the comic genre as both leading actresses and authors makes for the latest advancement in this area of popular culture. Old gender stereotypes aside, even beautiful ladies can be funny and in control. A story for *Vanity Fair* magazine investigates relations of power, beauty and comedic talent, displaying the "queens of comedy" (Stanley) on the cover: Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, draped as Greek goddesses with golden laurel wreaths.

2 *30 Rock* has invited a number of feminist readings, with some controversy about the main character Liz Lemon. Is she a toned down version of the "unruly woman" (Rowe) with her sharp tongue and love of food? "Unruly" sums up the disruptive qualities "too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious" (19) that allow women the power of visibility by "fashioning – as subject, as author, as artist – a spectacle of themselves" (11) Is Liz the third wave feminist as corporate girl or Tina Fey's tongue-in-cheek comment on that type? The following appraisal does not take the character approach, instead the show's internal differentiation of comic modes will be analysed. As it turns out, *30 Rock* is structurally concerned with the gendered "genres of laughter" and their ties to a history of feminism and humour. To

pursue this line of argument it will become necessary at some point to introduce a more theoretical understanding of comic communication in modern society, different both from the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and from postmodern fictional irony.

3 *30 Rock* consists of three distinct, yet overlapping comic settings: first and foremost, the workplace "inside NBC"; secondly TGS, a live sketch comedy show produced in those fictional NBC-studios; and finally a special kind of interaction between Liz Lemon and her boss Jack Donaghy. This non-romantic couple is not only at the spotlight of the program's critical acclaim, with awards for both actors, it also marks crucial scenes, in which a displacement of laughter occurs that surprisingly takes the possibilities of female humour to the next historical level. Before this is studied and explored theoretically, the genres of NBC and TGS need to be described as well as subjected to gender criticism.

4 The major part of *30 Rock*'s comedy works satirically and is drawn from situations or characters inside the big broadcasting company, located at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Especially in the first two seasons many of the episode storylines are topical, dealing with media policies such as product placement (Season 1, Episode 5, "Jack-Tor") as well as broader issues like homeland security (Season 2, Episode 6, "Somebody To Love") or environmental initiatives (Season 2, Episode 5, "Greenzo"): Jack Donaghy, leading executive at NBC and subdivision manager of General Electrics, introduces a green superman character that is supposed to promote GE products with "saving the earth"-messages, but starts to take his mission so seriously that, counter to Donaghy's intentions, he is no longer "business-friendly". However, any regular viewer will note that Liz Lemon is equally involved in those politics, be it as head of writing staff or privately when she suspects her neighbour Raheem of planning a terrorist attack when in fact he and his brother are practicing to take part in the TV competition "The American Race" (= *The Amazing Race*), a pun on anti-Arabic racism. Generally, *30 Rock* seems careful to balance workplace and private life scenes for each, Liz and Jack, so as not to simply reproduce gender tendencies for either home or business. Lemon's boss has been going through more *Sex and the City*-like dating stories than his employee.

5 Satire in *30 Rock* explores the whole range of political correctness, feminism being only one of the sources. In "Believe in the Stars" (Season 3, Episode 2) TGS actors Tracy Jordan and Jenna Maroney cross-dress in their respective social roles to find out who suffers more from discrimination: black male or white female? Their mediator supplies the hybridising third option by lamenting his own trouble: "Do you know how hard it is to be an overweight transgender in this country?" Tracy and Jenna, over-the-top caricatures of gender and ethnic stereotypes, share the levelling trait of (almost) complete celebrity self-centredness.

They take advantage of star-struck, overeager Kenneth, the page. This religiously fundamentalist naïve from the South completes the line of topical characters.

6 The treatment of feminism, to single out this field of satirical humour, uses a deconstructive technique by displacing positions of utterance: Sexist commentary or behaviour as well as its feminist criticism may come from any of the three characters Liz, Jenna and even Jack. While Liz is the obvious champion of women's rights Jenna usually acts as an example of all the jokes on famous or not so famous blondes. Still, she also typically speaks as the voice of female empowerment. Whenever Lemon claims "It's different for women" – being a tough boss, having a much younger sexual partner – she is rebuked by Donaghy: "That is so sexist of you. To that clueless boy over there you're a very powerful woman." (Season 2, Episode 7, "Cougars") The same Jack Donaghy applauds Lemon for "thinking like a businessman" and on being corrected "a business woman" by Liz herself only answers: "I don't think that's a word." (Season 2, Episode 3, "The Collection") Apart from these instances it would be advisable to look at the wider framework of the show to assess the way it becomes engaged in a critical discussion of gender differences:

> *30 Rock*'s blending of the fictional and the biographical might also be the show's greatest contribution to scholars investigating the intersection of gender and political economy in media production, particularly as Fey constructs an avatar and, in the process, presents what can be read as a self-reflective feminist critique of working in the culture industry. (Vesey, Lambert)

This holds true for the NBC-locale as a meta-fictional context set by the double role of Tina Fey/Liz Lemon as writer/actress. It provides an overriding perspective that affects our perception of the politically incorrect jokes presented on character level.

7 "The Girly Show with Tracy Jordan" (TGS), the sketch comedy written by Liz Lemon's team, remains at the background of *30 Rock*; it is more referenced to than actually represented. When we do get a glimpse of the skits and bits on TGS, they centre on celebrity parodies including politicians and on bodily functions. A best-of-reel assembled to protect the show from "Cutbacks" (Season 3, Episode 17) features a mad scientist's "farting machine" and a temporarily overweight Jenna on roller skates, covering her unintended fall with the catch phrase "Me want food!" The comic setting can thus be categorized as carnivalesque. Its emphasis lies on the grotesque body, as Bakhtin found it in Rabelais: "The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (26). This is complemented by another carnivalesque measure, i.e. social inversion, the symbolic downfall of today's ruling class in media: Condoleezza Rice, Paris Hilton, Oprah Winfrey.

8 The conspicuous fact that many of the objects of parody are female drives a feminist point where none would be expected: women have become powerful enough to be spoofed. This is a step forward in comic emancipation when compared to the unruly woman who has to make a spectacle of herself to be noticed, just like Jenna's "Me want food"-character. Other critics would argue that her persona's forceful articulation of bodily needs, characteristic of third wave feminism, is defused by commercialising the humour of it: T-shirts with the punch line sell big and afford Jenna the attention she craves more than food. While on the level of character this would indeed constitute an "appropriation" (Shugart, Egley Waggoner, O' Brian Hallstein) of feminist positions by media practice, on the meta-level *30 Rock* reflects on that very practice. Moreover, it offers an alternative by subjecting Liz Lemon, who holds a superior position within the media, to carnivalesque laughter.

9 Though shared interests have been demonstrated NBC and TGS, the satirical and the grotesque mode of *30 Rock* must not be confused. The episode ending of "The Break-Up" (Season 1, Episode 8) is a case in point. Toofer, Harvard educated writer, disagrees with actor Tracy on how African Americans, a group they both belong to, should represent themselves. After sensitivity training they reconcile and decide to write a sketch on "racial relations" together. Yet, this piece is never shown on TGS, as Tracy prefers to impersonate TV presenter Star Jones in a "gastric bypass cooking show" eating and throwing up, which the studio audience apparently finds hilarious. Even Toofer admits that "this *is* actually funnier". Here, TGS is exposed as the lower, narrower form of comedy. All the political satire associated with the real SNL-tradition has been taken from its fictitious equivalent and transferred to the storylines "inside NBC". Reading *30 Rock* thus requires the ability to consider different genres of laughter separately while on the other hand they have to be placed within an overall self-referential, intertextual narrative. The same goes for the one site of comedy that remains to be scrutinized: the dialogue between the main character and her boss.

10 If you are looking for a strong unifying feature of the whole program it can be found in what I will call "corporate comedy". While in the title sequence the famous towering GE building is viewed from below, the series itself unfolds behind the scenes of a popular show produced by a major network. That *30 Rock* takes place in a hyper-institutional environment is most noticeable when we follow Liz Lemon into the office of Jack Donaghy, "head of east coast television and microwave oven programming". To enter the higher realm of NBC owned by General Electrics owned by the fictitious Sheinhardt Wig Company she has to ride the elevator up to the 52nd floor. In a 21st century update of carnivalesque reversal the show deals with the most sacred institutions of media and economy only to bring them down to

earth. As it says in *Problems of Dostevsky's Poetics*, what carnival suspends "first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it" (123). "Liz" and "Jack" are collaborative agents of this humour due to their friendship that practises "familiarization" (123) across the gap of hierarchy.

11 Despite this corporate comedy and collaborative carnival the same central relationship is responsible for introducing a difference relevant to both the history of comic communication and to gender in historical terms. One of the most revealing episodes in that respect would be "Jack-Tor" (Season 1, Episode 5). Donaghy has recorded a training video for the writing staff at NBC: Being vice president of General Electrics, he explains his company's philosophy of product placement, "pos-mens" in marketing speech, "positive mentions". Later, a blooper reel reveals that Jack is competent economically but fails disastrously as an actor. Communicating in a wholly different social sphere he is not even able to articulate the words anymore: What is "product integortion (= integration)" anyway? Apart from providing the means to economic ends the media seems to have its own logic the business man is not familiar with, at least not when it comes to acting. Also, Donaghy's high rank proves to be irrelevant to the social situation he is faced with. Both conditions are crucial, as the incident comically exploits the fact that modern society, according to the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, is no longer organized hierarchically, like in the Middle Ages, but follows the "functional differentiation" (190) of autonomous subsystems.[1] Although individuals are able to act in more than one system, principles are different. Later on in the episode, Liz tries to crack a joke to Jack who leaves for a conference with his corporate division head: "Oh, yeah, you guys gonna correlate overseas earnings report dynamics" (pauses in between, gestures indicating improvisation). Jack (dead serious in tone and facial expression): "Yes." The disruption of communication obviously works both ways even if the joke does not.

12 Liz and Jack do not have the same sense of humour, yet there are social and gender related reasons for that discrepancy. At least, Donaghy recognizes Lemon's expertise in comedy writing. In "Tracy does Conan" (Season 1, Episode 7) he asks her to suggest a funny opening line for a speech at a high class social event. Liz: "I haven't seen as many white people in tuxedos since the Titanic." Jack: "Lemon, this is not Open Mike Night at the Bryn Mawr Student Union." Her one-liner is answered by his sexist and elitist sarcastic repartee. The second suggestion is not received any more favourably: "Wow, a thousand dollars a

[1] Andreas Böhn's article mentions the relevance of Luhmann's concept of changing social differentiation for comedy (55), but does not develop a theory in its own right.

plate! For that kind of money this stuffed chicken breast better paint my house." Judging by their actual position, she is "joking up", making fun of the privileged group, whereas he is "joking down" at those who have not established themselves yet. His reference to all female college Bryn Mawr puts a gender twist to the whole exchange. As a professional funny woman Liz attempts to joke down, but her satirical and social alliances betray themselves which, drawing on postcolonial theory, can be considered an act of subversive mimicry. Jack, on the other hand, is fixated on status, which is exactly why his punch line, a convoluted comment on his business friend's managerial skills, "doesn't even make sense", as Liz rightly observes. From a theoretical point of view Donaghy fails to understand comedy because he is caught up in a pre-modern social order whose hierarchies are only exemplified by today's corporate thinking. This would render the approach gendered as male anachronistic while the comedienne knows how to communicate flexibly, in different subsystems of society. Besides, she uses the leeway of ambiguous attribution to have fun with it. This is, of course, even more valid with regard to Tina Fey who has written Jack's lines as well.

13 Taking the meta-fictional situation into account there is a difference between Liz Lemon, the comedy writer of TGS and Liz Lemon, the leading comedy actress in *30 Rock*. Jack Donaghy can not handle both levels equally well. In the episode analysed before, the former was referred to, the function of professional humour within the fictional frame. Whenever Lemon delivers a punch line in the midst of serious conversation, however, Donaghy looks bewildered instead of amused. "Black Tie" (Season 1, Episode 12) starts out, as an exception, at the site of TGS, with Liz directing her actors. She takes the stage herself to show them how it is done: "What is the difference between your Mama and a washing machine? – When I drop a load in the washing machine it doesn't follow me around for a week." After this male chauvinist joke she is addressed by Donaghy: "Lemon, can I speak with you alone, please." Liz: "That's what your sister asked me last night, booyah!" Maybe he does not react, because the ghetto style of this joke misses his class humour or because he misses that she is only acting male. The context has staged Lemon's double role as director and actor of a comedy show so what Jack really has no sensibility for is irony, fictional irony in particular. As the serious conversation goes on Liz agrees to accompany her boss to a social event: "OK fine, I'll do it, but I'm not gonna like it." – Jack (very seriously): "That's what your mom said to me last night – booyah." Liz bursts out laughing, saying to herself when he has left: "That was surprising." Indeed it was, for the corporate man has once managed to produce a follow up to the show's professional, ironical type of humour,

something which Jack Donaghy is incapable of but which actor Alec Baldwin is certainly brilliant at.

14 To further develop the gender argument: The male character's lack of meta-fictional awareness is indicative of a lack of social as well as historical awareness. In contrast to the funny female of *30 Rock* he has not adjusted his humour to the change in societal differentiation: from hierarchy (pre-modern) to functionally independent systems (modern). Luhmann's theory further assumes that communication and, therefore, society is based on follow up. Every type of organization limits the factor of surprise in what is said and done socially. The underlying problem of "double contingency" (Luhmann, 105) has to be accounted for, the fact that one person interacting neither knows what to expect of the other person nor what this other expects him to expect. Apart from primary differentiation, a social relation that reduces contingency is friendship. Between Liz and Jack we have seen several counter-tendencies that multiply the risk of misunderstanding or rather precarious follow up. Providing an abstract definition, this ambivalence characterizes comic communication at any point in history. In comedy the impulse to communicate will always assert itself, yet it asserts itself against strategies of subverting the respective historical principle of organization.

15 So far it has been suggested that Liz Lemon is superior to and historically ahead of Jack Donaghy in her practice of modern comic communication. But beyond that *30 Rock's* advanced structure can be traced down to the past of feminist humour, a question that comes to the fore in "Rosemary's Baby" (Season 2, Episode 4). Comedy writer Rosemary Howard belongs to so-called second-wave feminism: In the sixties and seventies an anti-patriarchal stance was taken in all matters of cultural politics. Initially, Lemon looks to Howard as an idol and pioneer in her field, yet the radical take of "pushing the envelope" (Howard) clashes with the limited subversion at TGS. When Rosemary, as guest writer, pitches the sketch idea of a "mulatto" in an "abortion clinic", Liz resorts to timid political correctness, claiming that those words are not allowed anymore. As she has just received the GE "followership award" presented to "the woman, sorry, person who best exemplifies a follower" (Jack) it is very clear that the episode satirizes a backlash in feminism. The title reference to Polanski's film applies to Liz following in the footsteps of second-wave comediennes and to Howard as well "who by the end of the episode literally becomes the burden Liz Lemon bears – psychologically as a reminder of feminism's (troubled) legacy" (Vesey, Lambert).

16 From the angle of feminist history the bottom line is uttered by Rosemary herself: "You can not abandon me, Liz. You *are* me. […] I broke barriers for you." Comparing the

two types of comedy, *30 Rock* and Howard's proclaimed radicalism, a different picture emerges. First, the actual show in contrast to TGS is not afraid of political incorrectness and pushes the limits of comic taboo in a sophisticated, self-reflective manner. Secondly, Rosemary's provocative take on gendered laughter seems outdated rather than progressive: After stirring Liz to quit her job, she drafts a joint film project about "women in their fifties [who] join the army and get laid by a bunch of grateful eighteen-year-olds". Moreover, the female comedy veteran is mentally and historically disoriented, thinking it is still "the 90ies". This does not mean, however, that her successor or even *30 Rock* represents the ultimate state of the art. In fact, the "followership"-award admits the very difficulty of creating a female style of comedy now that comediennes are irrevocably working within the system. The meta-level in *30 Rock* is not gratuitous irony but a way to highlight and process that complication which has been narrated as historical outcome by "Rosemary's Baby".

17 Returning to the earlier assumption – society's structural change affects comic communication – there is a story about the funny female left untold. Throughout the 19th century, when societal differentiation was already modern, i.e. functional, women's laughter was still defined within hierarchical gender relations of humour. If they chose to write in the comic genre their distribution of subjects and objects of laughter was shaped by male hegemony. For example, in the drama *Das Manuscript* (1826) the author Johanna v. Weißenthurn makes a change by ridiculing the male attitude of genius and taking the heroine seriously, who is scorned by men for her literary ambitions. This is more of an anti-hierarchical reversal than modern subversion of communication. Consequently, women run the risk of being stuck for ever in the carnivalesque or, as it were, postcolonial period of comedy. Neither Rosemary's rebellious attacks nor Liz's mimicry escapes this continuation of the past. Besides, they have lost an advantage caused by their gender fellows' belated comic emancipation. As long as the funny female was an exception, not an institution that non-place would have been well suited for unexpected joking. Precisely because they had no position those earliest precursors of Lemon and Howard were in the position to disrupt social follow-up by the improbability of women using the comic mode. To recreate that crisis of attribution, that element of surprise essential to modern humour *30 Rock* makes the effort of building a complex structure that dis-places female laughter, not least by meta-fictional ambiguities.

18 Now that the theoretical as well as historical reading is laid out it should be no longer far-fetched to attribute a unique status to *30 Rock*: Its historiography of gender and humour, its contemporary quality does not depend on feminist orthodoxy, be it third or second wave. Tina Fey hardly turns back the time to the days when women had no business making jokes,

let alone at their own expense. Rather the past alternatives for female comedy or women's laughter in general are built into the show's comedic scope, its internal differences and the metaleptic running gag afforded by its creative and corporate background. The proof of *30 Rock's* avant-garde aspirations is not in TGS-carnival or NBC-satire, the unlikely friendship between Jack Donaghy and Liz Lemon sets the standard. As final example, "Retreat to Move Forward" (Season 3, Episode 9) deserves to be examined. It sums up the reasons why Liz Lemon pushes beyond the unruly woman. In this scenario she is definitely not the one who needs mentoring, but a master of communication who saves her boss.

19 Jack asks Liz to come with him on a corporate retreat. Nervous about a legendary band of business coaches he needs moral support, but his familiarity with the female subordinate is frowned upon by the men from "Six Sigma". All the same Donaghy stays true to his "camp buddy" (Liz) taking her to "L.U.N.C.H", explained as: "Lego Utilization for Negating Crisis Hierarchies", a "competitive team exercise". That "C.L.A.S.S" stands for lunch time break Liz finds "intentionally confusing". This confusion does not keep her from excelling at the Lego task and becoming impatient with Donaghy who is supposed to give instructions, being the only one with a map of the train model the group has to built: "Don't stop talking, Jack, always be talking!" Apart from affirming the communicative skills of women this may allude to the basic social process of constant follow-up. Liz acts more competitive than any other businessman or -woman in the exercise. After her group has won ("Suck it, losers!") she takes the longish Lego engine and pretends "it is my penis" in unintentional travesty of the ruling aggressive power display – the "penis" breaks. The parody continues nonetheless with Liz playing "robot penis", complete with robot voice. She is "unruly" by over-adjustment, by outperforming the male agenda. She also stretches the limits of carnivalesque familiarity and reversal when taking the lead during team work, making fun of Jack's slow reactions at L.U.N.C.H: "Say something, haircut!" – "Adoy!" It almost seems like a revenge for all the times her boss has mocked her social ineptitude. Donaghy, intimidated and embarrassed by her outburst, is at the same time proud of his friend's achievement.

20 The climax of "Retreat to Move Forward" is yet to come. Liz and Jack are both in the habit of giving themselves psych-up speeches before important occasions, with the slight gender difference that she calls herself "stupid bitch" for breaking a sweat in the face of unknown people at a party while he tells the "son of a bitch" in the mirror that "it's winning time" before giving a lecture as management expert. Unfortunately, the microphone is already on, so the whole audience at the Six Sigma-meeting listens to Jack's soliloquy. For once, Donaghy's fetish for corporate power disables him, as he can not immediately recover from

the shame. Liz has rushed backstage to stop his involuntary comic performance. Before she enters the stage to create a distraction we get to hear her state of mind: "I got nothing." At this point, the crisis has arrived as it can not be predicted how and if Lemon will succeed in promoting the process of communication. Introducing herself as "Liz Lemon from the entertainment division" is quite a clever move, because it addresses the social system of economy, thus making sure that the interaction will go on. "Let's maximise the fun quadrant of this evening," she shouts out to the crowd. Further enhancing this effect, the impromptu-format offered by the "entertainment division" gives her a chance to talk about anything.

21 "I just fooled you all with my Jack Donaghy-impression" – in this particular scene Liz tries to lift the disgrace off Jack. She does this by changing social attribution from unintended ridiculousness in a business situation to professional comedy. It almost works out; when she asks a man from the audience "What's the craziest thing that happened to you this weekend, Dave?" he insists on: "Hearing Jack Donaghy talk on that microphone." Dave gets the laughs for this statement of fact. Still, Lemon's performance takes on another dimension if understood as a *mise en abyme* of *30 Rock*. As we have seen before, whenever the character Liz takes the stage this introduces self-reflection within the narrative. It is indeed striking that all the modes of *30 Rock* are featured in this variety show in a nutshell: stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, (musical) parody, but also social satire and media intertextuality with a reference to the 70ies sitcom *Happy Days*. It might therefore not be Liz Lemon but Tina Fey who "fooled [us] all with [her] Jack Donaghy-impression". Evidently, because she wrote his misogynist sarcasm, less obviously, because she lets Liz play the mimicry-part: The "penis" she takes on, adopting Jack's gendered philosophy of life and work, is made of Lego. The whole episode is remarkable for revealing the comedy author of *30 Rock* to be female, not by way of contextual knowledge, but in a meta-fictional constellation within the text.

22 When Dave remains unimpressed Liz makes the final desperate move: "Not anymore" will the microphone-incident be the "craziest thing" now that she rips open her blouse with her bra showing, vocally rendering and dancing to the 1990ies hit "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)" by C + C Music Factory. Afterwards more attendants talk about "the bra lady that went crazy" than about Donaghy's fall from business grace. Back in New York, Jack thanks Liz and calls her "heroic", the friends are reunited. What happened is that the unruly woman has taken the bullet for the corporate man. Baring her breast in true TGS-style, she has more than just made a spectacle of herself. On one level she snatches the leading part from co-star Jack Donaghy/Alec Baldwin: Liz Lemon after all *is* the main character of *30 Rock* who causes laughter by embarrassing herself. On another level, she

discloses the female author. Acting as writer she finally proves her superior grasp of what it means to be funny in a modern society of subsystems. Unrelated yet unforgettable: the loving expression on Jack's face while he watches his "buddy" being silly and unafraid.

23 "Retreat to Move Forward", the episode title, could be a motto for the issue pervading *30 Rock*: What are the possibilities of gendered humour today and how do they relate to the historical range of women's laughter? You can not retreat to move forward, considering that politics and the media have changed since the days of Rosemary Howard. You can not retreat to move forward, considering that a joke from a star comedienne will never be as socially disturbing as female wit in those centuries when women were generally the objects not the agents of laughter. There is no going back from institutional comedy and no going back to the purely hierarchical order of social relations. You will advance, however, if you include those historical perspectives into the program. You will advance, if you do not retreat from any kind of humour: feminist or sexist, ironical or physical. If the interplay between fictional action and the meta-level of writing is as highly artistic as in *30 Rock* the resulting disguises and exposures can actually surprise the post-modern viewer. Tina Fey has not fooled us, but maybe we are still none the wiser about the place of the funny female.

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