

Canned Laughter, Gimmick Sound

The topic of this chapter is something usually described as distasteful, if not disgraceful: the sound of prerecorded television laugh tracks. This technology was introduced into American television around 1953 and was often referred to as “canned laughter.” The epithet was negative even back then, redolent of both the artificial preservation of dead organic matter and abbreviated domestic labor (i.e., canned food). The TV comedian Red Skelton described this laughter thus in 1956: “Now they’ve got whole laugh-track libraries—canned, dehydrated, hermetically-sealed human laughter, artificially preserved . . . the laughter of corpses—that’s what you get on television! Now it’s spreading to radio. The titter-grinder is one of the most shameful frauds ever perpetrated. We are being hoodwinked into laughter, at the cost of our sense of humor. [. . .] You people are only laughing by proxy.”¹

Skelton’s outrage passes through metaphors that are familiar to those who study the history of recorded voices: death, ghosts, embalming, preservation. The word *canned* used in relation to recorded sound became commonplace in American discourse only after World War II, though “canned music” was coined as a derogatory term for recorded music by none other than John Philip Sousa in 1906, and canned goods date back to 1850s wartime food production.² Postproduced laughter was also known in the 1950s as “sweetening”—a word tied to additives, flavoring, and artificial pleasure. Rather than being a crude form of technological determinism, then, the notion of “canned” sound marks a response to the symbolism of canned food after World War II within US bounds (cheap, abbreviated wifely labor in the home) and perhaps also outside them (the emergence of postwar American imperialism and its attendant markets). Yet this briefly sketched cultural history cannot quite account for Skelton’s bellowing indignation. At the end of the quote his tone darkens further as he muses on a laughing crowd piloted into physical response by an invisible hand. From a swipe at Campbell’s soup we are transported to the realm of McCarthyist paranoia and brainwashing. How did this happen? Why was recorded *laughter* able to plunge Skelton—and many others after him—into such depths of disgust?

In this chapter, I mine this disgust, tracing it both to its cultural origins and to the sonic and musical practices that were its target.³ In order to do this, I will adopt a position that is still relatively unusual for those who have written on the theme: I will refuse to erect myself as a judge deciding whether canned laughter amounts to political brainwashing or whether it allows for subtler forms of political agency in its audiences.⁴ Instead, I ask why, of all the relatively unimportant features of televised sound, this technology sparked such intense outrage and paranoia, and what this discourse can tell us about the way we regard our own listening in modern capitalism. My working hypothesis is that midcentury laugh tracks were accompanied by an emerging sense that they were a uniquely audible form of ideology-in-play. As soon, that is, as laughter was postproduced into TV shows, it became important to be able to distinguish—or rather, to imagine that one could distinguish—canned laughter from (let’s call it) free-range laughter, postproduced from live. Of course, the debate about the authenticity of laughter and the capacity to tell “fake” from “real” laughter is a long-standing seam of Western modernity, and canned laughter is only one chapter in a long history. But, to my mind, the history of canned laughter shows us that the dream of being able to pick ideology apart by ear, of acquiring the audile technique for discerning truth from lie, is a peculiar, late-capitalist commodity all its own.⁵ The burgeoning belief that one could prize apart recorded and live laughter gave rise to informal techniques for making this distinction, and such techniques were and are essential rather than detrimental to the success of laugh tracks.

We can begin with some historical reflections, locating a beginning to the systematic use of TV laugh tracks—preceded though they were by a scattered use of prerecorded laughter in radio shows. According to my taxonomy, the term *canned laughter* refers specifically to prerecorded laugh tracks that are postproduced into a TV sitcom (not any other medium). The most famous and most often discussed means of doing this was the so-called Laff Box, a contraption designed by the wartime engineer Charles Douglass that connected loops of taped laughter to a typewriter keyboard.⁶ But many other competing practices for postproduction emerged almost immediately (such as playing a taped show to a live audience or splicing the recorded laughter onto the tape without the use of Douglass’s machine). We will return to the Laff Box and its hegemony later, but in all of these forms, canned laughter was proper to North American television but also widely exported in one of the most glaring examples of US cultural imperialism after World War II. In many ways, canned laughter signified the neocolonial export of the comedic scripts of midcentury American television, scripts that, as Judith Yaross Lee recently pointed out, themselves derived from equivalent British scripts. Lee analyzes the dynamic that allowed American imperialism to obscure its own ideological nervature: “These characterizations specifically twit condescending

British and other former masters or elites of the modern American empire in a fantasy that asserts postrevolutionary American ideals of the ordinary (usually white) citizen. [. . .] By imagining themselves as innocent victims of empire, they, conveniently enough, evaded responsibility for the American imperium that followed as the United States grew westward by focusing attention eastward, across the Atlantic, instead.”⁷

The Californian setting of the conception and production of laugh tracks is key in this respect—as a site of this emerging “westward gaze” that hid its colonial ambitions toward the Pacific under the rubric of an anticolonial, postrevolutionary (and, as Lee points out, largely white) pride. Indeed, we will soon see this ideology of the charmingly innocent white American take center stage in the earliest sitcom to feature canned laughter: *The Hank McCune Show*, which was not only shot but also set in Los Angeles. Yet equally important, and related to the ideology of midcentury Californian television and its catering to white middle America, is canned laughter’s endurance and afterlife as an object of both suspicion and disgust. One oft-quoted example is a scene in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977) in which the protagonist, Alvy, develops violent nausea on a trip to Los Angeles after observing the addition of a laugh track to a TV comedy show. This “ick” factor is an enduring part of the cultural discourse surrounding canned laughter—nowadays not an open moral disgust à la Red Skelton but a kind of fly-swatting liberal irritation. The British newspaper the *Guardian*, which likes to see itself and is often thought of by its dedicated readers as one of the last pillars of the liberal elite—no paywall, commitment to long-term inquiries into burning political issues, some attempts at leaving sensationalism at the door—has devoted hundreds of column inches to canned laughter (all damning) since 2002.⁸ Laugh tracks have also been increasingly disgraced and maligned outside left-wing discourse over the past twenty years, with the emergence of reality TV and, more important, a style of comedy that is shot and edited like a documentary, with lower production values, movable cameras and tracking shots, and deliberately offbeat and awkward dialogue. This mockumentary aesthetic pointedly implies a remove from the high production and postproduction values of the TV studios of traditional sitcoms. It is no mystery that a string of US comedy series—*Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–), *Scrubs* (2001–2010), *Arrested Development* (2003–2019), *The Office* (2005–2013), *30 Rock* (2006–2013), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015)—found success in part by effectively changing the contemporary aesthetic of TV comedy, moving it away from timed gags with punch lines and laughter and toward a slower rhythm and deadpan delivery that dispenses with the need for live audience response.

Yet it is remarkable that, for all its decline as a practice, the use of canned laughter continues to draw attention. Reruns and the wide digital availability on streaming platforms of sitcoms from the era of laugh tracks—especially those within recent memory like *Friends* (1994–2004) or *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019)—keep laugh tracks within the realm of contemporary culture even as the discourse

around them has remained uniformly critical in tone. I mentioned the *Guardian* in the previous paragraph, but there have been contributions from the higher academic echelons as well, with, for example, the journal *Critical Inquiry* publishing a special issue devoted to laughter, including an article on canned laughter.⁹ There are now forms of entertainment that are grounded in the mockery of laugh tracks. For instance, on the digital channel Comedy Central, a June 2016 episode of Amy Schumer's satirical show *Inside Amy Schumer*, titled "The Psychopath Test," parodies a 1990s sitcom, with increasingly racist, sexist, and fatphobic jokes delivered to the sound of uproarious canned laughs on cue, to the increasing distress of one of the characters, who catches on to the ideological trickery at play and tries to warn the others before being abruptly replaced by a more compliant actor. On the level of grassroots, user-generated comedy on YouTube, a whole genre of video has emerged in the past five years in which segments of sitcoms from the 1990s are shown stripped of their laugh tracks. You can watch, say, a five-minute segment from *Friends* featuring Ross Geller making a series of misogynist jokes and then standing there in deafening silence, waiting for the canned laughter to subside. The fact that the characters stop for the laughs makes the confected nature of the shows—and in this case the calculated naturalization of the misogyny—all the more apparent and thus ripe for critique.¹⁰ The moral is clear: canned laughter tells us when to laugh, or worse, it laughs *for* us, becoming a form of mind-numbing social entertainment with dark political ends. The laugh track is, according to this interpretation, a cipher for the enabling of all the things we find distasteful about now-ancient sitcoms as a genre: the whitewashing, the glorification of the middle class, the general disregard for if not mockery of any sort of minority, the misogyny, and so on. But—to repeat—for me the real point of interest is not so much the presence of such ideological constructs in comedy of the past but the fact that laugh tracks can function for contemporary audiences as a perennially ready alarm bell, for such ideologies, or, to switch metaphor, they act as a distancing screen between *us*, a self-styled politically aware public, and past cultural artifacts that we now consume for the peculiar pleasure of diagnosing their ideological flaws. In its new guise as a suspicious ideology that users can peel away courtesy of basic video and audio editing software, the laugh track becomes, paradoxically, an enduring, fungible aural commodity.

Perhaps, then, our distaste for canned laughter, the desire to scrub it out of our ears and off of our soundtracks, is part of the commodity of canned laughter rather than a means of excising ourselves from it. If so, laugh tracks require us to dwell on an uncomfortable thought. Can a commodity such as prerecorded laughter be constructed to second-guess its audience in such a way that the audience's distaste for it becomes a selling point? And is this distaste something that separates contemporary audiences from, say, the supposedly mindless consumers of early laugh tracks? Are we more-evolved listeners than those who preceded us, or are we the latest in a long line of consumers who take pleasure in thinking themselves above the commodity they consume?

The reader may have noticed that, in the previous two paragraphs, I used the first-person plural, in a rather irritating way. Who, really, is the “we” to whom I refer when I flag the distaste for canned laughter and the implicit smugness that sometimes accompanies it? And why does my observation of contemporary disavowal of canned laughter need to be directed at both myself and my potential readers rather than at a more defined and distinct third-person plural? What, indeed, do I know of my readers such that I would include them in this collective pronoun instead of more respectfully allowing them to distance themselves as they see fit? The use of *we* in this chapter is strange, an imperfect solution to a problem of positioning. As I will outline below, many members of the contemporary liberal professional-managerial class have exhibited a revulsion to laugh tracks that is akin to a revulsion to any kind of visibly nonliberal ideology—any ideology, that is, that denies the self-determination, capacity for critical consciousness, and upward mobility of any human subject. Laugh tracks are counted as base attempts at brainwashing and consensus creation that go against the ethos of the critical, self-aware liberal subject, and I hail you, reader, and also myself as people who have held and still hold some hopes and dreams to either be such a subject or foster such freethinking in others. But I also hail us both as members of a neoliberal professional-managerial class for whom participating in the public flagging of racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist discourses has become a highly desirable and marketable (if quickly inflationed) skill.¹¹ This is what Catherine Liu calls “virtue hoarding”: the monopolizing of a discourse of social justice, often enacted at the level only of consumer choice, at the expense of a redistribution of wealth, which marks out the contemporary professional-managerial class (and calls, for Liu, for its abolition).¹² Exposing laugh tracks and “choosing” not to endorse or consume them is, in my view, a minor symptom of this shared ideology.

There are two corollaries to these shared neoliberal desires for public virtue. The first is the frequent implicit belief that it is only we and not our predecessors (in this chapter’s case, 1950s television audiences, media executives, and trade press) who perceive such ideologies for what they are and that therefore we embody the highest, most advanced form of critical consciousness. The second is the inevitable worry that we are, in fact, much more subservient to ideology than we claim to be (indeed, that we may serve ideology precisely through our apparent critique of it). This generates an attending anxiety to stave off ruin by further performatively distinguishing truth from lie, ideology from fact, right from wrong even as our belief in such distinctions quietly and slowly hollows. The desperate wish to display a capacity for telling truth from lie and the ambition to do so more easily than others (those before us and those around us) is something that joins us as members, or aspiring members, of a particular class at this moment in history. The aim of this chapter is to show that not only do we share this exact same wish and ambition with a group of people (white middle-class midcentury Americans) with whom few identify nowadays but these desires were, in fact, anticipated, incorporated, and catered to by the complex commodities that were midcentury laugh tracks.

Were I to vaguely attribute these liberal wishes and ambitions to North American and European audiences—though even that would be inaccurate, as laugh tracks were common in television around the world by the 1960s—the pull of the argument would be lost somewhat, with its subject diluted into a “they” that is too comfortably separated from author and reader. It is only through the performative “we” that I can—awkwardly and imperfectly, but humbly—tie myself and the reader to the historical subjects and artifacts of this chapter.

And now for some historical analysis. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, canned laughter was a subject of discussion as early as the 1950s. In 1953, the prominent TV producer Jess Oppenheimer (the producer and head writer for *I Love Lucy*) wrote a short article in *Variety* laying out the landscape of canned laughter practices and attendant reactions. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

A number of television comedy shows on film have been using certain systems to incorporate laughs which create *an unnatural effect and this is quite disturbing to the home audience*. Some programs put the show on film and then play that film to a studio audience and record that audience’s reaction, which is then put on the sound track of the original film. This gives an honest reaction but that reaction sometimes, in fact, most times, doesn’t correspond with the timing of the actors on the film. Some programs don’t ever play it in front of a studio audience but simply take recorded laughs and dub them in where the producer feels the action calls for it. This too, unless most expertly done, creates *an unnatural result and uncomfortable feeling in the home audience*. The viewer may not have the critical faculties to analyze exactly why he doesn’t like the laugh, *he just knows something is wrong*, and is liable to condemn the whole idea of using laughs.¹³

An interesting counterpoint to Skelton, Oppenheimer thinks of laughter as a consumer good and of audience reaction as, basically, market research. He insists (as I have italicized three times in the above quote) that audiences can tell—although they may not know how—when they are listening to laughs that are spliced into the soundtrack. It is worth noting that his tone is one of ongoing market research and not really so moralizing, although the terms he uses to qualify a functional laughter commodity are political: “natural” and “honest.” The laughter that sells has the shine of authenticity, if nothing else—and it is important to remember that Oppenheimer was soon selling his own laugh-track-making machine (the Jay-O Laughter), which narrowly lost a patent war to Douglass’s Laff Box.¹⁴ Nature and honesty, then, are selling points here, and the belief in the audience’s ability to tell canned from free range becomes a means of marketing the commodity—indeed, of marketing a more “organic” form able to cheaply fulfill the need for live laughter.

As to whether anyone can really discriminate and distinguish between live and canned laughter, the answer, then as now, is no, not really. For instance, some of

the laughter in *Friends*, particularly in later seasons, is from a live audience. Yet that doesn't stop YouTubers from scrubbing it from the audio tracks and knowingly displaying the awkward remains. In any case, it would be naïve to imagine that, historically, laughers have not been coached, planted in the audience, and even put on stage next to the performers to respond on cue.¹⁵ What is crucial here, though, is that the investment in being able to tell true from fake laughter—and, in the twentieth century, prerecorded from live laughter—endures well past such basic critical considerations. We conveniently forget, for example, that early sitcoms using canned laughter sometimes played with the idea of laughter being a recorded sound. Signaling the laughter as artificial was part of the fun. For instance, Ernie Kovacs's show had a gag in which someone opened tin cans that released peals of laughter and applause.¹⁶ But there were also more complex ways of flagging laughs as part of a postproduced soundtrack. In the first televised episode of *The Hank McCune Show*, one of the first series to use canned laughter from Douglass's Laff Box, we see the titular character (a blundering, good-natured young man) attempting to fix a gramophone, only to find that the contraption sounds like a radio skipping stations—and canned laughter rippling on is part and parcel of this moment of technological confusion. In another laborious gag from the same episode, Hank's landlady suspects him of kleptomania and sends a handyman to secure all the furniture in his rented apartment. While Hank is out, the handyman proceeds to methodically nail down every chair, hanging picture, and ashtray while laughing very loudly to himself—an odd, almost pantomimed scene. When Hank returns home and tries to move a chair, only for it to stick and cause him to lose his balance and fall over, the canned laughter that ensues is clearly meant to be heard as an echo of the handyman's cackle as he made the chair fast, almost as if the laughter were stored in the objects at the heart of the gag.¹⁷ A later episode features the handyman oiling a squeaky door hinge and then using the same oil to fix someone's loud chewing—another knowing use of postproduced sounds that is rounded off, of course, by canned laughter.¹⁸

The pleasure in signaling artificiality—and guiding others toward identifying the markers of artifice—also features in the industry press of the same years. Overall, as we have discussed, the TV industry press routinely panned the use of canned laughter. One Jose Walter Thompson, writing for *Variety*, summed up the general opinion when he remarked in 1958 that the laugh track for *Father Knows Best* was “as phoney as a politician's embrace and totally unnecessary.”¹⁹ Critics were also eager to mention the supposed aural giveaways of “laughter from the can,” almost as if to train others to make the distinction by ear. One writer, reviewing a show called *Duffy's Tavern* in 1954, declared that “the canned laughter, poorly selected, much of the time overlapped. Most of the lines and situations invited chuckles rather than raucous laughter, which is how the ‘audience reaction’ came across.”²⁰ Poor syncing and excessive loudness recur as sonic markers in many reviews and became informal means of sorting laughers on the soundtrack. Yet an anonymous reviewer remarked of *You'll Never Get Rich*, a new show by Phil Silvers, that it

had “a plethora of laughs on the soundtrack, some of them even obliterating the film’s best lines. Comment has been loud and long about it, with a couple of critics even declaring that the ‘canned laughter would have to be eliminated.’ Actually, the Silvers show was filmed before an audience at the DuMont Telecenter in N.Y. and they were ‘live’ laughs. [. . .] With the audiences, the laughter is too loud, comes in the wrong places.”²¹ According to this writer, then, the same aural signifiers (loudness and poor timing) could signify at once liveness and postproduction, artificiality and authenticity, giving the lie, as early as 1955, to the idea of an audible technique capable of telling them apart. Of course, this is but one of hundreds of short mentions of canned laughter in industry magazines in the 1950s—hardly a fly in the ointment of a rising desire for aural discernment between real and canned laughter. Yet for contemporary sound historians it is a stark reminder that suspicion of canned laughter, as well as the wished-for ability of locating it by ear, is something that marked the technology’s emergence. Our current feelings about canned laughter are, then, the result of neither an acquired taste nor the wisdom of hindsight but are instead an uncomfortable, enduring inheritance. How did this come to pass?

GIMMICK

Let’s think in another way about the particular commodity that, according to my argument, canned laughter constitutes. Consider its use-value, in both economic and aesthetic terms. Employing prerecorded laughter was, in the burgeoning TV industry of the American midcentury, a means of cutting down costs while keeping up with demand. As more and more pilots were made and then syndicated into series contracts, the studio space capable of hosting a live audience became harder to find, as were actual, physical audiences. Remember that 1950s TV shows were by and large shot with a movable single camera—like films, that is (industry magazine even referred to them as “TV films”). This meant that every scene had to be reshot multiple times, from different angles (unlike contemporary sitcoms with a fixed multiple-camera setup, which has been the norm since the 1960s). Both actors and producers were candid about the ensuing costs and remarkably precise about numbers. The comedian Ray Bolger, writing to *Variety* in 1954 with a mea culpa for having used canned laughter in his TV show, justified himself with a string of figures: “Our elaborate dance production alone, which lasted a little more than three minutes on the screen, often took more than three hours to film. Just one scene. It took three eight-hour days to film the program. Using as many as 11 sets on a show, we could neither find a room to seat a ‘live’ audience nor the audience to sit it out for that long.”²²

With most sitcoms running twenty-five to thirty minutes, shooting time clocked in at around twenty-four hours per weekly episode, which excludes time for scripting, editing, and postproduction. Often, TV sitcoms were adaptations of radio shows fronted by the same comedians (this was the case, for instance,

with Red Skelton and Phil Silvers). Those shows had been recorded in front of live studio audiences, which was obviously a far less cumbersome affair in that technological medium. (It's worth remembering that prerecorded laughter was occasionally used in radio shows too.)²³ Live laughter in TV sitcoms, then, was important not so much—as is often argued—because it made the shows feel more like live theatrical performances but because it sutured a new media format to a previous one that audiences had already come to love: namely, radio. Laughter was necessary to the re-mediation of comedy from theater to radio to TV—it was a reality effect whose absence would have been felt as a rupture, a chink in the product. But live laughter and audience sounds were an unprofitable part of the TV sitcom even as its audiences still expected them.

It's important to be specific about what exactly constituted the issue here. Echoing Bolger, the journalist Bob Spielman wrote in 1955 that “[the TV producer Ray Singer], who uses audience reaction, not canned laughter, says one of the big problems these days is finding the audience to watch a TV show being run off.”²⁴ This is a striking contrast to the willing audiences of the laughing songs we encountered in the previous chapter, who aided economic reproduction by both paying for phonograph exhibits and marketing them with their laughter. I interpreted the laughter of those early phonograph audiences as a form of free reproductive labor that made the phonograph user-friendly and profitable. If we consider the perspective of a TV audience member at midcentury, the strain of such labor is evident: the filming schedule for a sitcom in the 1950s would involve sitting for eight hours as a ten-minute skit was reshot again and again. If for the producer this meant the expense of renting a studio that could seat an audience, there was also the issue of the audience itself. Even assuming one could find a willing live audience for the shoot, they'd likely become less and less prone to laugh over the course of the working day. Not to mention the cost of the hardware necessary to capture their responses: one critic estimated the need for thirty mikes for an audience of three hundred.²⁵ In short, being an audience member—nay, being an *appropriately vocal* audience member—was starting to look less like a form of consumption and more like labor of the kind that could no longer go unpaid. There remains little trace of these early live TV audiences: we don't in fact know if they were ever paid, or how much, but the difficulty in finding a paper trail suggests that they were off the books and so likely unpaid or at least unevenly paid; canned laughter swooped in to elide them right when—and likely because—they finally began to be seen as workers to be hired. After all, the TV industry was then recovering from the—to date—longest-running strike in the history of American entertainment: the Petrillo bans (named for the TV musicians union leader, James Petrillo), which saw musicians working in TV studios withhold their services to protest being recorded and thus made redundant. These strikes were of course unsuccessful, leading to mass dismissals of many who worked in the industry, but they lasted nearly two years, creating a large disturbance in the TV production line.²⁶ On the

heels of this disturbance, laughing audiences were likely taken as a problem to be swept under the rug, and quickly. Just as live audience laughter came to be seen as reproductive labor essential to the maintenance of the TV industry at large, it had to be elided, repressed, and displaced.

This admittedly superficial detour into the means of production of a laugh track—an ironic Marxian twist in a chapter set in the McCarthy era—gives us enough to begin understanding the kind of disgust that laugh tracks elicit. It is a disgust that clings to reproductive labor and emotion work in general, a disgust that implicitly genders, racializes, and dismisses the labor as something other than the rightful toil of a self-possessed, liberal subject. Bill Dietz's use of recorded concert audience sounds in his performance *L'école de la claque* sets up the work of *claqueurs* as nonwhite and nonpatriarchal, if not openly queer: "Contrary to the idealized image of white patriarchs engaged in rational, transparent exchange in Viennese coffee houses (as theorists such as Jürgen Habermas would have it), a history of the public sphere acknowledging the claque (the body of professional audience members paid to guide the evaluatory noise of an audience) would be messy, invested, conflictual, compromised, polarized."²⁷

There is much to be said for this kind of uncomfortable rehabilitation of the claque as anti-Enlightenment noise, yet I want to dwell in a place slightly to the left of this imaginative, positive reevaluation: I want to consider canned laughter as a reproductive labor that induces suspicion and disgust to this day, even among us (readers and writer alike). The renunciation of "the idealized image of white patriarchs"—or rather, their reincarnation in the implicit white middle-class subject of midcentury American television—is a tougher process than one might wish to acknowledge. Alongside a retelling of the history of audience responses, we need a critical consideration of a feeling that has long accompanied canned laughter and its ancestors: the intense desire for and belief in the ability to distinguish true from fake laughter.

To seriously consider what the link might be between disgust for canned laughter and its means of production and of consumption (including, therefore, the long history of our distaste for it), we must turn to a different kind of thinking. There is a disgust, Sianne Ngai reminds us, that is peculiar to our response to labor-saving devices and requires no allegiance to or even knowledge of Marxist tenets.²⁸ Ngai's work is famous for exploring, in original and profound ways, the aesthetic and political functions of negative and mixed emotions in capitalism. Indeed, from a more classical Marxist perspective, the dislike of laugh tracks signifies a critical consciousness that has caught on to a form of ideological conditioning. With this critique we enter a realm of esthesis that is resistant, detached from and antagonistic to the laws of capital. Pleasure, in this line of thinking—a bare-bones version of Frankfurt School aesthetics—is a form of ideological compliance; displeasure

is the door to the awakening of political consciousness. Ngai's work on emotional responses challenges this very basic assumption by showing that suspicion, disgust, fear, and pleasure all do their complex work in capitalism; she is broadly a Marxian thinker, but of a simultaneously wry and compassionate strain: for her, no form of aesthetic attunement can save us from capital, but conversely, a much closer, subtler, and profound connection exists between political and economic conditions and our aesthetic responses. In Ngai's thought, capital is a world of complex feeling, and its workings bind us to one another in incalculable, uncomfortable, and surprising ways.²⁹ It is from this place that I now want to consider the links between the production, consumption, and discourse of postproduced laughter.

I mentioned above our typical response of disgust to abbreviated labor, identified in Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick*. A gimmick is a device—by which Ngai means either an actual machine or, more broadly, a technique of the body or even a turn of speech—that saves labor time. As such, it obviously belongs to industrial capitalism and the long history of machines created to supplant, by being faster and thus cheaper, the labor of humans. Yet the gimmick is a unique subset of industrial hardware, in that it is meant to be observed, watched, and enjoyed as entertainment. Whether it does or does not save labor time is actually not relevant, because its primary function is to fulfill the desire to witness labor time in the process of being shortened and optimized, regardless of success. In this respect, the gimmick is not only the piece of hardware (e.g., the mechanized loom) but also the response the hardware elicits, which is more often than not ambivalent, if not outright negative (e.g., the disgust and fear of the Luddite facing the mechanized loom). Ngai's gimmick finds its primary forms of life in the realm of arts and entertainment and is just as likely to be the bodily technique of an entertainer as to be a machine. The comedian's bit, or hook, is a gimmick (one meant to elicit quick laughter without expending the energy for a full-fledged joke), and so are the many ways that comedic situations depict technology: as articulated, elaborate machines for performing basic tasks like buttering toast, for example. So the truth of the gimmick lies not in the literal description of what it is but—and this is what, for Ngai, makes it a product of industrial capitalism—in the audience's ambivalent aesthetic response to what it does. This kind of ambivalence, including its ties to capitalist production, is something for which Ngai offers us new language. In *Theory of the Gimmick*, she writes, "Repulsive if also strangely attractive, with a layer of charm we find ourselves forced to grudgingly acknowledge, labor- and time-saving gimmicks are of course not exclusive to comedy. We find them in shoes and cars, appliances and food, politics and advertising, journalism and pedagogy, and virtually every object made and sold in the capitalist system. But comedy [. . .] has a unique way of bringing out the gimmick's aesthetic features in explicit linkage to its status as a practical device."³⁰

Two things are particularly striking about this theory: first, the language it gives us for describing the slippage between the subject and objects of perception (the gimmick is a machine that accounts for the aesthetic responses it elicits); second and perhaps most important, the insight that it is in ambivalence, the mixture of pleasure and disgust (rather than mere positive aesthetic responses or dismissal), that industrial capitalism might most extensively reach the realm of the senses.

As may now be obvious, canned laughter partakes of many of the signature traits of the gimmick: it is a technological device (indeed, with machines like Douglass's Laff Box, a tangible bit of hardware) that is meant to abbreviate, optimize, and save on the labor of laughter. We can even turn this around and say that it is precisely because canned laughter was invented that we know that laughter was and is a form of audible labor: the act of laughing was treated the same as any reducible industrial labor cost. Canned laughter has, therefore, a kind of aesthetic-political double edge: it abbreviates labor, yes, but it abbreviates a labor that is reproductive in kind—a form of emotion work, a way of smoothing and maintaining the means of production. Because—and this is broadly the argument of chapter 3—reproductive labor is rarely recognized as such, the sound of laughter simultaneously performs it and, by sounding it, introduces it into the realm of representation. The distaste of critics for laugh tracks—and their evident pleasure at expressing such distaste—is part of the ambivalent aesthetics that radiate from abbreviated reproductive labor. But this is too quick and easy a match of theory to laughing practice. Two things need to be further ironed out in thinking about canned laughter as gimmick: first, the specific mechanism of pleasure that canned laughter produces—why audiences laugh along with it even as they love to hate it; second, the aural implications of a gimmick's mechanisms of display and occlusion. Ngai doesn't use canned laughter as one of her examples, but her work on the gimmick was first published in the aforementioned *Critical Inquiry* special issue on laughter (which she coedited with Lauren Berlant),³¹ and it's especially significant that she offers, as a classic example of the gimmick, the contraption described by the Symbolist writer Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in "The Glory Machine" (1883). This short story's titular device is a machine for eliciting audience reactions on cue during theatrical performances. Stocked up on laughing gas, tear gas, and other vaguely bellicose technologies, the machine sits at the back of a theatre, ready to dispense the right medicine for the desired response, ensuring that every performance will be a roaring success. In the story, the Glory Machine—and this is what makes it a gimmick—becomes the object of audience wonder as much as the onstage action, with theater attendees consenting to be manipulated in order, paradoxically, to witness and understand the workings of the machine that is manipulating them. The Glory Machine offers its audience the pleasure of witnessing the abbreviation of the labor of a cheering crowd at work, and as that crowd, of being both alert

to and complicit in the fabrication of artifice. But that's not all. In a particularly gnomic sentence, Ngai reflects on the strange economy of desire enacted by a gimmick: "One of the gimmick's aims becomes transparent: that of giving its addressee what it says we want (now). We recoil from this interpellation: not because the gimmick's claim to knowing our desire is wrong, but because it usually isn't."³²

How can a gimmick pander to your desire so crassly and still somehow get it right? In the case of the laugh track, we could take this simply to mean that its kitschy way of providing the reality effect of a live audience is both seemingly obvious and ultimately what audiences want, pace all Marxian condemnations. But there is a second, slightly against-the-grain reading of this passage. Perhaps the overt (declared?) purpose of a gimmick (in the case of canned laughter, providing a necessary reality effect to ensure the enjoyment of TV shows at home) is not, in fact, its true purpose. Our being interpellated by the laugh track-gimmick's apparent interpretation of our desire ("You want audience laughter; I keep up with your demand by abbreviating the labor of audience sounds") and then recoiling from that interpellation ("I can tell canned laughter from 'real' laughter and dislike the canned stuff") is part and parcel of the gimmick's workings. We enjoy the gimmick because we think it is a form of ideology we can outsmart, but in fact, the gimmick was catering to our desire for moral and intellectual superiority all along. The righteous distaste for abbreviated labor becomes, then, just another mode of consumption. Canned laughter is meant to fail as "true" laughter, is meant to be disliked and picked apart by ear. The theory of the gimmick reaches its sinister depths precisely by going beyond a mode of scholarship that aims to show us the mechanism, the laboring bodies, the oppression behind a smooth cultural surface: the gimmick, the machine whose workings are pleasurably beneath us, offers an aesthetic category in which the very feeling of revelation, of uncovering abbreviated and exploited labor, is a commodity bought and sold like any other. Indeed, the satisfaction of feeling immune to ideology is a psychic mechanism that can be activated by our aesthetic response to a ridiculous machine. The ways we hear the artificiality of a canned laugh, the means we have of dismissing it (purported tells of syncing, sound quality, volume), are all tricks by which we are led to buy into it. And so there is no escape from the gimmick: it thinks through you in the same moment that you congratulate yourself for thinking yourself out of it.

LAFF BOX

We can now turn to a second issue mentioned above: the role of the aural in canned laughter as gimmick. Because the gimmick relies on displaying, even staging (and then banking on our responses to) the means by which labor is abbreviated, issues arise when it is something that is primarily heard rather than seen. It is one thing to use a phrase or a certain segment of recorded sound (a comedian's bit, an advertising jingle, a laugh track) to save time and labor; it is quite another

to imagine the audience responding to that sonic segment as abbreviated labor: to hear the comedian's bit as a way of getting laughs faster than a full-fledged joke would, the jingle as a means of awarding the commodity it's selling a sense of combined wonder and familiarity, the laugh track as a substitution for the swell of a live audience. How, then, did the gimmick of canned laughter attach itself to the aurality of abbreviated labor—and come to be heard (with that familiar shudder of disgust and delight) as a device?

There are some immediate answers. As we saw earlier, critics writing in both industry and general readership magazines actively rehearsed the ability to tell canned laughter from “the real thing”—citing poor synchronization and the overflow of laughter drowning out the show's dialogue, as well as excessive loudness, as means of distinguishing nature from artifice. We are also aware that such techniques are highly fallible and were known to be so from the beginning—which tells us something about how the desire to be able to prize artifice and nature apart by ear in fact endures far past critique and can, in a gimmicky world, be harnessed toward increasing rather than decreasing consumption. The discourse around the capacity to hear when a laugh track was in play—the search, by ear, for an aural tell, a version of the poker player's giveaway tics when bluffing—continued on and mutated over time. For instance, the poor sound quality of the laugh tracks on Hanna-Barbera's cartoons in the 1970s—due, apparently, to the cost-saving practice of sampling prerecorded laugh tracks from other shows—was one such tell.³³ Another example: as sitcoms were more and more widely consumed and exported abroad and the taped laugh tracks they used became standardized, people gleefully recognized the sounds of certain prerecorded laughs across different shows. As canned laughter went global, along with the shows that it festooned, the techniques for hearing it as an imported artifice multiplied and articulated themselves into a grassroots knowledge that has yet to be systematically documented or discussed.

Going back to the 1950s—the zero hour of televised laugh tracks—there was one further element feeding into the sensing of laugh tracks as abbreviated labor: the Laff Box, also called the Laugh Organ or Audience Response Duplicator. I mentioned this contraption above and am returning to it now—with a mind to think of it not only as a piece of hardware but as a key part of the aural gimmick of canned laughter. The Laff Box came into being together with the practice of using canned laughter and in many ways made it systematically possible. After working as a naval engineer during World War II, Charles Douglass was hired as a sound engineer for PBS, where he must have figured out the gap in the market. His Laff Box, which was one of the main means of adding postproduced laughter until digital soundtracks superseded tape, underwent constant updating and optimizing but essentially consisted of loops of taped laughter ordered by intensity (“from a titter to a guffaw,” as an early account reads) and connected to a series of levers.³⁴ In its

original version there were only six loops and six levers, but in successive iterations the keyboard was that of a standard American typewriter and the number of loops went up to at least thirty-two. The player could activate one or more loops, simultaneously or in succession, by pressing the keys, allowing for a textured, even musical landscape of laughter. Indeed, the Laff Box was a sort of *avant la lettre* mellotron, a keyboard instrument that operates prerecorded samples. And, like any instrument, it outlined a whole practiced knowledge, allowed some things while making others impossible or even unthinkable. For instance, the samples of laughter in the Laff Box came, by some accounts, from the early years of *The Red Skelton Show*—its namesake star the same Red Skelton whose indictment of canned laughter opened this chapter (he would have had no way of knowing this, for the work of cutting loops of laughter was something Douglass did on his own). The show included extended pantomimed bits: sections without any spoken dialogue, whose audience laughter could be cleanly harvested by a sound engineer.³⁵ In those sections, however, the laughter tended to run for longer than in a spoken comedy, as the audience wasn't bound by the resuming of dialogue and could laugh on without missing out on gags. How interesting, then, that one of the reputed tells of the gimmick of canned laughter in those years was, as we saw, laughter spilling over spoken dialogue, which, while actually an unreliable aural signifier of canned laughter, could well have been a peculiar consequence of the Laff Box splicing the extended laughs of a pantomimed show into the pacing of a show based on dialogue.

We need here to delve deeper into the sonic anatomy of the Laff Box—and into the contributions it made to a general aesthetic attunement to what I've been calling the gimmick of canned laughter. Again much like any musical instrument, it had very distinctive methods for handling, generating, and stopping sounds, and these methods affected the discourse on the use of canned laughter as a practice in interesting ways. The little evidence we have of the operation of the machine itself consists of a handful of amateur online videos in which people with no technical knowledge push the buttons of the typewriter, only to release what are now sinister peals of laughter from deteriorated tape.³⁶ Yet even so, we can conjure an image of the machine at work. Let's consider dynamics. By some accounts of the machine, there were essentially two available methods for altering the volume of the laughter: mechanically, with a dial of sorts (although I haven't been able to place where that dial was in the videos of the machine), or manually, by activating several loops at once, a baroque technique of crescendo by polyphonic stacking.³⁷ We can imagine that altering the volume by simply dialing the gain up or down would easily yield an overproduced effect. For instance, operating too quick a fade-out on a laughter encroaching on a spoken line would feel more intrusive, more "canned," than any overlap. Knowing when to activate the loops, then, how to stack them, and how to calculate, on the spot, whether they would

run out in time for the next spoken line would have been essential parts of the performance practice of a well-made laugh track. When operating the Laff Box, Douglass created a mimetic loop between laughter as a peculiar technique of the human body and laughter as the product of the machine—because in reality the laughter of a crowd doesn't stop cleanly or at a beat but deflates gently with the breath of the laughers, but the instrument did not and could not control the rate of decrescendo of its laughter. It was built in such a way that a loop of laughter had to run its course once the key was pressed. Yet that unwieldy decrescendo of laughter could signify, at the very same time, the true "liveness" of audience laughter and the ham-fisted playback of canned laughter on the machine: another engineer who worked with postproduced laughter (though without the Laff Box), Louis Edelman, used laugh tracks to gently fade out live audiences who were laughing too long and too loudly.³⁸ Laughter as a disruption of speech was thus able to equally signify, and through the very same audible characteristics, the mechanical and the human, the canned and the fresh: indeed, this is what made it both so desirable a commodity and so suspect an item.

Overspill into dialogue was inevitable and even desirable to an extent: it was an indispensable reality effect that the machine's particular anatomy, down to its design flaws (it couldn't stop the loop of laughter early), was made to produce. But this same tendency toward overspill, while potentially hiding the workings of mechanical labor, could just as easily give them away. The overspill of a recorded laughter, consolidated into an aural practice by the Laff Box, became one of the unreliable yet ubiquitous aural tells of the gimmick.³⁹

I should say that my remarks here are by necessity, but also by choice, speculative, as I have not had a chance to study any version of the Laff Box in person—indeed, the arcane status of the machine to this day says something about the capability of gimmicks to age into their own mystique. In writing about this topic, I have had to connect and animate an uneven scrapyard of evidence: articles in industry magazines, reported interviews with historians at the Los Angeles Paley Center for Media, copies of shows that, according to scholars and to snippets of Douglass's logbook, were sweetened with the Laff Box, and finally, a handful of short amateur YouTube clips of a version of the Laff Box that resurfaced in 2011 on PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* (whose production team pointed me to the auction house that sold the Laff Box and to the name of the buyer but, because of privacy laws, could not give me any contact information).⁴⁰ Although the YouTube videos give little idea of the performance practice of an instrument that, in its tape-based, analog version, lived and died with its inventor, they are perhaps the most precious evidence of all. The dearth of direct information on the Laff Box is indeed a long-standing issue, since Douglass was very protective of his invention, wheeling it in and out of studios himself, insisting on being its only player, and guarding it against imitations even after he won the patent race.

Yet the lack of direct information has always been part of the Laff Box's allure as the mechanism single-handedly controlling a recognizable facet of the American

entertainment industry. Since Douglass's passing in 2003, and in conjunction with the emergence of digital press outlets like BuzzFeed, Vice, and Jezebel, the Laff Box has been the object of a considerable amount of attention, particularly because of its elusiveness. This is in fact a response to the Laff Box that dates back to its earlier days. As the work of David McCarthy has recently illustrated, the Laff Box's historiography is rooted in a sensationalist tone. In one essay, he shows that already by the early 1960s, industry magazines were fascinated and irritated by Douglass's instrument, depicting it as a kind of acousmate awaiting revelation.⁴¹ Cartoons depicted the inventor and sole player of the Laff Box as a deranged Lisztian keyboard god. And this iconography—provoked precisely by the secretive nature of the machine—served in turn, and perhaps unwittingly, to market the Laff Box and the unique services it rendered. The Laff Box earned this credit not only because it was occluded from sight but because it was the obvious visual element of a whole complex process—the process of substituting live audiences with laugh tracks in postproduction—that otherwise couldn't be observed. It gave a predominantly aural form of gimmickry a visual anchor. Indeed, its very role in 1950s television is overestimated (there were many ways of postproducing laughter into a sitcom, and this was but one of them) precisely because this machine became the cipher for both the act of laying a laugh track and the feelings this practice elicited. Chasing the Laff Box as the ultimate repository of the strange history of laugh tracks (and what they do to us) is, of course, a form of technological determinism. But it is a lot more than just that. The desire to grasp the labor-abbreviating machine, to which I am far from immune, is also our particular contemporary way of inhabiting the realm of the gimmick. Like the audiences who prick up their ears for recurring laughs or overlaps of laugh and dialogue, we seek the unique pleasure in revealing the laboring mechanism lying beneath; we want to believe we are beyond the ideology we consume (and indeed we consume the ideology because it makes us feel superior); we want to believe our senses can be trained on the difference between truth and lie. The fun in thinking ourselves especially privy to the workings of ideology—whether as consumers or as scholars judging (often negatively) others on their ability to tell truth from lie—has become, in late capitalism, a commodity bought and sold like any other.

Ngai's theory of the gimmick poses the question of the identity, position, and sensorium of the gimmick's intended audience. From what (implicit and unacknowledged) position in history do we examine the gimmick? There seem to be at least two modes of spectatorship and of listening at play: the enjoyment of the gimmick's offerings, and the more insidious pleasure of feeling immune to its trickery. One must both enjoy the gimmick's workings—laugh along with the canned laughter—and feel like one is consuming it with a higher level of political awareness than others. The pleasure of intellectual writing about canned laughter is one that the gimmick accounted for all along: you laughed along with a laugh track yet distinguish yourself from the imaginary dupes of the past who were fooled, entertained, and even brainwashed by the canned laughter. This is a form

of historical, moral, and political superiority born of the fragile but enduring capitalist belief that contemporary North American and European audiences must live in the most advanced, most aware, most progressive of all possible worlds.

CANNED LAUGHTER PURGE

And so, the use of laugh tracks persists—even past its official death as a televi-sual practice—despite their being disliked, and perhaps because of it. As Anca Parvulescu puts it, the distinction between fake and real laughter—a modernist conceit that she links to the suspicion of canned laughter—serves to fuel the “hope that not *all* laughs are fake.”⁴² By condemning canned laughter—as Red Skelton does in the opening of this chapter—as a form of (attempted) brainwashing, then, we implicitly conjure another, true laughter: spontaneous, self-determined, free, and pleasurable, like the life of the well-adjusted liberal subject.⁴³ We saw in chapter 3—via the work of Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora—how laughter has long constituted a kind of technological aid to the illusion of this idealized liberal subject’s existence.⁴⁴ Laughter helps the liberal subject be maintained, reproduce, continue in time but is also that which threatens it by showing it to be dependent on others for its survival and so not autonomous after all. It is little wonder, then, that laugh tracks should have germinated and proliferated in an era, the McCarthy era, that put extreme pressure on the distinction between an ideologically compromised, mechanized, brainwashed communist “East” and the assumed, and threatened, liberal democracy of the West, led by the United States.⁴⁵ Indeed, we can be more concrete, as laugh tracks intersected with McCarthyist witch hunts at a precise point in time. On October 6, 1959, after Charles Lincoln Van Doren, a contestant on NBC’s TV quiz show *Twenty-One*, went on record admitting that his win had been piloted by the producers ahead of airing, a subcommittee of the House of Representatives, led by Congressman Oren Harris, began hearings in Washington, DC, on various forms of malpractice in the TV industry. The subject was ultimately whether producers were allowing a distorted version of reality to be represented on TV, a medium obviously prized as a form of live visual broadcast. And while the inquest began by examining TV quizzes, it soon found another target—namely, pretty much all forms of prerecorded audio and visual material used in lieu of live footage. This included news reporting, interviews in which the answers to the questions were pretaped instead of being given live on air, the ubiquitous prerecorded mini advertisements and product endorsements placed inside sitcoms, and last but not least, canned laughter.

The reaction of network executives to this kind of scrutiny was in some cases so intense as to border on panic. CBS president Frank Stanton responded—perhaps impulsively—to the fear that sponsors would withdraw support by announcing, on October 21, not only the axing of all TV quizzes but the immediate end to all canned laughter on his network. Even more striking than Stanton’s quick and

drastic decision—an obvious attempt to appease state authorities that instantly irritated the network’s many private sponsors—is the particular wording of his announcement, reported by *Variety* magazine: “It took a quiz scandal to end canned laughter. CBS president Frank Stanton, who a day earlier announced the end of quiz shows on the network, told various networks executives last Saturday (17) that he meant it when he said that *his web wasn’t going to permit anything further on the air that purported to be something it wasn’t*.”⁴⁶

We are here far from canned laughter as a device merely in the service of “live-ness,” a cheap reality effect. In this quote, Stanton equates the use of prerecorded material with a fundamental manipulation of reality, a technical means of fabricating a sensorium and orienting it toward a hidden—and harmful—political agenda. The world evoked by Stanton in this pledge is close to that of the 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* and its celebrated 1962 feature film adaptation. There too, the first step in steering people toward compliance is to alter their sensoriums. In the film’s memorable opening scene—executed with a dazzling series of pans and cuts—eight American prisoners of war are shown, slumped and lackadaisical, listening to a middle-aged white woman lecture about hydrangeas to a small room of other middle-aged white women, only for us, the viewers, to slowly discover that these soldiers are, in fact, on the floor of a forbidding surgical theater, being evaluated by a team of Chinese and Russian scientists who have brainwashed them into believing they are somewhere dull and nonthreatening: an amateur horticultural society meeting. The manipulation of their sense of reality, in the film, allows them to be fully controlled by communist handlers. And, in Stanton’s wording, the peddling of canned laughter as a live event is, if not a full mind control operation, at least its gateway—the equivalent, then, of *The Manchurian Candidate*’s lecture on hydrangeas. We should not push the analogy too much further, particularly because *The Manchurian Candidate* (despite the subtle gender implications of the paradomestic, white, feminine space of the amateur horticultural society) does not foreground another key aspect of canned laughter—its connection to reproductive labor. Suffice it to say, though, that canned laughter was, at that moment, a means of connecting and rendering interchangeable a series of aesthetic and political binaries—namely, the difference between live and postproduced, between truth and lie, and ultimately between liberal self-determination and its others: the specter of reproductive labor and imaginary Eastern and racialized forms of mind control.⁴⁷

It is hard to imagine that the distinction between live and canned laughter could take on such intense political overtones. Certainly, the typically McCarthyist tension between hailing the free market as a pillar of American democracy and then sanctioning and closely monitoring all nongovernmental influences on mediatic output produced a simultaneous reverence for and distrust of commercial sponsors of TV networks and their influence on content. If canned laughter could be used to promote enjoyment of and consensus around, say, the General

Mills cereal whose product placement funded a particular sitcom, it could also be used to brainwash people into accepting deftly deployed bits of communist propaganda. But the flare-up of aural paranoia regarding canned laughter was also, and perhaps mainly, performative and sensational. Producers and sponsors worried, briefly, about the impact of the TV quiz scandal and addressed their concern, as well as Stanton's ban, by commissioning surveys on audience responses to canned laughter and to the scandal in general. These surveys are one of the first datasets on audiences of canned laughter. Outsourced to a few advertising agencies, they give us little indication as to their criteria, questions, or methods, and they are also discordant. One survey by Sindlinger's cites a healthy majority, 55.9 percent of about one hundred million consumers, who found canned laughter "not deceitful." This report, trumpeted in an issue of the industry magazine *Broadcasting* under the heading "Minor Vices: The People Don't Care," is obviously puzzling: in what, exactly, would the deceit consist?⁴⁸ And is canned laughter not deceitful because audiences can tell canned from live or because it doesn't matter whether the laughter is prerecorded or not? Another survey, by the Schwering Corporation in New York, ascertained, a month later, that "56% of people [. . .] found canned laughter and applause 'objectionable.'"⁴⁹ Stanton himself commissioned yet another agency, Gallup, to determine how aware audiences were of the TV quiz scandal, which revealed the level to be staggering (92 percent of interviewees)—though it is unclear to which parts or elements of the scandal they were specifically alert.⁵⁰ These interpellations of the audience were as unreliable as they were inconclusive—they are, however, indicative of the moment of panic, of the tension between consumer satisfaction and government interference, and, more broadly, of the tension between pleasure and moral outrage.

As it happened, however, within the industry, things flared up and died down quickly. The bout of communist-infiltration paranoia was readily capitalized on by both the government and TV networks: the US Treasury commissioned a special episode of the network favorite *Father Knows Best* (a CBS show that was sweetened by Douglass's Laff Box), titled "24 Hours in Tyrant Land." The episode, which had a somber tone and featured, pointedly, no laugh track, showed the titular, triumphantly white middle-class father and his family wake up to a dystopian America where their spending and earning habits were curtailed by the advent of communism. The expunction of the laugh track and the dramatization of the "red threat" were, then, openly joined up. Yet the episode never made it to air. Instead, CBS reintroduced laugh tracks on December 14, barely eight weeks after Stanton's issue of the ban, with the caveat that a sitcom's opening credits would now duly inform viewers when it featured a prerecorded laugh track.⁵¹ NBC commissioned an internal inquest, hiring ex-FBI agents to do an informal investigation, and on January 27, 1960, announced a five-point program in response to the scandal. It rejected all banning and labeling of canned laughter, on the grounds that "[when canned laughter] offends, its fault is not that it is deceptive but that it is obvious"—

a convoluted statement landing us back in the gimmick's world of outrage, discernment, and garish mechanization.⁵² On March 18, canned laughter returned to CBS exactly as it had been before the scandal, and the issue was dropped.⁵³

What, then, to make of this brief chapter of history? For one thing, it is striking that the desire and attempt to denounce and scrub canned laughter on political grounds hardly originates in the twenty-first century and is instead a spectacular product of the technology's early days, though I have not found this to be documented elsewhere. And so the revelation, outrage, and pleasure of the aural gimmick of laughter join us in uncomfortable fellowship with the TV audiences of the midcentury—indeed, all we can do is the thinking and listening anticipated for us by the gimmick. The main question, really, is not why canned laughter was denounced and scrubbed six decades ago but why it so quickly returned. If, as Parvulescu suggests, we declare some laughter fake because we want to believe that some laughter is true, if our sense of self-determination and freedom from ideology can be conjured by excising some sounds and canned laughter has become one such, why, then, does it keep returning to us, albeit in new guises, through similar processes of purging and reintroduction? The obvious answers—that it is by now an expected reality effect and a staple of the soundscape of entertainment television, that to remove it altogether would be, in 1959 as now, unprofitable—are not so much wrong as dissatisfying. Stanton scrubbed canned laughter from his network for eight weeks not because he truly wanted it gone but perhaps to ride the wave of a moral panic that resolved itself, oddly, by labeling canned laughter as such, almost as if to train audiences to distinguish it from live laughter. Although we cannot know this, it is easy to imagine that audiences found having canned laughter so clinically labeled to be off-putting, patronizing, and perhaps pointless. But it did something essential to the gimmick's workings: it reactivated the desire for and belief in the ability to identify the workings of mechanized laughter by ear even as it created, most likely, an increased annoyance with that very sound. Once the labeling ended a few weeks later, the pleasurable exercise of telling the gimmick by ear could continue in peace, and with an added degree of reassurance—and so it is with contemporary YouTubers who take the laugh tracks out of sitcoms. The point, surely, is not to stop watching old sitcoms or to watch them all without a laugh track. It is that we can return to watching them with the belief that we *can* tell canned laughter from the chimera of its authentic other, that we can uphold a mistaken but essential belief in our aural capabilities as liberal subjects. These beliefs are fed precisely by the kinds of distasteful sounds that we hold in righteous contempt even as we laugh along with them.