

Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity

In Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), the android David (Haley Joel Osment) tries desperately to appear human and so win the love of his adoptive mother, Monica (Frances O'Connor). In one of the film's most affecting scenes, David and his "parents" laugh at the way Monica eats her spaghetti. At first, David's laughter appears remarkably human, making us momentarily forget that he is a robot (figure 1). But gradually this laughter takes on an eerie and uncanny quality that makes him seem less human than ever. Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that the scene asks us to consider the line between mechanical and real laughter: "The laughter of David and his adopted parents becomes impossible to define as either forced or genuine, mechanical or spontaneous, leaving us perpetually suspended over the question as if over an abyss" (2001, 36). There is nothing new about this phenomenon. Though the spasmodic and nonsemantic nature of laughter makes it seem an unlikely carrier of meaning, it has played an ongoing role in the presentation of the authentically human in mass-mediated texts, notably on early genres of phonographic recordings and the broadcast laugh track.

The sound of uninhibited laughter, produced both by performers and by audiences, was an important index of authentic presence used to bridge the gap between recorded sound and the listener. The recording studios of the phonograph industry represented a radically new type of performance space, where performers had to develop new stylistic techniques meant, in Jonathan Sterne's words, to "stand in for reality within



Figure 1. Haley Joel Osment as the android David in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Frances O'Connor and Sam Robards play Monica and Henry Swinton. Source: BFI.

the system of reproduced sounds" (2003, 285). The laugh emerged as an expression that was particularly able to represent a sense of immediacy when mechanically reproduced for audiences that studio performers would never see. Recorded genres of "laughing songs," "laughing records," and "laughing stories" show that the laugh played a central role in the introduction of recorded sound as a form of entertainment. Further, these records can be seen as precursors to broadcast laugh tracks, which I place in the historical and discursive contexts of radio, television, and an "ideology of liveness."

Paddy Scannell writes that "all day, every day and everywhere people listen to radio and watch television as part of the utterly familiar, normal things that anyone does on any normal day" (1996, 6). The laugh track is an especially mundane part of the everyday TV experience that Scannell describes. For most viewers the sound of the laugh track is intensely, intimately familiar, so much so that focusing on it takes a concerted effort. It is by definition background, a part of the sonic wallpaper, effortlessly tuned out. In this chapter I'd like to bring the background to the fore, to make that familiar sonic object strange. As I plan to show, the laugh track is part of a larger story of the recorded laugh in the history of media, and telling that story can provide insights into the ways in which people have interacted with media technologies and in which bodies and voices have been represented through them. As such, the

examples I will present from phonograph records and radio broadcasts can also illuminate performances found in Hollywood films. Throughout these different media contexts, the laugh has been presented as the ultimate expression of the human—often as the result of its connection to discourses about race, class, and gender—and its mechanical reproduction has served as a lightning rod for anxieties concerning the social dimensions of mass media performance and consumption.

CRACKING UP: THE PERFORMANCE OF LAUGHTER

To begin an examination of the relationship between performed laughter and the media, consider the way in which early “talking machines” were demonstrated to the public. Interestingly, the use of the laugh to demonstrate the virtuosity of talking machines predates Thomas Edison’s 1877 invention of the phonograph; it can be found in conjunction with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century devices of Wolfgang von Kempelen and Joseph Faber. Kempelen, most famous for his automaton chess player, also designed a keyboard-operated machine in the 1780s that could imitate the vocal organs. Using Kempelen’s designs, Charles Wheatstone, a leading British scientist of the time, built a talking machine in 1837. After seeing it demonstrated, an observer wrote that the machine “laughs and cries with a perfect imitation of nature” (Feaster 2006b, 52). A decade later Joseph Faber designed a similar speaking machine that featured the torso of a “Turk” and a more convenient keyboard. The *Illustrated London News* noted in 1846 that the machine was capable of not only speech, but “even whispering, laughing and singing; all this depending on the agility of the director in manipulating the keys” (Feaster 2001, 67). Indeed, laughter seems to have become a routine part of Faber’s demonstrations after 1846; the *London Times* noted on August 12 of that year that the machine laughed “with the merriment of good humour” (cited in Feaster 2006b, 68). The laugh seems to have been a particularly evocative performance, one that was used for testing both the realism and the amusement value of a talking machine.

This was still the case when Edison’s tinfoil phonograph was displayed thirty years later. Early demonstrations of the phonograph often delighted audiences: the machine laughed and coughed and sneezed. Accounts of exhibitions of the tinfoil phonograph reveal that laughter recurred frequently. Take, for example, an article from the *New York Sun* on February 22, 1878, which described how Edison “coughed, sneezed, and laughed at the mouthpiece, and the matrixes returned the noises true

as a die.” The *Philadelphia Press* on March 9, 1878, described the following demonstration: “Laughter and whistling and singing and sighing and groans—in fact, every utterance of which the human voice is capable—was stored in that wondrous wheel and emitted when it was turned.” The *New York Daily Graphic* described on March 15, 1878, how a phonograph exhibitor had “laughed to his heart’s content . . . and the sounds were reproduced” (Feaster 2006a, 125).

In these demonstrations of the phonograph, as was true of earlier demonstrations of talking automata, the laugh was presented as the spontaneous creaturely expression of embodiment, a performance particularly capable of testing the limits of mechanical reproduction. The laugh in this context functioned like the “easily recognizable forms of human speech,” such as rhymes or popular quotations, that Jonathan Sterne (2003, 251) argues were mobilized to “help the machine”: “by the use of clichéd and conventionalized language, early ‘performers’ of sound reproduction helped listeners help the machine reproduce speech.” But the laugh continued to play a central role in phonographic performance beyond these initial demonstrations, as is indicated by the fact that it was prominently featured in the recording industry’s earliest catalogs.

George Washington Johnson’s *Laughing Song*—whose chorus is a gale of rhythmic laughter—stands as a particularly dramatic case in point because its massive popularity made it an instant standard that was “closely identified with the emerging entertainment phonograph” (T. Brooks 2005, 32). Johnson’s laughter was transmitted far and wide by traveling exhibitors like Lyman Howe, whose 1891 program at the Welsh Congregational Church in Scranton included Johnson’s *Laughing Song* fifth on the bill (Musser 1991, 32). Tim Brooks, a historian of recorded sound, cites the report of a traveling exhibitor in New England to the trade journal the *Phonogram* in July 1892: “Johnson’s ‘Whistling Coon’ and laughing song are immensely popular, and I presume they will always be. There is more call for them than for any other selections” (T. Brooks 2005, 34).

Johnson’s records were an important part of traveling phonograph demonstrations, and *The Laughing Song* became perhaps the first blockbuster of the emerging market for entertainment phonograph records. Johnson had been performing for coins at the Hudson River ferryboat terminal when he was hired by Victor H. Emerson to record for the New Jersey Phonograph Company in 1890 (T. Brooks 2005, 26). The U.S. Phonograph Company’s 1894 catalog claimed that “over 25,000” copies

of *The Laughing Song* had been sold; as for sheet music of the song (which Johnson wrote himself), the figure was said to be “over 50,000” (T. Brooks 2005, 35, 40). Whatever the exact numbers, this record was certainly one of the (if not *the*) best-selling records in the country during the 1890s (T. Brooks 2004, 55).

Johnson’s performances of “The Laughing Song” and “The Whistling Coon” are also notable as the first popular vocal recordings made by an African American.¹ Johnson’s laugh certainly carried with it racist stereotypes of the minstrel show, as was illustrated by the comments of the early phonograph producer Fred Gaisberg, who described Johnson’s laugh as “deep-bellied [and] lazy like a carefree darky” (1942, 40). In an American musical culture steeped in the blackface minstrel show tradition, part of Johnson’s success had to do with his aura of authenticity: “Johnson’s performance *sounded* authentic, just like the black panhandler on the street. This was far more unusual than it might seem, for in the early days of recording most artists sang in distinct, stilted, almost shouted tones, striving above all else to make the words *very clear and understandable*. When they imitated blacks, in sketches and song, they were so broad and mannered as to be almost cartoonish. But here was the real thing, a black street singer doing just what he did for nickels on the sidewalks of New York” (T. Brooks 2005, 31–32). In spite of their racist stereotypes, these records are important documents of African American recorded vocal expression, and ones that highlight both the limited stylistic choices available to blacks and their inventive and resourceful responses to those limitations.² In the context of my larger argument, Johnson’s “authentic” blackness was performed by his laughter and served to amplify the sense of authenticity already associated with that expression.

As was the case with pre-phonographic talking machines, the laugh was a significant and powerful index of presence for the first audiences of prerecorded performances. Johnson’s *Laughing Song* juxtaposes sung verses with a chorus of rhythmic laughter, but another early phonographic genre called laughing records are almost entirely the sound of unrestrained and unaccompanied laughter. These records were made by various labels throughout the first decades of the century and can tell us more about the interaction of vocal performance and media technologies.

One of the most successful was *The Okeh Laughing Record*, released in 1922. This recording did so well that it was quickly followed by two sequels called *The Second Laughing Record* and *The Okeh Laughing Dance Record* (T. Brooks 1979, 3). In the most prevalent model of the

laughing record genre, a recurring, elementary narrative frames the laughter. The records begin with a very solemn performance of a musical solo (often a horn or a vocal performance). These recordings are “framed” in a very particular way: a serious musical piece is being performed, and so the listener is keyed to respond appropriately. By “frame,” I refer to Erving Goffman’s term for the definition of a situation that governs social events (1974, 10). The initial framing of laughing records as highbrow concert culture must be seen in light of the high prestige that classical music had for phonograph listeners in the early decades of the century. The phonograph industry made clear distinctions between its high- and low-culture products, distinctions that were physically inscribed on records: from 1903 Victor’s operatic recordings bore a “Red Seal,” in contrast to the “Black Seal” of popular records. Although high-culture products were prominently featured in industry ads and catalogs, it was sales of the low-culture popular tunes that had enabled the expansion of the phonograph companies: “Victor produced three times as many popular as operatic discs” (William Howland Kenney 1999, xiii).³

The introductory music on these laughing records establishes a classical performance with a one-to-one relationship between the musical performer and a listener. This performance is then punctuated by a fluff of some kind, an audible (sometimes barely audible) mistake that interrupts the smooth flow of the musical solo. Immediately following the mistake, a woman is heard to break out laughing. Her presence was previously hidden, and her laughter thus changes the listener’s framing relationship to the recorded performance.⁴

For Goffman, laughing can be an important instance of flooding out, when “the individual will capsize” as a social interactant, dissolving into “laughter or tears or anger” (1974, 350). The most common instance of flooding out is the “unsuccessful effort to suppress laughter, sometimes called ‘breaking (or cracking) up’ ” (351). This phrase is particularly appropriate, as it points to the cracking up of the social frame as well as to the act of uncontrolled laughter itself. When the woman in the laughing record floods out, the one-to-one situation between listener and performer is altered, as there are now at least two audience members. The listener’s role is suddenly made uncertain, free-floating. Is the listener part of an audience—or situated outside and overhearing the performance? The woman’s flooding out precipitates the listener’s frame reorganization: the listener has lost a certain formal connection with the performer but has gained a relationship to the laughing audience member, who has broached the ritual constraints of the situation.

As the recording develops, the musician nobly tries to continue the instrumental solo, but the laughter of the woman in the audience proves so unsettling and infectious that the performer cracks up as well, revealing his identity as a man. What follows for the rest of the record are waves of laughter from both the man and woman, each one's guffaws stimulating and encouraging the other's, interspersed by short-lived attempts by the man to return to his performance. After the performer's first mistake and the introduction of the laughing woman, the listener's role has been problematized. Now, as the performer himself floods out with laughter, *his* role is also destabilized, and the listener's further so. The distinction between performer and audience member on the recording breaks down, and as the contagious laughter stimulates the listener, the distinction between listener and recorded performer breaks down as well. All three subjects become unified in this community of spontaneous laughter: a moment of frame disintegration.

The main purpose of these recordings seems to have been the incitation of the listener's laughter, a project in which they were successful far beyond the scope of their local cultural origins. Fred Gaisberg wrote that Burt Sheppard's *Laughing Record* was "world famous," and had sold "over half a million in India alone." He provides this brief description of its reception: "In the bazaars of India I have seen dozens of natives seated on their haunches round a gramophone, rocking with laughter, whilst playing Sheppard's laughing record" (1942, 41). Similarly, Andrew F. Jones, in his study of media culture in the Chinese Jazz Age, describes this scene:

Sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, a young Frenchman named Labansat set up an outdoor stall on Tibet Road in Shanghai and began to play gramophone records for curious Chinese passersby. Labansat, whose career up to that point had consisted in operating a peep show for Shanghai theatergoers, had recently purchased an imported gramophone from a foreign firm, Moutrie & Company. His new business gambit was simple and effective; he would ask each listener to pay ten cents to hear a novelty record called "Laughing Foreigners" (Yangren daxiao). Anyone able to resist laughing along with the chuckles, chortles, and guffaws emerging from the horn of the gramophone would get his or her money back. (2001, 53)

Jones notes that Labansat "laughed all the way to the bank," earning enough from this routine to establish China's first record company (53).

Scenarios such as these suggest that laughing records helped ease anxieties about a potentially disturbing new medium. Henri Bergson's famous essay on laughter illustrates this point. For Bergson, the comic

“consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (1956, 67). Laughter, for Bergson, functions as a social sanction against rigid or mechanical behavior: “[Laughter’s] function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with” (174). In other words, whenever a person is acting rigid or mechanical, that person is not adapting to the particular moment and so is socially sanctioned by laughter.

In Goffman’s terms, Bergson’s definition of laughter has to do with the social control of frame maintenance. When people are not flexible or fluid in their ability to adapt to the appropriate social frame, they are sanctioned by laughter. Laughter, then, is a kind of suture between the rigid and the flexible, the social and the individual, the mechanical and the human. The incitation of laughter in the listener and the frame disintegration described above would work to remove anxiety about interacting with a machine, making the phonographic apparatus appear more “human.”⁵ The ability of a mechanical recording to break frames helps it emanate a sense of authentic presence and humanity. Laughing records, then, were important ways of establishing the credibility and authenticity of early recordings, alleviating the anxiety of hearing a disembodied, recorded voice (figure 2).

To stimulate reciprocal laughter from the listener, the laughter on records such as these is presented as “natural”; that is, it is unrestrained and unregulated in terms of rhythm and vocal inflection. Those qualities highlight laughter’s nature as uncontrollable spasm. In their infectious quality, laughing records have striking similarities to other forms of what Linda Williams calls “body genres,” such as pornography, horror, and melodrama, which produce a direct bodily response in their audience members. In Williams’s study of early tendencies in film pornography, she describes presentations of “women in spasm,” including Jean-Martin Charcot’s photographs of women “in the grips of convulsive attacks of hysteria” and Eadweard Muybridge’s protocinematic representations, including “a woman’s involuntary convulsions” (1989, 48). Williams also mentions other early experiments with film, most notably the famous *Fred Ott’s Sneeze* from the Edison Laboratory in 1893–94, which Williams notes was in fact inspired by a request to see a “nice looking . . . woman” in the act of sneezing (52). These filmic presentations of spasm are, in fact, contemporary with the earliest laughing records.



Figure 2. An advertisement for three Okeh Laughing Records released in the early 1920s.

As is true of some early films, the main object of pleasure on laughing records is the traces of a female body in spasm. It is interesting to note as well that while the female body is “voyeuristically” displayed, it is also the vehicle for the derailment of a solemn male performance of high culture. The highbrow framing of these musical performances also suggests how class-based cultural tensions could have been part of the pleasure of the frame breaking. As Goffman notes, flooding out often occurs “when individuals are obliged to enact a role they think is intrinsically not themselves, especially one that is felt to be too formal, and yet no strong sanction is present to inhibit a frame break” (1974, 352). This might well have been the case with the initial concert frame for the typical consumer of popular recordings in the first decades of the recording industry. Indeed, these records’ ability to bring the elevated role of the highbrow classical performer down to the level of equal participant in

shared bodily spasm might have been experienced as liberating and cathartic.

Consider some parallels between laughing records and a film directed by Edwin S. Porter and released by Edison in 1909 entitled *Laughing Gas*. In the film, an African American woman identified as Mandy goes to the dentist to have a tooth pulled. In great pain, she takes nitrous oxide and is overcome by ecstatic laughter. Her uncontrollable glee is infectious, inducing the dentist and his assistant to succumb to fits of laughter. For the rest of the film, Mandy moves through a series of social encounters and spreads her laughter to everyone she meets.

One such encounter takes place on a streetcar where, through a carefully laid *mise-en-scène*, Porter manages to depict a world of stark social hierarchies and divisions. We see a row of seated passengers separated into distinct groups by their class and gender. Two bourgeois gentlemen, one wearing a top hat and spats, look over papers and speak to each other. Next to them is a man marked as a country rube by his corncob pipe and somewhat shabby clothes. Three upper-class women sit on either side of the men. A fourth woman enters, whose clothes and stylish hat establish her as bourgeois. The men rise and ostentatiously offer her a seat, but she haughtily moves away to join a similarly dressed woman. Another woman enters the frame, wearing a kerchief that marks her as working class, and perhaps an immigrant. She tries to sit next to the men, but they do not move to offer her a seat, and she is forced to stand. By establishing the scene in this manner, Porter lends Mandy's entrance both a certain pathos and an element of social critique: she matter-of-factly stands and takes a handhold, suggesting that unlike the first and second women, she does not expect to be offered a seat. Porter has carefully framed the scene, using the entrance of three women of various social rank to indicate the pervasiveness of social distinction in even the most mundane everyday public interaction. The movement of the train jostles the two standing women, and Mandy erupts with laughter when she falls between the two bourgeois men. Her laughter radiates to her fellow passengers to both the left and right, first to the bourgeois gentlemen and then to the rube, who raises his hand to slap his leg but accidentally slaps the leg of the bourgeois woman next to him. She reacts in shock at first, but before long she also joins in the laughter (figure 3).

Mandy's laugh in this scene serves a narrative function that is quite similar to that of the laughing records I've been discussing. In an insightful analysis of American films from this era, Jacqueline Stewart describes how black female domestic workers like Mandy were often



Figure 3. Mandy spreads her infectious laughter to everyone she meets in Edison's 1909 film *Laughing Gas*.

depicted breaching social hierarchies and boundaries (2004, 105). Stewart writes that through her laughter, Mandy “brings disorder then harmony” to each of the social situations she encounters (119). Like the eruption of laughter during the highbrow musical performances found on laughing records, Mandy’s laughter causes “frame disintegration,” transforming a social situation noted by rigid hierarchies into a state of relaxed camaraderie. It is certainly true that through the performance of spasmodic laughter both Mandy and the women heard on laughing records are offered as a kind of bodily spectacle. Compare, for example, the prolonged close-up of Mandy at the end of *Laughing Gas* with an photograph of the comedian Sallie Stembler in a trade journal promoting laughing records in 1918: in both cases we see a woman with eyes closed, mouth open, and head thrown back (figure 4). But this is only part of the story, since the ecstatic laughter of these women was situated within a narrative context that produced a subtle social critique.

The close-up images of Mandy and Sallie Stembler can also remind us of the fact that the performance of laughter in *Laughing Gas* is seen and not heard. As such, the film illustrates how that expression could be conveyed in silent cinema through a number of broad physical gestures: opening the mouth, slapping the knee, throwing the arms up overhead, rhythmically swaying back and forth, and generally presenting a loose and relaxed posture—note, for example, the dentist as he flops back in his chair. Mary Ann Doane has written that “the absent voice” of silent cinema “reemerges in gestures and the contortions of the face—it is spread over the body of the actor” (1999, 363). We see in *Laughing Gas* that laughter is a vocal expression that is particularly embodied; it is “spread over” the bodies of the actors in a particularly vivid manner, blurring the lines between speech and gesture. Here, then, is another indication of laughter’s particular efficacy as an index of embodied presence on phonograph records.

In addition to existing in a gray area between spoken and gestured, the laugh also slides between what Erving Goffman (1959, 18) calls expressions *given* (“a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions”) and those that are *given off* (“a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control”). Crucially, “truth” is often thought to be found in what is given off: “we often give special attention to features of the performance that cannot be readily manipulated, thus enabling ourselves to judge the reliability of the more misrepresentable cues in the performance” (58). Because it blurs the distinction between given and given off, and between



Figure 4. The “Laughing Girl,” Sallie Stembler, pictured on the cover of a phonograph industry trade journal to promote her laughing records. Source: Edison National Historical Site.

spoken expression and gesture, the sincerity of laughter can be difficult to gauge. The laugh is a vocal expression like speech, but one that involves the entire body, like gesture; it is controllable, and yet it hints at the “ultimate truth” of spasm.⁶ This, in turn, makes the laugh a particularly interesting problem for actors.⁷

One indication of the laugh’s problematic nature for acting is evident in its absence from turn-of-the-century acting manuals. Laughter is notable by its absence in several early acting texts that typify what

Roberta Pearson has called the histrionic code, a style of acting predominant in the second half of the nineteenth century in England and America wherein actors “performed in a self-consciously theatrical fashion, ostentatiously playing a role rather than pretending to be another person” (1992, 21). Edmond Shaftesbury’s 1889 *Lessons in the Art of Acting* describes the gestural codes for a multitude of expressions, but laughter is not one of them. He even omits laughter when he lays out a list of “automatic sounds” that includes sighs, gasps, gurgles, whimpers, sobs, sneezes, and death rattles (1889, 277). In Gustave Garcia’s *The Actor’s Art* (1882), the closest we come to laughter is “Rapturous Joy,” but the actor is warned that expression loses its grace “the moment joy becomes noisy and exuberant, and degenerates into such petulance as to cause contortions of the face, and turn the free and graceful movements of the body into the gesticulations of a clown” (1882, 129). Although this evidence is not enough on which to base any definitive statements, it indicates that outright laughter was repressed on the nineteenth-century legitimate stage, perhaps because of the ways in which it could upset the decorum or gentility of performance.⁸ It is notable, then, to find uninhibited laughter so frequently on early phonograph records, and that those who often enacted this performance were typically considered to be culturally “other”: women, African Americans, and in the case of another genre of early recordings, the country rube.

Along with the laughing records I’ve been describing, a cycle of records called laughing stories also featured prominent laughter, and they can be seen to anticipate the broadcast laugh track. In the early years of the popular phonograph business, there was a wide variety of popular spoken-word recordings, including political speeches, minstrel show comedy acts, and even reenactments of famous battles. Cal Stewart (1856–1919) was one of the most popular of these spoken-word recording artists during the late 1890s and early 1900s. In his “descriptive specialties,” Stewart played the role of a gullible rube named Uncle Josh Weathersby from the fictional town of Pumpkin Center. *Uncle Josh* films, particularly *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison 1902), have received critical attention from scholars, but the phonographic origins of these films are rarely mentioned.⁹ Stewart’s records described life in rural Pumpkin Center and Uncle Josh’s comic encounters with the many facets of modernity in New York City. These performances, as William Howland Kenney writes (1999, 33), could have functioned to demonstrate how and how not to behave in the modern city, and so served as a kind of “cultural survival kit.”

Much of what is comic about Uncle Josh recalls Bergson's idea of laughter as social sanction for inflexible behavior. Instead of adapting to the new environment, Uncle Josh stays rigidly in the role of the rube, and so he receives the social corrective of laughter from an audience trying itself to keep up with rapid cultural changes. Uncle Josh's voice is also marked by a certain rigidity, making it prime material for a Bergsonesque social sanction of laughter. Uncle Josh's voice tends to hover in a droning monotone, falling into a very regular pacing and rhythm, often repeating phrases. The vocal flow is punctuated about every twenty to thirty seconds by the most distinctive characteristic of the recordings, Uncle Josh's trademark laugh. This laugh was important to listeners at the time, which is indicated by its inclusion in transcriptions in the original Edison cylinders, its designation as a point of contention for later Uncle Josh imitators, and the creation of textual analogs for it in Pumpkin Center stories released in book form (Feaster 1999a). Much of the pleasure of these recordings derives from the spasmodic release of Uncle Josh's laughter in the flow of his droning speech.

Thus far I have been discussing the laugh as spasm, as a moment of flooding out, but it is important to consider also how the laugh can function as a part of personal interaction. In her study of conversation Gail Jefferson has described (1979, 93) how one technique for inviting laughter is for a speaker to place a laugh "just at completion of an utterance," which is then often mirrored by the recipient's laugh directly after the speaker's laughter. This kind of social laughter serves as a bridge between individuals in a conversation, operating as an invitation to participate in an ongoing interaction. Uncle Josh exploits such laughter to hook the listener and give prerecorded performances a particularly powerful sense of interactivity and presence.

Uncle Josh laughs at his own rigid behavior in the face of modernity, at the same time providing a suture between the listener and the modern apparatus of the phonograph. *Uncle Josh* recordings, as well as other phonographic laughing stories such as the "Arkansas Traveler," associate the country rube with a performed laugh.¹⁰ As happens in the laughing records genre, where a highbrow classical performance is disrupted, class tensions seem to be projected onto the release of laughter, maybe because of the possibility of social maneuvering when social frames break down. As we shall see, the sound of laughing audiences would serve similar functions for radio and television broadcasting.

THE RAW AND THE CANNED:
THE LAUGHTER OF AUDIENCES

By examining these early phonographic recordings, we can see that the audible laugh as accompaniment to mass-produced comedy was not an invention of broadcast radio. Indeed, Rick Altman has argued that the performance of audible laughter in the context of a comedy show can be traced back even further, to the nineteenth-century minstrel stage: “The minstrel show gave us the banjo and the formulaic straight man/funny man comedy team (the farcical Bones and Tambo always getting the better of the serious Interlocutor), as well as the transfer of laughter from an external audience (as in legitimate theatre, where a joke on stage is met with laughter in the balcony) to an audience located within the spectacle (on stage in the minstrel show, on the laugh track in TV situation comedies). Whenever a Bones or Tambo would get the best of the Interlocutor all others on stage would howl with laughter, thus leading the theatre audience and showing them when to laugh” (1987, 202).

These performance dynamics carried over to the sound media, since minstrel shows were an important genre for the early phonograph industry. For example, George Washington Johnson joined the Imperial Minstrels in 1894 with his fellow recording artist Len Spencer, and he released a series of cylinders duplicating the songs and stories of a minstrel show “first part” (T. Brooks 2005, 37). In the New Jersey Phonograph catalog, Johnson’s famous laugh becomes a part of the audience response: “The Interlocutor ventures to ask Bones ‘How he finds things?’ to which Bones replies, ‘I look for ’em.’ This strikes the audience as being a witty sally, and they applaud and laugh vociferously, Mr. Geo. W. Johnson’s hearty laugh particularly being heard above the din and confusion” (cited in T. Brooks 2004, 38). As with Johnson’s *Laughing Song*, racist stereotypes of the “carefree darky” helped to shape conventions of performance that became useful in the context of new mass-produced media.

To explore further the conflation of blackness, authenticity, and the hearable audience, let us briefly return to the 1909 film *Laughing Gas*. The final scene in the film takes place in an African American church, where the movements of Mandy’s laughing body are made to resemble the gestures of black religious worship. A similar connection between laughter and expressions of black community can be found in the climactic scene of a Hollywood film made thirty-two years later: Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941). Sturges’s film tells the story of John

L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), a Hollywood director who has been making comedies and musicals with titles like *Ants in Your Pants* and *Hey, Hey in the Hayloft*. Sullivan is intent on making a “serious” film about poverty to be entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* but the executives at the studio where he works convince him that he knows nothing about the subject. To their dismay, Sullivan decides to learn about “trouble” by traveling the country disguised as a tramp. The resulting film is a parable about the attainment of an authentic artistic voice.

After some false starts, Sullivan gets firsthand experience of the difficulties of poverty: he rides the rails, takes communal showers, sleeps on floors, and walks the streets wearing a degrading sandwich board. Convinced that he has learned all he needs to know about trouble, Sullivan decides to return to Hollywood to make his film—but not before going back to the streets one last time to distribute money discreetly to those who had helped him. Through a series of mishaps, Sullivan finds himself in a brutal Southern work camp. It is at this point, when Sullivan is utterly cut off from his life of Hollywood privilege, that the film asserts that he truly learns about trouble. The work camp sequence functions as a coda in which the emotional tone of the film shifts and Sturges seems to lay his cards on the table. Notably, both race and laughter become signs of authenticity.

Throughout the film, Sullivan’s artistic aspirations have been expressed in terms of class, not race: the clip we see of the type of socially conscious film Sullivan wants to make features an allegorical struggle between “capital” and “labor” on the top of a speeding train. And yet Sturges shows us that, when Sullivan moves out into the “real” world, racial differences become crucially significant. For example, when Sullivan and his unnamed girlfriend (Veronica Lake) go to jump a train, we see many African American men waiting along the tracks. Later, in a homeless shelter, a white preacher sternly speaks to a large crowd. A long tracking shot reveals that the joyless audience is composed of white, African American, and Asian faces. These details demonstrate Sturges’s awareness of the racial dimensions of poverty in America, but race functions most dramatically in the church scene at the end of the film. After scenes of Sullivan’s brutal treatment, culminating in a night spent in the work camp hot-box, there is a transition to a church in a misty Southern swamp, where an all-black congregation listens to a deep-voiced preacher.

It should be noted that “blackness” in this scene is defined largely in terms of the voice. This is not surprising: Alice Maurice has connected the fetishization of the black voice in early sound films such as *Hearts in*

Dixie (1929) and *Hallelujah!* (1929) to assertions from that time that the “Negro voice” was particularly fit for sound recording (2002, 44). Maurice contends that “the hyperpresence of black bodies” served in part to demonstrate the “prowess” of the sound film by foregrounding the “supposedly ‘inherent’ talents” of black performers (45). The same words might be used to describe George Washington Johnson in relation to the phonograph. Black voices are certainly the main attraction in the church scene in *Sullivan’s Travels*: we hear the preacher’s rumbling baritone, sounding not unlike Paul Robeson’s, the congregation’s powerful singing, and, most pertinent to this chapter, their laughter.

As a makeshift movie screen is hung at the front of the church, the congregation twice breaks out into uproarious laughter: the stereotypical depiction of African Americans as being particularly easy with their laughter.¹¹ Led by the preacher, the congregation sings “Let My People Go” as Sullivan and his fellow inmates—only one of whom is visibly black—file in (figure 5). We see a shot of their chained feet shuffling into the church, which, combined with the congregation’s singing, makes the subtext of these images of slavery clear: Sullivan has found authentic trouble because he is living the life of a black man. The lights are dimmed, and as a Walt Disney cartoon is projected on the screen, we are shown close-ups of both the white inmates and the black congregation in fits of hysterical laughter. Sullivan looks around in a daze, and then joins in the laughter himself.

By the logic of the film, it is this communal laughter that makes Sullivan’s travels complete. The church setting cues us to the fact that Sullivan takes part in a kind of secular rite in which he is baptized into an authentic sense of group membership. In fact, the audience in the church is remarkably diverse, in terms not just of race, but of age and gender as well, making it a powerful utopian image of communal harmony. The black community, then, becomes a sign of “community” writ large, in stark contrast to the lifeless audience who listened to the white preacher earlier in the film. Richard Peterson has noted that claims of ethnic group membership have traditionally been an important strategy for establishing claims of authenticity in the context of popular music (1997, 218). In Sturges’s film, the African American community is the symbolic representation of community, and its laughter becomes the emblematic sign of, and vehicle to, the group bonding that provides Sullivan with the authenticity required to make *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Sturges’s conflation of black vocal expression with an idealized community is not unique. David Brackett has written that “the slaves’



Figure 5. John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) finds authentic trouble in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Source: BFI.

capacity for communal and spontaneous creation” through vocal techniques such as call-and-response often instilled in European listeners a sense of “transgression”: “transgression of the boundaries that separated the European’s sense of himself or herself from the objects viewed, as the sense of communality and spontaneity threatens to undo the distance between observer and the observed” (1995, 110). White listeners have often interpreted black vocal expression in both essentialized and romanticized terms, hearing in it the index of a traditional, “natural” community feared lost in the whirlwind of modernity. Returning to *Sullivan's Travels*, we might well ask whether the African American congregation’s singing and laughter is *creating* the sense of their authentic community as much as it is simply reflecting it.

Nevertheless, although race is the key to Sullivan’s conversion, that fact is erased in the film’s closing montage. Sullivan is rescued from the work camp, and, on a plane flying back to Hollywood, he breaks the news to the studio executives that he is no longer interested in making *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Instead, he wants to return to making

comedies, as he has learned the power of laughter: “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that’s all that some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan. Boy!” We hear a chuckle on the soundtrack, which builds to the laughter of a great multitude and is eventually drowned out by fanfares of orchestral music. On the screen we see a montage of laughing faces: Sullivan’s fellow prison inmates, a golden-haired young girl, nurses and patients in a hospital ward, and a group of laughing children. Notably, all the faces shown are white. When this is compared to the African American church scene, one has to say that black expressions of laughter were the vehicle for Sullivan’s attainment of authenticity, but only the vehicle: though images of black faces predominate in the church, they are absent from the “family of man” imagery in the final montage.

I don’t want to oversimplify Sturges’s film, which subtly manages to critique Hollywood for its inability to represent a world of racial difference faithfully. What I want to emphasize is the continuing importance of laughter—in this case the laughter of an audience—as an expression of authentic, embodied presence. It was exactly this sense of presence that broadcast radio would be at pains to replicate for its far-flung audience. In fact, the performance of laughter served an important function on radio broadcasts and established conventions for the hearable audience that were then carried over into television. Paddy Scannell has written of the dilemma facing early broadcasters in the face of the “unprecedented newness of radio as a medium of general social communication” (1996, 4). One of the major issues was to produce programs in such a way that people who turned on a radio or television set would “be able to figure out what was going on pretty quickly” (4). The sound of the laughing audience would play an important role in this endeavor.

Scannell analyzes *Harry Hopeful*: a program broadcast in England’s North Region in 1935, and the “first programme that sought to create a sociable occasion as its *raison d’être*” (24). The hearable audience constituted what was taking place as a “performed *public* event in the presence of an audience” (28). Scannell shows how the presence of the audience in *Harry Hopeful* was cause for discussion at the time, and also how it provided a sense of the authentic and regional: “The use of a hearable audience as part of the programme aroused considerable curiosity up in London, when heard for the first time. The Director of Talks, Charles Siepman, felt it was the nearest thing to real and typical regional performance that he had heard yet. The whole thing had a great air of spontaneity but he wanted to know if the audience was literally there,

whether the laughter and applause were real or recorded, and whether they were genuine characters or actors” (29). A crucial early development in radio broadcasting was thus the establishment in some genres of the hearable audience as “part of a performance produced for absent listeners” (29). The sound of the audience provided a sense of authenticity, spontaneity, and “liveness,” as well as formally contextualizing the radio performance.

Some of the reasons for emphasizing that liveness had to do with network politics. Michele Hilmes describes how, as early as 1928, the Federal Radio Commission discouraged stations from playing prerecorded entertainment, and as a result stations broadcasting live entertainment were given “precedence in the allocation of air space because that material presumably remained unavailable in any other form” (1990, 27). Only the big radio networks, with their access to cross-country landlines and local wires, could provide and transmit high-quality live programming, so it behooved them to promote the superiority of the live broadcast (143). The presence of a live audience on radio, then, was determined by economic as well as formal factors.

The sound of a studio audience was not a universal aspect of radio broadcasting. The influential comedy program *Amos 'n Andy*, for example, initially featured the voices of the characters and little else (Ely 1991, 2). Nor was the hearable audience met with unanimous approval. The comedian Fred Allen stated that “the worst thing that ever happened to radio was the studio audience. Somebody like Eddie Cantor brought those hordes of cackling geese in because he couldn’t work without imbeciles laughing at his jokes” (Hobson 1966b, 22). Allen’s view is important because it shows that the sound of audience laughter was considered by some to be cheap and manipulative. If the laughter of a live studio audience was manipulative, than a prerecorded laugh track was doubly so. With the advent of magnetic tape and multitracking in the 1940s, manipulation of the radio studio audience’s response became much easier.¹² On broadcast television the laugh track became both a ubiquitous formal feature and the focus of debate about authenticity and the social experience of mass media.

The same kind of network imperatives that had encouraged live broadcasts on radio also existed for early television. For many of the same economic reasons that made radio networks give priority to live programming, the television networks were initially unreceptive to filmed programming. But as television production began to move from New York to Hollywood and was increasingly shot on film instead of

performed live, the recorded laugh track became a fixture of television comedy. The social aspects of laughter made it a potent rhetorical weapon in the battle over filmed TV, a discourse colored by the ideology of presence and immediacy. As television production moved increasingly to film, the laugh track, like the laughter of Uncle Josh, helped to maintain a sense of the “liveness” and presence of the studio audience.

The first television show to use a prerecorded laugh track seems to have been the *Hank McClure Show* in 1950; the practice became much more widespread in the wake of the phenomenal success of the filmed comedy *I Love Lucy* after 1953. Laugh tracks became a crucial component for filmed television comedy, desired by both sponsors and home viewers. Several commentators told the cautionary tales of *My Little Margie* and *Dear Phoebe*: “‘My Little Margie,’ a situation comedy first filmed without so much as a titter, raised its rating the week it got a laugh track all its own. ‘Dear Phoebe’ tried to buck the trend . . . and went on the screens for six weeks with nothing but dialog and soundtrack. The noble experiment came to an end, on the sponsor’s orders, and a ‘subtle’ track replaced the silence” (“Strictly for Laughs” 46).

The laugh track was discussed in the popular press between the years 1954 and 1957, and it reemerged as a topic in the wake of the 1959 quiz show scandal. Under pressure to reform, CBS’s president Frank Stanton announced that “canned applause and laughter, ‘spontaneous’ interview shows that are actually rehearsed, and other deceits common to television are to be weeded out of the schedule of the Columbia Broadcasting System. . . . The practice of dubbing recorded applause or laughter into the sound track of a completed program . . . simply does not accord with [my] belief that a show must be what it purports to be” (J. Gould 1959, 1). Stanton initiated a policy of identifying canned laughter via “announcements of disclosure” after the show. For example, a show might have to display titles reading “audience reaction technically produced,” or “audience reaction technically augmented” (J. Gould 1960, 75). Unsurprisingly, TV comics hated this policy, and several prominent performers, including Jack Benny, publicly fought for its removal. Stanton scrapped the policy after only a few months, hoping that the publicity had brought the idea of the laugh track into the open, and he encouraged greater care be employed “to prevent overdoing the use of canned laughter” (75).

The use of the laugh track dovetailed with concerns about the nature of the television audience. Unlike movies and the theater, television played not to a unified mass audience, but instead “to a group of perhaps

five or six people at a time” (Boddy 1990, 82). Comics and writers of the time were unsure about, and even suspicious of, this strange new audience: “What the TV audiences lack is a genuine interest in comedy. Most TV viewers drop into place before their sets because they have nothing more diverting to do at the moment. As an audience they cannot be counted upon to be either attentive or receptive because they have been assembled not so much by design as by default. A man who removes himself from a comfortable chair in his home to occupy a less comfortable one in a crowded theatre becomes predisposed to laugh in a way he would never do if he stayed at home” (“Comedy Crisis Worries Comics” 38).

Statements like this reflect the widely held belief in the essentially social nature of laughter. Robert Provine, in his recent scientific investigation of laughter, emphasizes the point: “When we hear laughter we tend to laugh in turn, producing a behavioral chain reaction that sweeps through a group, creating a crescendo of jocularity or ridicule. The contagious laughter response is immediate and involuntary, involving the most direct communication possible between people ‘brain to brain’ with our intellect just going along for the ride” (2000, 129). For its advocates, the “direct communication” of laughter via the laugh track could help solve the problem of the fragmented television audience. Proponents of the laugh track, such as NBC president Sylvester (Pat) Weaver, stated that laughter was “a community experience and not an individual one”: “No one likes to laugh alone, and when you sit in your own living room an honestly made laugh track can project you right into the audience, with the best seat in the house, to enjoy the fun’ ” (“Strictly for Laughs” 46).

Opposition to the use of prerecorded audience laughter was part of the larger critique of filmed television, what William Boddy calls “the central element in the highly prescriptive critical discourse of television’s Golden Age” (1990, 73). For some of the key critics of filmed TV (such as Jack Gould of the *New York Times*), comedy, laughter, and the laugh track were particularly salient case studies, just as much as the oft-discussed live dramas. In one of Gould’s most elaborate polemics against filmed TV (1956, 27), he begins with the example of Jackie Gleason: “The case for natural television against canned television is up for spirited review in industry quarters. [Jackie Gleason] chose to abandon live TV. . . . Jackie doesn’t seem so funny anymore; in fact film has made his program distressingly flat.”

Many of the opponents of the laugh track rejected the idea that laughter was essentially a social act, emphasizing instead the role of the individual: “I always say nobody has to laugh, canned or live, to let me know

if a show is funny” (Ace 1954, 28). Critiques of the laugh track also emphasized the spontaneous nature of laughter, one of the main tropes in the attack on filmed television in general: “The very essence of true laughter is spontaneity. It is unmanageable, unpredictable, impervious to control” (Shayon 1959, 44). Part of what made the laugh track offensive was the sense that the viewer was being told when to laugh: “A situation comedy on film may be quite acceptable until from left field comes a wave of tinny, doctored and apportioned guffaws. Strips of this pre-packaged approval are pieced into the film in what some wan director hopes are the right spots. Usually he guesses wrong. . . . The viewer loses his sense of being a partner and instead becomes a spectator. It is the difference between being with somebody and looking at somebody” (J. Gould 1956, 27). In many critiques of mass culture, the television viewer is presented as a passive victim of media manipulation. Gilbert Seldes was one critic who saw the TV laugh track in this light, describing it as a manipulation akin to that of the radio studio audience: “The canned laughter of filmed comedy carries a step further the deception that began years ago in the induced laughter of the studio audiences in radio, the obedient cackles and clappings when the sign was held up” (1956, 167–68).

The rhetoric against the laugh track sometimes focused on the role of the television comedy writer. Consider an essay by Max Liebman in the January 4, 1961, issue of *Variety*. Entitled “Laugh? I Thought I’d Die,” it is the cautionary tale of an idealistic young comedy writer named Hank, who learns from an unnamed Big Executive about the laugh machine known to his colleagues as “Mr. McKenzie.” Hank’s objections to the laugh machine have to do with its effect on his labor as a writer: “‘I don’t want it,’ he said. ‘I get paid to write comedy. If my jokes can’t score on their own, they don’t belong in the script. . . . I have a craftsman’s pride in my work. I look to the audience to tell me how good I am, or how good I ain’t. I’m valued by the laughs I get. I’m guided by the lines that conk out. . . . Your Mr. McKenzie is destructive to good comedy writing. He wrecks a writer’s incentive. Who’s going to sweat and strain to get a yock when there’s a mechanical pushover handy to deliver it for you?’” (1961, 86).

Commentators like Liebman saw the laugh track breaking a crucial circuit that joined writer, performer, and audience. Further, the laugh track was seen as a threat to established hierarchies in the writing community: “[Hank] had earned his status by struggle and accomplishment. He had satisfied some of the best comedians on the air. He had won

awards. The tasteless McKenzie could raise any slob of a writer to Hank's plateau by saturating the slob's script with unearned guffaws" (86).¹³ One way to understand the comedy writer's anxiety is to recall Provine's description of social laughter as "the most direct communication possible between people 'brain to brain' with our intellect just going along for the ride" (2000, 129). The comedy writer would have a vested interest in asserting that the intellect did indeed play a role, that laughs were produced by clever writing and not some kind of group hysteria. One can see, then, why the comedy writer might have tended to side with those who stressed the individual nature of laughter in the debate over the laugh track.

One of the most vivid attacks on the laugh track can be found in Elia Kazan's 1957 film *A Face In the Crowd*, starring Andy Griffith. Interestingly, Griffith began his career by telling rube stories very much in the tradition of Cal Stewart. Like Uncle Josh, the Griffith rube persona provides naïve, wide-eyed descriptions of modern, typically highbrow events like opera, ballet, and Shakespeare's plays, although his most famous routine was about a football game ("What It Was, Was Football"). After making his television debut playing a rube character in *Make Room for Sergeants*, Griffith starred in the Kazan film, based on a short story by Budd Schulberg called "Your Arkansas Traveler," which tells the story of Lonesome Rhodes, a mysterious drifter who rises to fame on radio and TV telling folksy anecdotes about the fictional town of Riddle, Arkansas. These stories are similar to Cal Stewart's tales of life in Pumpkin Center, and Rhodes is a kind of evil Uncle Josh—a country rube who is not overwhelmed by modernity but, through the use of broadcast media, overwhelms it.

In both Schulberg's story and Kazan's film the rube's body is represented through his laughter. Schulberg writes of Rhodes's "ruddy, laughing face, the haw-haw kind" (1953, 4), which is manifested not only on his face but also his belly: " 'Haw haw haw,' he chuckled from deep in his belly" (7). At another point, "He shook all over when he chuckled" (5). Rhodes's visceral laugh and prodigious sexual appetite make the female narrator uncomfortable: "He had a certain animal charm that made me feel uneasy" (7). In Kazan's film, Griffith's laugh is consistently the subject of invasive close-ups, and it is breathlessly commented upon by his costar, Patricia Neal: "You put everything you've got into that laugh" (figure 6). The narrative bite of Schulberg and Kazan's film comes from the shock of finding Lonesome Rhodes's trademark laugh to be crassly manipulative. As the index of how far Lonesome Rhodes has fallen from country authenticity, we see him crouching in his penthouse



Figure 6. Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffith) puts everything he's got into his laugh in Elia Kazan's 1957 film, *A Face in the Crowd*.

apartment, gleefully caressing his new prized possession: a laughing and applauding machine (figure 7).¹⁴

The rhetorical vehemence and pure outrage of some of the laugh track's opponents show how laughter can stand as an index of the human: "Is this merely another harmless variation of the theatre's advancing technology or is there something profoundly disturbing about the dehumanization, for all concerned, of man's ultimate defense against the gods and himself—laughter?" (Shayon 1959, 44). As it was in the performances of Faber's and Edison's talking machines a century earlier, laughter is seen as a pure indication of individual human presence, an expression that becomes particularly significant and contradictory in the context of mechanical reproduction.

We might better understand the debate over the laugh track by comparing it to another debate concerning sound media production and aesthetics. James Lastra describes how two representational models for the film soundtrack dominated the discussion of sound engineers and technicians in the 1930s. A "phonographic" model imagined the recording apparatus as the surrogate for an invisible auditor; it sought to "unite the spaces of reception and representation—to place the auditor as literally as possible *in* the profilmic space" (2000, 181–82). Engineers working



Figure 7. Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffith) and his laughing and applauding machine, from *A Face in the Crowd* (1957).

along these lines would strive to faithfully reproduce the sonic spaces of the profilmic performance by matching sound perspective to visual perspective—for example, long shots of a character would be accompanied by low-volume dialogue. On the other hand, a “telephonic” model emphasized clarity and legibility of dialogue above all else, and so it utilized a clear, dry sound that reproduced well in movie theaters and thus did not faithfully preserve profilmic space. Though the telephonic model became dominant in film practice, Lastra asserts that the phonographic model “ruled the theoretical roost” (139).

The ubiquity of the laugh track is an indication of the lingering influence of a phonographic model in broadcasting. As Sylvester Weaver’s comments above indicate, the laugh track was meant to simulate the “best seat in the house,” to unite the space of reception in the home with an imagined space of representation in the theater or studio, and so place the “alone together” audience within a simulated social context. The hearable studio audience was one way to simulate a theater atmosphere, but Sarah Kozloff describes how early radio drama programs such as *The First Nighter* also featured the sounds of ushers and curtain calls. Kozloff argues, however, that “the most creative radio playwrights” of the 1930s rejected such a model and shifted their ideal from simulated

drama to narration (1988, 27). Orson Welles was a central figure in this shift, and the fact that his influential *Mercury Theater of the Air* was originally entitled *First Person Singular* indicates his refusal to conceptualize radio as simulated theater. Instead of turning the living room into the “best seat in the house,” such an approach imagines radio as creating a more intimate, first-person space that is modeled on the subjective experience of literature and sometimes known by the moniker “the theater of the imagination.” Recall the way in which Jack Gould framed his critique of laugh track: it turned the viewer from a partner into a spectator and represented the difference between “being with somebody and looking at somebody” (1956, 27). Gould uses spatial metaphors to reject the idea of a simulated theater and instead points to a more intimate, subjective framing for broadcast entertainment.

From this perspective, the sound of any audience reaction, live or taped, could be considered stylistically retrograde. But anti-laugh track rhetoric often made distinctions between the live studio audience and the prerecorded laugh track, holding up the former as the index of authentic presence and communication. But the argument that contrasts the artifice of the laugh track with the authenticity of a live studio audience is problematic because the reactions of the studio audience were rarely free from manipulation. For example, a 1973 television production manual describes how the sound mixer can increase the volume of certain responses in order to “milk the audience”: “To produce the right effect the operator must judge precisely the moment when the laugh will come. He has to anticipate the amount of laughter and be able to create realistic swell effect, increasing the natural rise and fall of the volume, without making it obvious that it has been exaggerated” (Alkin 1973, 210). Additionally, a large number of reaction microphones must be used to capture the sounds of the audience laughter, adding another layer of technological intervention. And even though this audience is live in the studio with the performers, it is often prompted by the playback of its own laughter: “Audience reaction can be encouraged by feeding part of the output of the audience reaction microphones back to the audience on the p.a. system. . . . Loudspeakers can be used at the back of the auditorium supplied either with the output of the front reaction microphones or with pre-recorded reaction which acts as a ‘trigger’ and is not used directly in the studio output” (211). The studio audience is thus being “triggered” and manipulated much as the home viewer is.

Further blurring the line between live and recorded sound, television producers sometimes talked about how the reactions of the live audience

were not without their own problems, and they could even seem less real than the laugh track. A 1959 article about Sid Caesar describes how a big part of his decision to use a laugh track had to do with anxiety about the response of the live audience: “The quantity and quality of the local studio audience that would attend was a highly risky factor. If the weather were poor; if the audience were unsophisticated, morose or from Missouri—the degree of laughter on the air might be anywhere from debilitated to disastrous” (Shayon 1959, 44). In a 1966 *TV Guide* interview, Arthur Julian, writer of *F Troop*, stated that “real audiences sound phonier than the laugh track. Sometimes they freeze up and act unnatural” (Hobson 1966b, 21). Similarly, the producer Don McGuire characterized live audiences as “tense and nervous,” which made it hard to get “their true reactions” (21). Dick Hobson describes how one of the reasons live audiences “aren’t all they’re cracked up to be” is that they “can hardly see the performers through the swarm of cameras, announcers, lights, sound men, props, musicians, microphone booms, dancers, cameramen, stagehands, and assorted production assistants” (21). Not only that, but sometimes producers complained that live audiences laughed too much or too loudly: “The audiences are so delighted to be there, actually seeing the stars in the flesh . . . that sometimes they laugh too loud and too often. If we played it just as it comes out, nobody would believe it. We have to tone it down to make it sound real” (Levin 1978, 36).

It is clear, then, that in terms of television production, the live studio audience is hardly the bastion of human spontaneity. Similarly, from the standpoint of the home audience, the reactions of live studio audiences as heard on network television do not typically provide a sense of the spontaneous. Take, for example, Norman Lear’s *All in the Family*, a show that, in reintroducing a live studio audience, was credited with “bur[ying] the laugh track forever” (G. Jones 1993, 207). But the audience reaction on *All in the Family* clearly reveals the methods of control and manipulation outlined above. While suggesting that we are watching an authentically live event, the laughs and applause of the studio audience are just as seamlessly part of the text as a laugh track.

THE CANNED UNCANNY: LAUGHING MACHINES

We have seen so far how the laugh served as a suture between audience and prerecorded performances. In broadcasting the laugh track was used to locate the isolated viewer in a constructed social context, building on

the social nature of laughter, and to give broadcast performances a sense of immediacy. The sounds of the live studio audience were just as much a creation of the processes of media production as was the recorded laugh track. Conversely, the closer one looks at the actual labor involved in creating the laugh track, the less mechanical it begins to seem. Partly because of its uncertain marriage of human and mechanical, reactions to the “laughing machine” apparatus often drifted from the comic to the uncanny, further revealing the nature of laughter and its role in authenticating media texts.

Despite flurries of interest in the popular press, the apparatus and production techniques behind the laugh track were largely kept an industry secret, and they are notable by their absence. Industry magazines like *Broadcasting* and *Television* all but ignored the issue in the 1950s. In a 1953 article in *Variety*, Marc Daniels, the director of *I Married Joan*, noted that “laughs can be dubbed in, using chuckle tracks, laugh tracks, yock tracks or boff tracks in various combinations. . . . Why do there have to be laughs? Well . . . that is a highly controversial subject. Let’s skip it” (1953, 37). Similarly, a TV sound engineer in a 1957 *Time* article would discuss the laugh track only anonymously, “so furtive” was “the whole industry” about canned laughter (“Can the Laughter” 40). In 1959 the *Saturday Review* followed the sound engineer Maxwell Russell on his job providing the laugh track for a Sid Caesar special on NBC. The article describes the secretive and isolated nature of this work: “No one in charge gave him any instructions on how to integrate the laugh machine into the program. He followed the rehearsals, marked his script according to his own hunches on where the laughs would or should come. The director did not even acknowledge his presence. It was as if he were not there” (Shayon 1959, 44). The mystique of the laughing machine, or “Laff Box,” as it was called in the industry, remained intact well into the 1960s. A 1966 *TV Guide* article described how, “if the Laff Box should start acting strangely, the Laff Boys wheel it into the men’s room, locking the door behind so that no one can peek. . . . Everybody and his brother has a theory about what’s inside. But mention the name ‘Charley Douglas’ [inventor of the Laff Box] and it’s like ‘Cosa Nostra’—everybody starts whispering. It’s the most taboo topic in TV” (Hobson 1966a, 4).¹⁵

Coupled with this aura of secrecy, the laugh track, though introduced to a public familiar with the idea of recorded voices, seems to have been considered eerie and uncanny from the very beginning of its existence. This was the case even with professional TV technicians: “Fellow tech-

nicians strolled over to look at the mechanical laughter, shuddered, and said they were glad they weren't operating it" (Shayon 1959, 44). One of the main means by which people expressed their sense of the uncanny nature of the laugh track was by noting that many of the people heard laughing were now dead: "People who once, in a moment of abandon, guffawed at Stoopnagle and Budd can, without knowing it, hear their youthful follies repeated as the background for a TV film. Fred Allen, for one, can never help thinking that much of the merriment is being made by folk long dead" ("Strictly for Laughs" 46). The TV writer Larry Gelbart stated, "It's a standing joke, of course, that most of those people on the laugh track are dead now." He went on to paint a picture of laughing souls trapped in a televisual purgatory: "They laughed those laughs years ago and they'll never be allowed to stop, never" (1984, 17). Something about the recorded laugh seems to have brought these thoughts readily to mind, even to people immersed in over a half century of recorded sound.

Why was the recorded laugh felt to be so powerfully disturbing? For Bergson, laughter is a social sanction against frame rigidity and mechanical behavior. When someone acts like a machine, we laugh. But, following Freud's essay "The 'Uncanny,'" this same ambiguity between human and machine is an important source of our experience of the uncanny. Freud begins his essay by quoting Jentsch on the uncanny's link to "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate," and referring to "the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons" (1997, 201). Though Freud went on to find other sources for the uncanny, the laugh machine could similarly blur the lines between living presence and inanimate machine. In articles criticizing the laugh track and filmed television more generally, Jack Gould describes practices like lip-synching that combine live and taped as zombielike: "phony TV with performing half-breeds—half-live and half-dead, the zombies of show business" (1956, 27).

Like Gould's lip-synching zombies, the combination of the taped laugh track and videotaped performers forces the viewer to recognize layers of presence in the broadcast performance. Freud's inclusion of epilepsy as a source of the uncanny also suggests that the spasmlike nature of laughter is prime for the production of such an effect: "These excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation" (1997, 201). The uncanniness of the laugh track therefore reveals how

the spasmodic nature of the laugh, so often read as an index for the human, can just as easily appear mechanical.

Max Liebman's 1961 essay in *Variety*, which I described above, indicates how the laugh track could confuse the animate and inanimate in unnerving ways. The comedy writer Hank, frustrated by how the Big Executive had forced him to work with the laugh track, revisits the experience of a laugh track dubbing session in a dream. The description of the scene emphasizes the uncanny undercurrents of the laugh track, with its blurring of human and machine: "There was an eeriness about the dubbing studio which Hank hadn't noticed before. The Big Executive had also changed. Seated beside Mr. McKenzie, he seemed to be of the same metallic composition, and the same inscrutability." Note how the machine has a name, but the executive does not. The dream becomes more surreal when Mr. McKenzie refuses to laugh at Hank's show. The Big Executive explains, "He doesn't like your script . . . he doesn't think you're funny." "Hank realized that he was in a realm where madness was the norm. Artistic judgment was entrusted to an arrangement of wires and buttons and tubes, and men born human were accepting robotism as the best means to progress. His frustration was total when he suddenly heard the executive ascribing human emotions to the laugh machine. 'You hurt him when you called him a pushover. He hasn't laughed at anything since' " (1961, 86).

Hank swallows his pride and apologizes to Mr. McKenzie, who then lets out a "bellow of laughter that sounded like thunder coming out of a tunnel": "The sound rose and swelled until it shook the building. Infected by it, the executive added his own maniacal shrieks. Hank was on his feet yelling that that scene wasn't funny. It was destroyed by laughter. But his own voice was soundless in the din, which grew louder, even more cacophonous." Hank wakes up, laughing at the absurdity of the dream, but soon finds himself racing to the next dubbing session, unfed and in a sweat, hoping to influence the process: "After all, Mr. McKenzie was only a machine" (86). This narrative nicely illustrates how troubling the laugh track could be: it made machines seem eerily human and human laughter seem mechanical.

For Freud the uncanny is particularly tied to the involuntary return to the same situation, something of particular pertinence to the experience of the laugh track because of its nature as a tape loop: we hear the same laughs again and again (1997, ???). Indeed, the laugh track apparatus is an unlikely precursor to the tape loop performances in modern avant-garde and popular music, even a kind of proto-sampler: "[the laugh

machine is] about the size of a fat suitcase standing up. Behind thin, hardware-drawer panels, small reels of tape revolve in perpetual three-to six-and-one-half-second loops. Each reel is marked to describe the specific kind of laughter it provides. The control panel is a small wood block with ten buttons, five stop and five go. Press the go button and the machine keeps repeating the appropriate laugh cycle ad infinitum. Press stop and the laugh stops at the completion of the brief cycle” (Shayon 1959, 44).

Musical analogies occurred to writers who saw the machine in action, and they repeatedly noted its organlike appearance: “The engineer plays his machine like an organ, rehearses right along with the cast, tailors the laughs snugly to the lines” (“Can the Laughter” 38).¹⁶ Charley Douglas, the man credited with creating the machine, is portrayed as playing “an organlike mechanism with six keys that when played with the left hand, can provide small chuckles, medium chuckles, small laughs, medium laughs, medium heavy laughs, and rollin’-in-the-aisle boffs” (“Strictly for Laughs” 46). The similarity to a musical instrument is heightened in descriptions of the machine that refer to chords and themes: “Using chords, the player can provide some 100 variations on these six basic themes; and his right hand can control the volume. Jess Oppenheimer, producer of ‘I Love Lucy,’ has another machine, dubbed the Jay-O Laughter, which he claims can produce 100 different kinds of laughs on each of its six keys” (“Strictly for Laughs” 46).

In his 1966 article “The Hollywood Sphinx and His Laff Box,” Hobson neatly combines the uncanny and the musical: “Picture if you will Lon Chaney Sr. in ‘Phantom of the Opera’ flailing at the pipe organ in the darkened cathedral crypt and you have some notion of the Laff Boy at work. Hunched over the keyboard of Charley’s box on the darkened dubbing stage, his fingers punching at the keys, his feet manipulating the pedals, he wrings forth his fugues and caprices. He’s a veritable virtuoso of titters and snorts” (1966a, 4).

These musical comparisons underscore the fact that laying down the laugh track was a performance that relied on skill, timing, and taste: “When the lights come up, the Laff Boy is frequently drenched in sweat. . . . The trick of the Laff Boy’s trade is timing. . . . To manufacture a natural-sounding laugh, the Laff Boy must let a few ‘people’ in his box anticipate a joke. This is called ‘giving it a little tickle.’ Then he might punch in a ‘sharpie’ just before the main laugh. . . . Gags frequently build, each capping the last, so the Laff Boy must likewise build and hold his biggest laugh for the pay-off” (6). Compare this intricate and subtle

performance with the degree of manipulation of the live studio audience discussed above, and it becomes even harder to declare one more authentic than the other.

The keyboard design of the Laff Box reveals a morphological resemblance that helps to place it in a historic lineage with Joseph Faber's laughing Turk. Moving forward in time, we can place it with other, more modern machines that used tape loops, such as the Chamberlin and the Mellotron. The keys of these instruments triggered recorded loops of instruments playing the notes of the scale. The Mellotron was state-of-the-art studio technology in the 1960s; the haunting sound of its flute setting can be heard on Beatles' recordings such as "Strawberry Fields Forever." Indeed, the Beatles' recording of "Tomorrow Never Knows," which has been heralded for its use of swirling psychedelic tape loops, pays an unconscious tribute to the laughing machine: the loop, vaguely reminiscent of the sound of seagulls, is a speeded-up recording of Paul McCartney laughing.¹⁷

The debate over the laugh track didn't end in the 1960s, as the comments and career of Larry Gelbart illustrate. A vehement opponent of the laugh track, Gelbart rearticulated the belief in the individual nature of laughter: "Laughter is a very personal act. It has to start with the individual, although it can end up a group experience. But first, it has to work for you; then you can work in a crowd" (1998, 184). Gelbart reluctantly agreed to allow the laugh track on his series *M*A*S*H*, but after the success of that show, Gelbart had the clout to produce his new program *United States* without it: "[We] did away with the laugh track, rejecting outright the suggestion to the viewer that there were three hundred people living in the same house as our couple, going from room to room with them and laughing their heads off at their intimate and/or hilarious exchanges" (94). His rejection of the laugh track went hand in hand with his insistence that this new series was more personal and autobiographical than anything else he'd ever done. As has often been the case with television comedy, artistic aspiration is indexed by the absence of the laugh track, making it an important index of genre and authorship.¹⁸

The Laff Box and the laugh track can be placed in the context of the practices and discourses surrounding the recorded laugh that I've traced through various media of the past century. The flooding out of performed laughter is one example of a modern vocal style that was forged in the context of these new sound media technologies. The use of the laugh track to simulate social experience and so suture the audience to

the prerecorded text, the uncanny experience of the Laff Box, and the assertion that laughter is a quintessentially individual expression all illustrate how laughter has been regarded as a powerful index for authentic human presence in the production and reception of mass media. Returning to the scene in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* described at the beginning of this chapter, we can see that the laugh continues to be used to test the boundaries between the human and the mechanical. The android David's laugh works much like the media texts I have analyzed above, slipping from the human to the mechanical, from the social to the individual, from the comic to the uncanny.

Laughter has consistently been mobilized as a barometer of the authentically human, a choice that is not without consequences. Holding up laughter as the definition of the self-motivated individual is problematic in light of the inherently social and spasmodic nature of the laugh. If laughter is so connected to instinct, spasm, and the social, then its identification as a citadel of the individual self is already compromised: the raw, living laugh and the cooked recording become harder to disentangle. The anxiety about the laugh track demonstrates the potentially disturbing nature of blurring these boundaries and the difficulty of defining both the human and the mechanical, the can and the canned, in the context of modern mass media.