Emma Li
Prof. Ruti Talmor
Senior Seminar in Media Studies
5 December 2020

<center>The Good Place as Meta-Television: The Production Process and the Narrative</center>

"Oh, it looks like paradise, but it's actually a filthy dumpster full of our worst anxieties. . .. We've been torturing each other since the moment we arrived, and everything Michael has done has made at least one of us miserable."
"Oh dip! Eleanor, I told you that first night that we were in a prank show."

<div align="right">(Schur)</div>

<center>**Welcome to *The Good Place***</center>

Introduction

The Good Place is worth critically examining as a piece of meta-television not only for its metareferences to the television medium and conventions, but also as a case study for demonstrating the functional potentials and limitations of meta-television. Through analyzing *The Good Place*, this paper seeks to broaden the definition of meta-television to one that is inclusive of its intertextual, self-reflexive, critical, and functional characteristics. Not all of these characteristics need to be present for a show to be considered meta-television. Since much of the past scholarly focus has been on the former two characteristics, this paper also aims to encourage further exploration of the critical and functional potential of meta-television, especially as it relates to the television medium.

This paper seeks to first gain a solid understanding of existing discourse on meta-television, the sitcom genre, and the television medium. Given this foundational knowledge, the primary questions this paper seeks to answer are the following. How does *The Good Place* operate as a work of meta-television and comment on its own medium? How does this case study challenge or expand upon current understandings of meta-television, especially in terms of its critical and functional potentials?

About the Show

The Good Place, created by Michael Schur, is a genre-bending television series produced by NBC and internationally distributed by Netflix. The comedy-drama-fantasy show premiered on September 19, 2016 and last aired on January 30, 2020, ending after four seasons. It has widely received critical acclaim, partly due to its unique emphasis on moral philosophy. *The Good Place* is "one of NBC's highest-rated shows, averaging around 10 million viewers each week once viewership from [streaming] platforms [are] factored in" (Sarner). As further indication of its success, the show has picked up fourteen Primetime Emmy nominations and enjoys a 97% average rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes.

Premise of the Show

With its pastel colors and lighthearted theme song, *The Good Place* may seem like an innocuous television show about the protagonist Eleanor Shellstrop trying to fit in a heaven-like version of the afterlife, called the Good Place, knowing she does not belong. However, this illusion is shattered, for the human characters and the viewers, in the season one finale when Eleanor utters her now-iconic realization, "This is the Bad Place."

The core of the show is difficult to explain without giving away this plot twist, as its true premise is largely hidden before then. IMBd attempts to sum up the show by writing, "Four people and their otherworldly frienemy struggle in the afterlife to define what it means to be good" ("The Good Place"). The basic premise is that the four human main characters Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell), Chidi Anangonye (William Jackson Harper), Tahani Al-Jamil (Jameela Jamil), and Jason Mendoza (Manny Jacinto) have died on earth and entered the afterlife.

In the first episode, they are welcomed into a neighborhood in the Good Place by the architect running the neighborhood called Michael (Ted Danson), an assistant with universal

knowledge and magical powers named Janet (D'Arcy Carden), and 318 other human residents. After a season full of mishaps and interpersonal conflicts, the finale reveals that Michael had duped the four human characters into believing they are in the Good Place when they're actually getting tortured in the Bad Place (the show's version of hell) by demons and each other. Michael is actually a Bad Place architect piloting out his new idea for torture. He stole Janet from the real Good Place, and the other residents are all demons acting as humans under Michael's direction.

The next three seasons clarify the layout of the Afterlife and its key settings: the Good Place, the Bad Place, the Medium Place, and the Neutral Zone. In the second season, Michael attempts his experimental neighborhood through 802 "reboots" where he wipes the four humans' memories, changes some variables, and repeatedly fails to make the Good Place illusion last. Eventually, the cast of demons organize against Michael, leaving him no choice but to appeal to the four humans to join forces. Along with Janet, Michael, Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason band together to form "team cockroach."

As part of the deal, Michael must take ethics lessons with former moral philosophy professor Chidi, and Michael gradually experiences a positive ethical transformation. Team cockroach then fights their way through the afterlife system in an effort to create a more equitable afterlife. Through running redesigned experiments to prove humans are capable of ethical growth, the team gains insight into the system's underlying issues and learns about moral philosophy in the process. By the end of the last season, the team succeeds in designing an afterlife that facilitates personal, ethical growth with no torture.

Quality TV and Sitcoms on the Small Screen

The Rise of Quality Television

Interrogating television's ability to critique itself is especially important in 2020 and beyond. With the sudden spike in people stuck at home in front of screens, the COVID-19 pandemic has further cemented television's place at the forefront of media entertainment. The medium has grown increasingly influential under lockdown. In the United Kingdom, the viewership of online streaming services increased by 71% during lockdown compared to 2019, and the amount of time adults spent watching streaming services roughly doubled (Rajan). Although broadcast TV viewership has decreased in recent years due to the shift to streaming, it was still 11% higher in June 2020 compared to the same time last year (Rajan).

Even before the pandemic, television was "said to be in a creative renaissance, with critics hailing the rise of Quality series such as *Mad Men* and *30 Rock*" (Newman and Levine). *Mad Men* is an AMC period drama set in the 1960s portraying the life of an advertising executive as well as the people and events around him. The show has received critical acclaim with 94% aggregate critics rating on Rotten Tomatoes and has been discussed extensively in television studies. *30 Rock* is another example of Quality TV. It's an NBC satirical sitcom about what occurs behind the scenes at a fictional live sketch comedy show. Although it has a considerably lower critics score of 78% on Rotten Tomatoes, it has nonetheless garnered significant attention and praise in television studies. The audience score is also high at 93%.

Quality TV with a capital-Q is used to reference "those programs that target a narrow, upscale audience and that are widely viewed as high quality by these viewers as well as by many critics and scholars" (Newman and Levine 172). Information on how acclaimed a show is has become more easily accessible than ever before. People no longer rely on newspaper columns

and word-of-mouth to find out the public opinion on a show. A quick online search is enough to reveal its aggregate critic scores and audience scores. Review sites such as Rotten Tomatoes serve as vast online ecosystems for viewers interested in Quality TV.

The cultural legitimation of television as Quality has been an ongoing effort since the emergence of television broadcasting in the 1940s, but the 1970s and 1980s marked a turning point "when the fragmentation of the audiences made for increased opportunities to direct programming at sophisticated, affluent niches" (Newman and Levine 4). This fragmentation has been further intensified in the 21st century by the widespread popularity of streaming platforms programmed with complex algorithms to target Quality shows at people whose past browsing behaviors indicate interest in such shows. The change in television viewing habits, from broadcast to online streaming, represents another turning point in the rise of Quality TV.

Along with other Quality TV series, both *Mad Men* and *30 Rock* have inspired scholarly literature on meta-television. *Mad Men* has been described as meta, because the show includes representations of television and they "offers a reflective commentary of the time" (Bacon 26). The series finale for the seven-season-long show even ends with a 1971 television commercial for Coca Cola. *30 Rock* is also packed with references to television, but the aesthetic standards of *30 Rock* is very different from the shows represented within the show, leading some to consider it as "new" Quality TV (Pape 97).

Critics also have "likened the digressive cut-away humor of *30 Rock* and [similar sitcoms] to the . . . metafiction of Pynchon, Coover, and Barth" (Newman and Levine 72). The fact that metacommentary, which has been culturally legitimized through older, established forms of meta-fiction, found its way into popular television series may have furthered the

television medium's legitimization. These comparisons have contributed to boosting the sitcoms' respectability (Newman and Levine 72).

The Sitcom Genre

The situation comedy, otherwise known as the sitcom, is essentially a comedic television show with the same characters starring in almost every episode who find themselves in different situations. With the exception of a select number of acclaimed sitcoms, the genre as a whole has been "often regarded contemptuously as among the most conservative, formulaic, and artless of narrative forms" (Newman and Levine 59). Common elements in the sitcom formula include a live studio audience, laughter tracks, silly costumes, catch phrases, and opening credits (Pape 98).

A classic example of a popular sitcom with these characteristics is the 1994 to 2004 TV show *Friends*. The NBC show follows the merry misadventures of six friends in their 20s and 30s living in Manhattan over the course of ten seasons. Although it sometimes received mixed reviews, the show still often ranks as one of the best sitcoms of all-time. It was nominated for 62 Primetime Emmys. Its comedy writing was considered innovative and fresh at the time, but it also has practically all the common elements of the sitcom formula. Each episode features the same main characters, the same few settings, the same catchy song in the opening credits as well as a live studio audience, laugh tracks, catch phrases ("How you doin'?"), and the occasional silly costume.

Around the second half of *Friends*' run, in the early 2000s, the sitcom genre began undergoing significant transformations with some gaining the status of Quality TV. Newman and Levine claim that without exception, "the critically admired and culturally validated comedies . . . have rejected some of the once-defining traits of the genre," using aesthetic

progress to position themselves to be more legitimate than traditional sitcoms (Newman and

Levine 59). Some Quality sitcoms in the 2000s such as *The Office* and *30 Rock* also benefitted

from appealing to "a technologically adept audience through iTunes downloads" (Newman and

Levine 60). Since then, popular sitcoms on streaming platforms have continued to gain cultural

legitimation by defying traditional sitcom norms and, for example, abandoning laugh tracks and

live studio audiences.

The effort to leave behind outdated sitcom tropes opened up opportunities for

metareference and metacommentary. *30 Rock* did not use live studio audiences typical of

traditional sitcoms except for one episode in season five titled the "Live Show," which was not

only performed live in front of a studio audience but also broadcast live on television. A

character refuses to do "cheap" comedy on her show (within the show), but the meta-episode

nonetheless "includes a number of gags that can be described as slapstick . . . and clearly marks

these gags as low-brow" (Pape 101). *30 Rock* exemplifies the use of metacommentary to distance

itself from traditional, cheap sitcom elements and maintain its status as Quality TV.

The Good Place falls in the sitcom genre, because it's a comedic show with the same

characters from team cockroach appearing throughout the show. However, in many ways, the

show is distinguished from traditional sitcoms that are looked down upon for lacking in artistic

value. Not only does the show not have many of the typical sitcom elements (opening credits

scenes, a laugh track, a studio audience), *The Good Place* also challenges the norms of the

sitcom genre in a number of other ways, like heavily featuring moral philosophy and high-brow

references to renowned philosophers Socrates, Kirkegaard, Scanlon, and the like.

The show also puts a twist on the typical plot-twist. Plot twists with convenient comedic

timing that seemed conventional for the sitcom genre were all tied together in the season one

finale plot-twist, revealing that the previous plot-twists weren't merely convenient. Rather, they were intentional, facilitated torture masquerading as coincidental misfortunes. The plot-twists turned out to be far from formulaic in Michael Schur's show, since the plot-twists in Michael's neighborhood turned out to be heavily formulaic. *The Good Place* contributes to the growing number of sitcoms moving away from standardized, low-brow gags towards subversive, high-brow Quality TV.

<div align="center">That's So Meta</div>

Meta

The term "meta" is used in a myriad of ways by critical theory scholars. Compound words relevant to this paper's discussion include meta-phenomena, metareference, metacommentary, metafiction, and (of course) meta-television. While meta-television is specific to the television medium, it incorporates meta-phenomena, metareference, metacommentary, and metafiction, which also exist in various other mediums besides television. An understanding of these terms is necessary for the study of meta-television.

According to the Oxford dictionary, "meta" is an adjective used to describe self-referential creative works that refers to itself or to the conventions of its genre ("Meta"). Phenomena considered meta is referred to as meta-phenomena. The term meta-phenomena has also been used in other contexts (to describe non-creative works), such as in scientific fields, but this paper will only discuss meta-phenomena in the context of creative works.

Metareference

Cited by multiple critical studies scholars, Werner Wolf defines metareference as a "heuristically motivated umbrella term for all meta-phenomena occurring in the arts and media" (Wolf 12). This provides a foundation for examining meta-phenomena in media studies. Building

upon Wolf's work, Neumann and Nünning add that metareference is "a signifying practice that generates self-referential meaning and actualized a secondary cognitive frame in the recipient, thus eliciting a 'meta-awareness'" (Neumann and Nünning 4). This suggests that metareference is reliant upon the reader of the text becoming aware of the meta-phenomena's occurrence in the work.

Metareference has been present in the humanities for centuries in various creative works, changing with the evolution of new narrative techniques and technologies that could be commented on. However, the rise of metareference and the study of metareference significantly "evolved from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, precisely when scholars were attempting to define postmodernism" (Neumann and Nünning 4). Postmodernism is a late 20th-century art movement that is characterized by its "self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions" ("Postmodernism"). This self-conscious nature meant that many postmodernists incorporated metareference in their work.

Metafiction

Metafiction can be understood as metareference specific to fictional works, especially in terms of metareferences to the work's own fictionality or storytelling process. In 1970, Scholes and Gass first introduced the term "metafiction," designating it to mean "fiction that incorporates various perspectives of criticism into the fictional process, thereby emphasizing structural, formal, or philosophical problems" (Neumann and Nünning 3). However, research in the field of metafiction dates back to before the term was coined. Analyzing the novel *Tristram Shandy* in 1965, Šklovskij "addresses the concept as a 'device of laying bare the device,' namely as a device through which the storytelling itself is made part of the story told" (Neumann and Nünning 3). Early studies of metafiction primarily examined novels, but the term has since gone

on to be used for various newer forms of fiction, including television. It follows that metafiction in a television series (otherwise known as meta-television) is a device through which television's storytelling process is part of the television show's story.

Media Metacommentary

The term metacommentary refers to metareferences that is used to give commentary, critiques, or explanations. It has been used in a variety of contexts. For example, footnotes in a research paper that offer further explanation on a term can be considered metacommentary. However, this paper will focus on media metacommentary in order to discuss meta-television. Jacobs and Townsley define media metacommentary as "critical reflection about media practices and performances, in which the primary basis for criticism is the comparison of different kinds of media styles" (Jacobs and Townsley 341). For example, in terms of metacommentary in meta-television, the basis for criticism lies in the ways television is unique and different from other mediums.

While Neumann and Nünning cite postmodernism for the rise in metafiction explorations, Jacobs and Townsley claim that the push for media literacy education programs throughout the 1970s and 1980s "made commentary about media a much more regular and visible part of the public sphere," which resulted in "the proliferation of a new form of media-centered expertise, or *media meta-commentary*" (Jacobs and Townsley 349). This argument suggests that the proliferation of meta-television may be attributed to the development of television studies in educational settings as well as television discourse becoming more prominent in the public sphere. Lander implies that the increasingly media literate audience in the current media landscape feeds into the growing trend of meta-television (Lander 1).

Jacobs and Townsley also notes that new formats of media use metacommentary to take aim at the performance styles and the stagecraft of the format that preceded it (Jacobs and Townsley 349). In their representations of a show-within-a-show, new Quality meta-television such as *30 Rock* avoid "the very same conventions and aesthetics that they represent as being the standard of television-making, [adding] yet another layer to the critical assessment of their pre-cursors" (Pape 97). In these instances, media metacommentary is indeed used to critique artistic formats that preceded it.

Rise of Meta-television

There are various understandings of meta-television with some shared characteristics. Some scholars see its rise as directly tied to that of digital media. For Lander, the rise of meta-television in more recent years may be a result of mediascape changes in the digital age: "the emergence of digital media has affected reflexive television programming," as meta-television projects and reflects "the types of active audience engagement engendered by digital media, suggesting a fundamental change in the relationship between media producer and consumer" (Lander iv). Over the course of its existence thus far, television has evolved from being a postwar mass produced, mass consumed product to becoming a media form that actively engages with its viewers, which it targets and produces for.

This new relationship of active audience engagement brought on by digital media is key to meta-television's operation, as meta-television's "sophistication is hidden like a game within the text" (Olson 4-5). In order for meta-television to be meta or for any creative work's metareference to operate, a level of meta-awareness must exist in the audience. Some meta-television shows may be more explicit in their display of metareference, such as breaking the fourth wall to comment on itself directly to the audience or creating a television show within the

show. Other instances of metareference may require more active audience engagement. For example, metacommentary on established norms in the television industry requires viewers to be familiar with such norms. Shows such as *The Good Place* may include story elements that resemble the television medium without ever explicating referring to television, requiring viewers to make the connection. The new dynamics in the television industry that now sees content producers actively engaging with target consumers has laid the groundwork for meta-television to flourish.

Meta-television as self-reflexive

Scott R. Olson, who has published multiple texts on the subject, defines meta-television as "television that is intertextual or self-reflexive" (Olson 4). Television with intertextuality refers to other television programs, and television with self-reflexivity refers to itself as a television program (Olson 9). Displaying either intertextuality or self-reflexivity is enough for a show to be considered meta-television, though Olson does not delve into other qualifying characteristics for meta-television. First published in 1987, Olson's definition of meta-television represents a consensus about meta-television in the media studies sphere, though this consensus has been challenged in recent years.

While self-reflexivity has been studied extensively in film and literature, the rise of meta-television has prompted deeper examination of reflexivity in the televisual medium. Similar to preceding forms of reflexivity in the arts, "reflexive television employs the use of various techniques in order to foreground its own artifice and mediation, ultimately calling attention to the formal conventions of the medium" (Lander 1). However, the television medium has arguably experienced much more significant changes compared to film and literature. The way

television is consumed and culturally perceived today differs vastly from when television first gained popularity after World War II.

Television has since gained cultural recognition with the emergence of Quality TV and experienced significant disruptions with the proliferation of online streaming. Although it shares similarities with its predecessors, "it is important to note that televisual reflexivity is not simply a transfer of formal techniques and thematic construction from its cinematic and literary predecessors" (Lander 10). Rather, reflexive television is based upon its own medium specificity, drawing awareness to techniques specific to contemporary television (Lander 10-11).

Meta-television as intertexual

In *Memories by* Mad Men, Kelly Bacon seems to be in agreement with Olson's understanding of meta-television. The intertextual part of Olson's definition is evident in the text's claim that "*Mad Men* is self-referential in the fact that it uses television references from the past to tell a story in the present about the past" (Bacon 25). The self-reflexive aspect of the definition can be seen in Bacon's suggestion that *Mad Men* is a piece of metafiction "which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact" (Bacon 25-26). The text equates "meta" with self-referencing or referencing other creative works. In fact, Bacon claims that *Mad Men*'s intertextual references to television during the 1960s is "intended solely to further the fictional reality" in the show (Bacon 26). Bacon mentions that the meta-phenomena in *Mad Men* serves as a commentary of the time but does not specify the commentary being made nor suggest any functional potential of such commentary beyond historical world-building.

Meta-television as critique of television

In "'Cut the Shitcom': Meta-television in *Entourage*, *Extras* and *30 Rock*," Toni Pape takes a different approach to meta-television by defining it as "television about the media

industry and, more particularly, about the production and quality of film and television itself"
(Pape 91). The text makes a crucial distinction between the three shows in its title and earlier
self-reflexive comedies, which fit in with Olson's older definition of meta-television.

Pape claims that it is "by virtue of recent meta-television's critical functions that it
distinguishes itself from post-modern self-reflexivity" (Pape 92). Meta-phenomena in *Entourage*,
Extras, and *30 Rock* "provide an explicit critique of outdated modes of TV production" through
actors playing actors and shows portraying shows. Furthermore, this criticism "inscribes itself in
the implementation of enhanced quality standards that these shows adhere to" (Pape 103). In
other words, meta-television functions as a means of conveying criticism of television *and* as an
implementation of its proposed quality improvements.

Meta-television's ability to serve such critical functions has not even been extensively
explored in academia. Much of the work on meta-television, including the works of Olson and
Bacon, has fallen into "the habit of stressing the de-naturalizing, anti-illusionistic and comic
effects of meta-phenomena" while neglecting to consider "the functional potentials of
metareference" (Pape 92). This paper's approach to meta-television in *The Good Place* is more
closely aligned with the new, functional approach to meta-television as described by Pape than
the solely self-reflexive and intertextual approach put forth by Olson and Bacon.

Scholars on *The Good Place*

Philosophy

Philosophy is an integral part of The Good Place's identity. Speaking on the official *The
Good Place* podcast, creator Michael Schur explained that as he was developing the premise of
the show, the idea began with an accidental trip to heaven before it evolved and he realized it

became a reimagination of existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, which Schur describes as a play about three people trapped together in hell forever and their specific personality traits are the torture devices for one another (Mellor). Although *The Good Place* does not make explicit mentions of Sartre, it directly discusses other philosophical texts and ideas through moral philosophy lessons with the former professor character Chidi Anangonye. Topics that feature prominently in the plot include the trolley problem, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and Buddhist philosophy.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that the show has attracted significant scholarly attention on its interpretations of moral philosophy. Before the show even finished airing its last episode, there had already been at least three books published on the show within the field of philosophy: *The Forking Trolley: An Ethical Journey to The Good Place, The Good Place and Philosophy (Popular Culture and Philosophy 130),* and *The Good Place and Philosophy: Everything is Forking Fine!* The latter is a book with writing on the show from 21 philosophers with a foreword from Schur.

Beyond the ones featured in these books dedicated to the show, there are also scholarly articles featured in other books or journals discussing philosophy in the show. It is safe to say that, for a show that only finished airing in this year, there has been significant scholarly attention dedicated to *The Good Place* through the lens of philosophy. The same cannot be said about examinations through the lens of media studies or television studies.

Media Studies

Explorations of the show from a media studies perspective has been practically nonexistent. This may be partially attributed to the fact that the show's fourth and final season finished airing in January of 2020. As of 2020, the only scholarly text available that examines

The Good Place from a media studies perspective appears to be *Medium Specificity, Iterative*

Ethics, and Algorithmic Culture in The Good Place by Jane Stadler.

As the name may suggest, Stadler's text discusses the audience viewing experience of the

show and the ethical implications of contemporary television technology. Although the text does

not explicitly use the term "meta," it makes some important points that are highly relevant to the

study of meta-television in *The Good Place*. As numerous non-academic articles have done,

Stadler draws attention to the television-like community in the show's neighborhoods. Stadler is

essentially characterizing *The Good Place* as meta-television when discussing the plot's parallels

with the television industry.

By drawing these parallels, Stadler is characterizing Michael as the showrunner and

Shawn (Marc Evan Jackson), the character in charge of the Bad Place, as the television network

executive. The humans are akin to protagonist actors with extremely limited power and

knowledge in the production process. On the other hand, Stadler seems to suggest the demons

posing as residents are actors with power in writing the scenes. Stadler does not dive into details

on how these characters mimic standard roles in the television industry, but discussion of these

connections is solid evidence for *The Good Place*'s status as a work of meta-television.

Stadler is essentially highlighting meta-phenomena in the show without using "meta"

terminology. Stadler also discusses how the show exemplifies the way the wider sitcom genre

operates. A major focus of the text is on iterative ethics. The text draws the connection between

iterative learning of ethics to iteration in the sitcom formula, pointing out its use in *The Good*

Place.

The Good Place: "Everything is Fine!"

The Production Process: Designing, Writing, and Directing

The production of *The Good Place* is unique compared to some other works of meta-television in that the show builds up an illusion instead of breaking it. *30 Rock, Entourage,* and *Extras* "talk about television in order to disrupt [their] fictional illusion or mock [themselves]," drawing attention to their own artifice (Pape 92). In contrast, before its infamous season one finale plot twist, *The Good Place* steers clear of self-reflexive, anti-illusionistic effects while maintaining its status as a work of meta-television. This undermines the notion that meta-television should be characterized by anti-illusionistic qualities.

Much of the show is devoted to constructing and maintaining a certain illusion. The first episode's Netflix description states, "When Eleanor dies and winds up in an afterlife paradise reserved for only the most ethical people, she realizes she's been mistaken for somebody else" (Schur). This is exactly what the viewers and the four human characters are led to believe until the season finale, when it turns out that all the characters are actually in an afterlife hell. No human's identity had been mistaken, but all the other residents turned out to be demons.

A number of visual design tactics were used to trick viewers into believing that Michael's neighborhood is the Good Place. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, the show's art director Andrew Rowe discussed a rule he had to follow for color usage, namely that he was not allowed to use red, not even red flowers; he speculates the reason may be that red is associated with the devil (Kornhaber). While a highly self-reflexive meta-television show may draw attention to its illusionary qualities, *The Good Place* actively takes measures to build up its illusion.

Nonetheless, the show is packed with intertextual references. It goes beyond characters like the Judge (Maya Rudolph) mentioning the television shows she's binge watching (*NCIS,*

Deadwood). Each "Place" or world within the afterlife has its own, distinct style. Rowe revealed

that the "*Mad Men* era was the Bad Place," and Michael's neighborhood is the "heightened,

more European" version of that mid-century modern design (Kornhaber). The Bad Place's

costumes, hairstyles, and set design all resemble the 1960s corporate world depicted in *Mad Men*

(see Fig. 1). The fake Good Place appears to be more like a contemporary interpretation of mid-

century modern design with 21st century clothing, more pastel colors, and less dim-lighting.

Comparatively, the Bad Place's color palette is much more cool-toned with more dim-lighting

and less natural light (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 1. Team cockroach at the Bad Place from: Schur, Michael, creator. *The Good Place*.

Fig. 2. Michael in Shawn's Bad Place office: Schur, Michael, creator. *The Good Place*.

At the end of season 2 episode 7 of *The Good Place*, Shawn suddenly shows up in

Michael's office and says the lines, "Shut the door. Have a seat," an iconic quote from *Mad*

Men's season 3 episode 13. In *Mad Men*, a leader from the company that had taken control of the

Sterling Cooper colludes with a few leaders from the agency to escape their control and found

their own agency. In *The Good Place*, Michael, a Bad Place architect, colludes with the four

humans to escape the Bad Place's control and form their own team cockroach. The set design

and the script work together to form intertextual references to *Mad Men* as well as

metareferences to television history.

The script is also used to make intertextual references to the set design of other shows, as

seen in Season 1 Episode 6 with the show *Friends*. Michael explains to Eleanor that, to prepare

to welcome the humans to the neighborhood, he studied the human concept of friends by

watching all ten seasons of *Friends*. He says with a baffled expression, "Although, and I realize

this is the kind of observation that would only occur to the mind of an eternal being: How did

they afford that apartment? A waitress and a chef with those Manhattan real estate prices," to

which Eleanor responds, "Yeah, we were all confused about that too" (Schur). This apartment is

shown in Fig. 3. One of many *Friends* references in the show, this joke highlights the unrealistic

nature of the *Friends* set design, an issue that non-eternal beings like Eleanor noticed too.

Fig. 3. The *Friends* apartment from: Crane, David and Marta Kauffman, creators. *Friends*.

The *Friends* set design is representative of the traditional sitcom "shot on a three-wall set

with the cameras, crew, and audience taking the place of the fourth wall," and the show is then

"performed like a play, scene by scene, with three or four cameras shooting simultaneously"

(Newman and Levine 62). This style is known as the multi-camera sitcom (Newman and Levine

63). The structure necessitates that the apartment setting cannot be reflective of the tiny

Manhattan apartment that a waitress and a chef could afford, as the stage for the "play" would

also be tiny, restricting dynamic movements around the set.

The Good Place* often avoids doing things that it criticizes other shows for doing through

metacommentary. The show abandons the traditional sitcom's three-wall set. Similar to

conventional feature films and television dramas, it uses the single-camera style, which can "penetrate the space of the scene and shoot from any angle" (Newman and Levine 64). Consequently, the set design does not face the same restrictions as traditional sitcoms like *Friends* did. The fact that it's largely set in its self-invented afterlife universe also enabled *The Good Place* to not face the kind of criticisms it makes about *Friends* in terms of realistic settings.

Each experimental neighborhood in *The Good Place* operate as a show-within-a-show. In the first season, the neighborhood is Michael's design of a fake Good Place, informed by his research on the real Good Place and his psychological torture mechanisms. The neighborhood is actually located in the Bad Place. It was rebooted at least 802 times, each time with some changes, but it was essentially the same neighborhood. At the end of the third season, team cockroach creates another experimental neighborhood with four new humans (chosen by the Bad Place) in an effort to demonstrate to the Judge that humans are capable of ethical growth after death, when many of life's complexities are removed. Once again, the new humans are told they're in the Good Place, but the neighborhood is actually located in the Medium Place. The physical neighborhood looks largely identical to Michael's first neighborhood.

The two neighborhoods both had central features resembling a television show. Namely, there are actors posing as residents (demons in the first season, "Janet-babies" in the fourth season), an architect in charge of directing the scenes (Michael in the first season, Eleanor in the fourth season), a network-executive-like character with more power over the architect/director (Shawn in the first season, the Judge in the fourth season), and settings constructed specifically for the action (the physical neighborhood). This phenomenon of a show-within-a-show is a classic feature of meta-television and exists in other shows deemed to be meta-television such as *30 Rock*.

In all *The Good Place*'s neighborhoods, the setting is created by Janet, though many ideas may have come from Michael. Along with the many other roles she plays, Janet's role in this context is analogous to the production designer or set designer in the show-within-a-show. The creation of the first neighborhood is not shown in the show, but a glimpse of the neighborhood generation process is shown in Season 3 Episode 11 when Janet and Michael work on creating the fourth season's experimental neighborhood.

As they prepare to build the neighborhood on a vast, flat grassland in the Medium Place, Janet tells Michael, "I have some ideas for how to design a sort of basic neighborhood, which we can then tailor to the guests as we learn more about them" (Schur). Michael asks Janet what her first "basic" idea is, Janet generates a restaurant building with filler text (see Fig. 4), and the two laugh about how it is "so basic" (Schur). The neighborhood is indeed basic with distinctly upper-middle class, small-town spatial imagery. Rowe described the set as having "that cute, charming, endearing vibe from European villages" with colorful ice cream and flowers (Kornhaber).
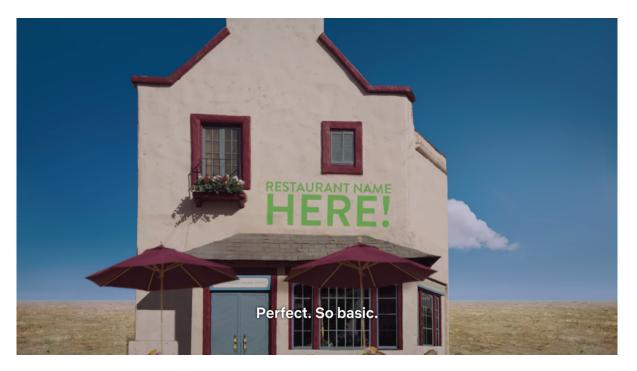

Fig. 4. Janet's first "basic" idea from: Schur, Michael, creator. *The Good Place*.

In many ways, the neighborhood is like a conventional sitcom set. Compared to real-world environments, the set is inoffensive and colorfully decorated without a mess in sight unless it is part of a joke in the plot. The same could be said about a traditional sitcom like *Friends*. Michael's remark that the design is "perfect" and "basic" is metacommentary on how sitcom sets tend to be oversimplified and heavily idealized; they would never actually exist in the real world. Luckily, *The Good Place* isn't set in the real world but in a fantasy afterlife. Its set was created by a character with magical powers. The show is not held to the same standards for realism and believability that sitcoms like *Friends* are. Nonetheless, *The Good Place* was committed to visual design details that would be realistic in its own fantasy world. For example, there are no electrical outlets shown, since electricity isn't needed in the afterlife (Kornhaber). The show is able to circumvent the "basic" sitcom set design that it criticizes through metacommentary.

The show-within-a-show that occupied the most screen time was Michael's neighborhood in the first season. The season one finale reveals that Michael has been a Bad Place architect running a fake Good Place neighborhood full of demons posing as residents to torture the four humans. After Eleanor realizes this, he explains to the humans, "After I came up with everyone's characters, we'd just create fun scenarios to torture you" (Schur). Michael's role as the neighborhood architect mirrors the role of a television showrunner, which is defined as a "hyphenate" writer-producer in scripted narrative television genres (Newman and Levine 39). The demons are actors who are casted in certain roles created by Michael.

Through Michael's explanation of his torture scheme, the episode revisits a plot point from episode five. Under quarantine, Eleanor and Chidi were fighting, but when another couple (played by demons) suddenly had to quarantine with them, Eleanor and Chidi had to abruptly

hide their fighting under constant scrutiny by the two guests, "a marriage counselor and a human lie detector" (Schur). What seemed like an unfortunate coincidence was actually intentional torture facilitated by Michael. In an interview, *The Good Place* creator Michael Schur "spelled out how writing details [of the disguised torture mechanisms] organically led his writing team to make a meta-commentary on the tropes in sitcom writing" (Berkowitz). This confirms that the show's metacommentary on television norms is very much intentional.

Unless otherwise specified, in this paper, "Michael" refers to Ted Danson's demon character and "Schur" refers to the creator Michael Schur. Although Schur claims he did not name the character Michael after himself but rather after St. Michael the Archangel, it is worth addressing that the two share the same name, which (perhaps unintentionally) adds a layer of metareference to the show (Egner). Perhaps more importantly, the two Michaels play parallel roles in running their own "shows." They share a functional similarity.

Schur explained that Michael is "like a writer on the show you're watching. There's a writer on set, an omniscient writer who's observing" the characters and making a bad situation worse for the sake of comedic timing (Berkowitz). In episode five, it may have seemed that the couple suddenly joining Eleanor and Chidi in quarantine was just part of classic situational comedy writing. However, the finale reveals that all the instances of unfortunate timing throughout the season have been created by Michael for torture and created by Schur for his comedic reimagination of hell. It also puts a twist on conventional sitcom writing, emphasizing the intentionality behind the seemingly convenient comedic timing.

Ultimately, television shows are created for the sake of entertainment. In pitching his new model of torture, Michael proclaims, "The human afterlife can be more fun. For us, obviously, not the people we're torturing" (Schur). He torments the characters for the other demons'

entertainment while Schur creates conflicts in the show for the audience's entertainment. Both sitcom entertainment and Bad Place entertainment rely upon putting "the protagonist characters in conflict with one another and [creating] obstacles to their growth and fulfillment" (Stadler 89). Michael's entertainment thus serves as a metacommentary on the tension-creating nature of comedy TV writing.

Both showrunners can be considered television *auteurs*, since they not only write and produce the show, they are also "responsible for [their shows'] conception and its ongoing execution" (Newman and Levine 39). They came up with innovative ideas that challenge their industry's norms and then remain involved in their idea's implementation. Michael came up with the new form of torture and lived "on set" in the neighborhood to craft tormenting situations. Schur was on set to run the show, giving creative direction to teams ranging from visual design to writing.

The Michael's role as a showrunner and Janet's role as set designer are just two examples how characters are used to make metacommentary on the television production process. Of all the demon actors Michael employed in the first season, Vicky (Tiya Sircar) played the most prominent role in the first two seasons, both in-character in front of the humans and out of character behind the scenes. In the second season, Michael does his 802 reboots and the demon actors were getting exhausted as he kept failing and starting over. On Attempt #802, all the actors, led by Vicky, go "on strike" until all their demands are met. Vicky speaks for the entire crew and tells Michael they "can barely remember what [they're] supposed to do anymore" (Schur). Each of the 318 actors have their own demands. Vicky blackmails Michael into giving her a more important role, the top point-getter in the neighborhood and the mayor.

As the showrunner, Michael struggles to balance his own big-picture responsibilities with directing all the actors. Consequently, the actors are at a loss for how to portray their characters. They then band together to make demands. This is reflective of how the television production process can work in reality. The six protagonist actors on *Friends* cast were known to be one of the first TV stars to band together and demand "salary increases to about $100,000 per episode, plus a percentage of the show's profits in syndication" by threatening not to show up for the next season's taping (Carter). The demon actors banding together to make demands also worked. This metareference to showrunner-actor dynamics, like other metareferences discussed earlier, sheds light on the dynamics at play when producing a television series.

The Narrative: Repetition, Duration, and Functionality

Television as a medium comes with certain affordances and limitations. Distinct from other storytelling mediums such as film and literature, the television series' aesthetic form and structure "privileges continuity over change, particularly with respect to core character traits that are central to the premise of a television series and to the character's function within that series" (Stadler 94). Films typically tell their stories over a few short hours, during which the premise is first introduced and the story ends. However, television needs to maintain a storyline over multiple seasons and episodes; thus, it relies on a certain level of repetitiveness and stability in its storytelling.

This is especially pronounced in sitcoms, where running gags "typically pivot on entrenched character traits and flaws that offer the audience cognitive pleasures of recognition and repetitive engagement" (Stadler 94). Stadler points to Janet's assistive function and Chidi's pedagogical function as examples of character functions that remain the same throughout *The Good Place* (Stadler 94). However, compared to classic sitcoms like *Friends* where the

protagonists' personalities and roles largely remain unchanged, *The Good Place*'s protagonists demonstrate significant character changes.

In fact, their changes are central to the show's key message that people can experience ethical growth. Eleanor goes from a self-centered, insecure person to a team player who's more compassionate and secure. Michael goes from a seemingly kind and confused leader to revealing himself to be manipulative and cruel all along to evolving to be caring and optimistic. The show's emphasis on its characters' personality evolutions over the course of four seasons challenges the sitcom genre's norm of entrenched character traits and flaws.

Not only does *The Good Place* itself challenge the sitcom genre, its show-within-a-show also subverts the typical television series' structure, providing metacommentary on the medium. The television series' repetitive nature and character stability means that the characters' "failure to perform key narrative functions and to interact with other characters in pre-established fashion could seriously undermine a series' premise" (Pearson).

In the first neighborhood in season one and two, Michael is the showrunner directing the demon actors, so his neighborhood is the show. It relies upon the four humans to perform key narrative functions, namely bring out the worst sides of each other, exacerbate conflicts, and torture each other. However, to Michael's immense frustration, the show fails 802 times, and the premise of the show is undermined repeatedly, because the humans fail to interact with each other in the pre-established fashion Michael had expected.

Michael designed the situation so that Eleanor would reach out to Chidi for help in becoming a better person. This was designed to be torture for Eleanor, because she hates learning and hates feeling that others are morally superior to her. While Chidi does play his pedagogical function, as Stadler points out, each of Michael's neighborhood reboots nonetheless fail because

genuine ethical growth was not supposed to be part of the function. As Michael admits, "[Chidi's] agreeing to help was part of my plan, what wasn't part of my plan was it actually working" (Schur). Michael "casted" the four humans for their conflicting personalities and tendency to psychologically torture one another. They sometimes played this part, but they also "went off-script" when they helped each other improve, undermining the premise of Michael's show-within-a-show.

This metacommentary draws attention to the character stability and plot continuity that the showrunner must strive to maintain in the series. It also demonstrates the problem with this task, logistically and ethically. The metacommentary suggests that, when working with dynamic, human characters, the showrunner should not expect personalities and roles to remain unchanged. At the same time, there is a fundamental conflict between the goal of character development and the tendency to maintain stability in a television series.

The resolution may lie in controlling the duration of the series so that stability is not required to be maintained throughout, for example, ten seasons in a classic sitcom like *Friends*. Michael the demon could not psychologically torture the humans for eternity, but he and Eleanor were able to run neighborhoods for shorter periods of time. What metacommentary does *The Good Place* make about how long television series should go on for?

In this attention economy, television profits depend on its hold over viewers' attention. Its ability to do so over long periods of time has increased in the age of online streaming. The Nielson report in 2019 found that overall television viewing time continues to increase, and "viewing through TV-connected devices has increased by 8 minutes daily" (Hayes). However, television's need to keep a grasp on viewers' attention is not new. Since the postwar TV boom, "the political economy of television programming [has been] primarily based on developing

popular entertainment meant to attract . . . 'attention' that was then commodified and sold to advertisers," which distinguishes popular television from film and literature that were more often sold directly to consumers rather than to advertisers (Rogers et al 46).

In addition to this profit model, the typical television series is also structured as multiple seasons with multiple episodes in each season. Consequently, the television series faces unique pressure to produce new content and hold viewers' attention for extended lengths of time. Many television shows considered successful, both in terms of profitability and popularity, ran for numerous seasons. *Mad Men*, *30 Rock*, *Friends*, and *The Office* all lasted for seven or more seasons. Successful shows face pressure from their networks to continue creating content for as long as possible, generating profit and attracting attention.

The Good Place makes metacommentary on this issue in a number of ways. In Season 1 Episode 6, Michael enlists Eleanor's help to scour the neighborhood in search of the root cause for all the malfunction in his neighborhood. As he is (pretending to be) giving up on his search, he tells Eleanor, "I can't help the people I promised that I would help. I feel like *Friends* in Season 8, out of ideas and forcing Rachel and Joey together, even though it made no sense" (Schur). On one level, this line makes an intertextual reference to *Friends* and critiques the show for dragging on longer than its creativity could sustain. It draws attention to the issue of sacrificing content quality for the sake of extending the show's duration.

On another level, the line reveals the interpersonal dynamics at play. Michael is the showrunner who has a duty to help the people who depend on him, namely the residents in his neighborhood or the cast of his show. The showrunner's inability to come up with new ideas negatively impacts the livelihoods of everyone involved in the show. The critique of *Friends* is cushioned with a recognition that, despite their struggles, the *Friends* showrunners were

attempting to fulfill their promises to people invested in the show, whether it be the fans, the crew, or the network executives.

In contrast to *Friends* and most other popular shows, *The Good Place* firmly decided to end after four seasons. This relatively short length is not for a lack of success, given the show's high viewership and award nominations. In an interview, Schur said that *The Good Place* "isn't a typical show where the goal is to do it as long as we can and as many episodes as we can" (Prokos). Beyond specific lines in the script, *The Good Place*'s plot also includes metacommentary on the duration of shows. In *30 Rock*, the show-within-a-show is very different from the actual show in terms of structure and aesthetics, enabling the show to critique the characteristics represented in the show-within-a-show. Similarly, *The Good Place*'s neighborhoods as shows stand in contrast to the actual show. *The Good Place* ran with a limited timeframe whereas its afterlife neighborhoods were supposed to run on for eternity.

Michael's first neighborhood aimed to run for thousands of years (at least) but the longest it went without a reboot was only eleven months. His experiment failed, representing a television show that aspired for a long run but was cut short. On the other hand, the real Good Place, shown in season four, was supposedly a success with no threats to its continued existence, representing a popular, profitable television show running for as many seasons as possible. However, its residents were miserable and numb in their own way. As Hypatia (Lisa Kudrow) explains, "On paper, this is paradise. All your desires and needs are met. But it's infinite. . .. You do everything and then you're done, but you still have infinity left. This place kills fun, and passion, and excitement and love" (Schur). This statement parallels Eleanor's when she first realized she was in really the Bad Place, saying it looks like paradise but really isn't. Even a "good" show can begin to resemble a "bad" one when it must be dragged on for many seasons. As Michael said

about frozen yogurt, "There's something so human about taking something great and ruining it a little so you can have more of it" (Schur).

Ultimately, team cockroach "fixes" the Good Place by creating a door that allows residents to peacefully end their time in the universe whenever they want. This metacommentary is indicative of Schur's ideals, namely that "the way to restore meaning" to good shows and creative works is to allow them the freedom to choose when they end (Schur). When discussing his decision to end the show, Schur remarked, "The nice thing about TV shows nowadays is it's not a forced marathon. You can let the idea dictate the number of episodes you actually do, which is great for creativity" (Prokos). Fittingly, the protagonists redesign the Good Place to have an end in the last two episodes of the final season, as the show is also coming to an end. This self-reflexive parallel makes the metacommentary on television duration even more apparent.

Despite its challenges, the continuity inherent to the typical television series also comes with affordances. The temporal prolongation that characterizes the television medium facilitates "feelings of friendship or familiarity with characters . . . has the capacity to make the audience's emotional and ethical engagement with television qualitatively different from their engagement with films" (Stadler 94). In the context of film and television, ethical engagement means immersing the viewer in imaginary ethical scenarios to "prompt deliberation about moral character and conduct . . . that may transfer to lived contexts" (Stadler 87). *The Good Place* is especially transparent about its purpose of ethical engagement. Team cockroach rely on Chidi's moral philosophy lessons and wisdom to navigate the afterlife, and taking these lessons are a necessary condition for Michael to join the team.

In explaining ethics to the other characters, Chidi is also educating the viewer without much subtlety. Repetition is key to this learning process. The television medium affords plenty of room for repetition. When a philosophical idea is brought up in one of Chidi's ethics lessons, the characters revisit it at various points throughout the episode until they gain ethical insight (Stadler 89). Similarly, Quality TV with "easter eggs" and intertextual references often requires viewers to re-watch the show to understand the references.

This is especially true for meta-television, because "the ability to recognize multiple levels of the text are conditioned by the familiarity of each viewer with the program in particular and television and reading in general" (Olson 4). Viewers need to be familiar with the show itself and the context it operates in in order to gain meta insight. For a televisual text that operates on many levels, watching it once is typically not enough to extract most of the meta-phenomena.

Repetition for the sake of learning and recognition is reflected in *The Good Place*'s plot. Through learning about the afterlife system and moral philosophy, team cockroach ultimately designs a test tailored to help each deceased human reach the level of moral development needed to enter the Good Place through as many reboots as necessary. This time, the rebooted person retains a "little voice in their heads" giving them more virtuous moral intuition (Schur). The test's reboots are comparable to re-watches of meta-television. With each watch, viewers may gain more ability to recognize instances where the show is operating at a higher level as well as gain familiarity with the program, television, and text-reading.

Conclusion

The Good Place has many aspects that one would expect from a work of meta-television, such as having a show-within-a-show and clever references to other TV shows. It also has some of the characteristics one would expect from a sitcom: cheerful colors, a consistent main cast,

seemingly convenient comedic timing. However, what makes the show a useful case study for understanding meta-television is the ways in which it distinguishes itself from other works of meta-television and the sitcom genre.

It demonstrates that a show does not need to be anti-illusionistic (something scholars have emphasized in the past) in order to be meta. *The Good Place* builds up illusions rather than breaking them down. Compared to meta-television like *30 Rock* that is explicit about its own meta status, *The Good Place*'s meta-phenomena exist on higher levels for viewers to explore, especially through re-watches of the show. There is no literal TV show featured in *The Good Place*, but rather, its experimental neighborhoods operate like television communities with characters analogous to showrunners, actors, network executives, visual designers, and so forth. The intertextual references also may not be immediately apparent.

The meta-phenomena in the show also support recent arguments to expand the definition of meta-television to consider its critical and functional potentials. Much of the metareferences are not just included for amusement or for Quality status; they actually make metacommentary on the television medium, offering criticisms and demonstrating ways to overcome the issue criticized. For example, when it makes fun of *Friends* for its unrealistic set design and for getting dragged on longer than it should, *The Good Place* makes sure to have "realistic" sets and end after just four seasons. The show provides evidence for Pape's argument that in "critically assessing their own media environment, [meta-television] series clear a space for a renewal of television itself" (Pape 102-103). *The Good Place* doesn't just critique television conventions and suggest improvements, it actually puts the enhanced television standards it promotes into action on the small screen.

While scholarly texts on *The Good Place* from a media studies perspective barely exist (not unreasonable for such a recent show), there have been numerous articles and columns published that discuss meta-phenomena in *The Good Place*. The show still has plenty of unexplored potential in the media studies field, including in the realm of meta-television. This paper primarily focused on metacommentary made on the television medium without delving into its metacommentary on the television industry and the entertainment media industry. Issues ranging from the #MeToo movement to cancel culture to tabloid media are implicated in the industry metacommentary. Within the television medium, this paper focused on the sitcom genre, which is what *The Good Place* technically falls under. Other television genres not discussed in this paper but discussed in the show's metacommentary include reality TV, late-night talk shows, prank shows, and romance dramas.

As an innovative television show with unique metacommentary, *The Good Place* is ripe with opportunities for further scholarly exploration in the field of television studies and critical studies. Michael proclaims, "What matters isn't if people are good or bad. What matters is, if they're trying to be better today than they were yesterday" (Schur). The same could arguably be said about television. *The Good Place* exemplifies television that is critiquing what it was before and trying to be better.

Works Cited

Bacon, Kelly. "*Mad Men* Goes Meta." *Memories by* Mad Men. McMaster U., Sept. 2012, pp. 25-

    26, macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/14400/1/fulltext.pdf.

Berkowitz, Joe. "How 'The Good Place' Slipped In Some Sly Commentary On Sitcom Tropes."

    Fast Company. Mansueto Ventures, 5 Oct. 2017, www.fastcompany.com/40477493/how-

    the-good-place-slipped-in-a-sly-commentary-on-sitcom-tropes.

Carter, Bill. "Friends' Cast Bands Together To Demand a Salary Increase." *The New York Times*,

    16 Jul. 1996, www.nytimes.com/1996/07/16/arts/friends-cast-bands-together-to-demand-

    a-salary-increase.html#:~:text=But%20several%20

    confirmed%20the%20basic,the%20series'%20profits%20in%20syndication.

Egner, Jeremy. "'The Good Place' Finale Finds the Meaning of Life: 'Yep, Nailed It.'" *The New*

    York Times, 28 Jan. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/arts/television/the-good-place-

    michael-schur.html.

"The Good Place." *IMDb*. Amazon, www.imdb.com/title/tt4955642/.

Hayes, Dade. "Streaming Overload? Nielson Report Finds Average Viewer Takes 7 Minutes To

    Pick What To Watch; Just One-Third Bother To Check Menu." *Deadline*, 1 July 2019,

    deadline.com/2019/07/streaming-overload-netflix-nielsen-report-average-viewer-takes-7-

    minutes-to-pick-what-to-watch-1202640213/.

Jacobs, Ronald N., and Eleanor Townsley. "Media Meta-Commentary and the Performance of

    Expertise." *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 21, no. 3, Aug. 2018, pp. 341-349,

    journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1368431017740720#articleCitationDownloadCon

    tainer.

Kornhaber, Spencer. "*The Good Place* Visualized the Unimaginable." *The Atlantic*. Emerson

    Collective, 30 Jan. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/01/good-place-art-

    director-why-heaven-is-the-getty/605482/.

Lander, Katherine. That's So Meta: Contemporary Reflexive Television and its Textual

    Strategies. DePaul U., 8 Aug. 2013, pp. iv-11,

    via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=

    1&article=1017&context=cmnt.

Mellor, Louisa. "The 1944 Existentialist Play That Inspired *The Good Place*." *Den of Geek*, 4

    Aug. 2018, www.denofgeek.com/culture/the-1944-existentialist-play-that-inspired-the-

    good-place/.

"Meta." *Lexico: Powered by Oxford*. www.lexico.com/definition/meta.

Neumann, Birgit and Ansgar Nünning. "Metanarration and Metafiction." *The Living Handbook*

    of Narratology. Hamburg U., 24 Jan. 2014, pp. 3-4.

Newman, Michael Z. and Elana Levine. *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and*

    Cultural Status. Routledge, 2012, pp. 4-172. ProQuest,

    ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/reader.action?docID=817212.

Olson, Scott R. *Reading Meta-Television: A New Model for Reader-Response Criticism*.

    International Communication Association, 31 Oct. 1989, pp. 2-20,

    https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED319084.pdf.

Pape, Toni. "'Cut the Shitcom': Meta-television in *Entourage*, *Extras* and *30 Rock*." *Previously*

    On, 2011, pp. 91-103, fama2.us.es/fco/previouslyon/05.pdf.

Pearson, Roberta. "Anatomising Gilbert Grisson: The Structure and Function of the Televisual

    Character." *Reading SCI: Crime TV Under the Microscope*. I.B. Tauris, 20 Aug. 2007.

"Postmodernism." *Lexico: Powered by Oxford,* www.lexico.com/definition/postmodernism.

Prokos, Hayley. "Why Michael Schur is Pulling the Plug on 'The Good Place' after Only 4

  Seasons." *Newsweek*, 8 Jun. 2019, www.newsweek.com/why-michael-schur-pulling-

  plug-good-place-after-only-4-seasons-1442963.

Rajan, Amol. "TV watching and online streaming surge during lockdown." *BBC*, 5 Aug 2020,

  www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-

  53637305#:~:text=By%20the%20end%20of%20June,than%20this%20time%20last%20y

  ear.

Rogers, Mark C., Michael Epstein, and Jimmie L. Reeves. "*The Sopranos* as HBO Brand Equity:

  The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Reproduction." *This Thing of Ours:*

  Investigating the Sopranos. Columbia U. Press, 2002, pp. 46.

Schur, Michael, creator. *The Good Place*. NBC, 19 Sept. 2016. Netflix,

  www.netflix.com/title/80113701.

Wolf, Werner. "Metareference across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and

  Problems, Main Forms and Functions." *Metareference across Media: Media Theory and*

  Case Studies. Brill, 30 Sept. 2009, pp. 12.