



2008

Seinfeld

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Recommended Citation

Erber, Nick (2008) "Seinfeld," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 11 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol11/iss1/17>

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Keywords

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NICK ERBER

Seinfeld

My younger brother likes to watch *Seinfeld*. Last summer, when I would come home from work, he'd be laying on one of our green couches or sitting in the giant brown velvet armchair that my Dad bought himself. A plaid-clad George Costanza would be on our rigorously indulgent 42-inch Phillips plasma screen television yelling at Jerry, his glasses brightly flashing directly into the camera, catching my attention and certainly blinding the cameraman. My brother would sit there, transfixed and tired from his day of running up and down the football field, face unsmiling and eyes dimmed. Often he'd have a box of Triscuits at his side and a Gatorade in hand, alternately gulping and crunching, leaving large chunks of fibrous cracker in the bottle.

When the laugh track would blare out, loudly commending the comedians on the screen, he would stare blankly at the giant faces. Occasionally, I would agree with the audience's evaluation of a certain joke or situation. I would laugh. He rarely did, and when he would, they would be brief, thoughtless laughs, like the ones we would sometimes give out of obligation at a bad joke told by someone in authority over us. Immediately he would go back to staring at the screen, basking in the simultaneous cold-warm hysterics of recorded laughter.

Dim eyes, cold laughter, commercial. Then. Dim eyes, cold laughter, commercial. Rinse. Repeat. This was art apart from art, narrative apart from thought.

For me, *Seinfeld* is hit or miss with its humor. This holds true for most sitcoms that I watch. Most of the time I'll be at least OK with what the show is about. There's consistent writing and a little character development. But at other moments, I just think that it's boring, a complete waste of time. There's a draw about the show. It's exciting in a difficult-to-pin-down way. The show is about nothing, but it's so obviously popular. (1) I think that this fascination with nothing comes from a subtle but integral self-involvement that the show exudes.

The laugh track is the key to the show's draw, but it's also the reason that I'm so disgusted with the show sometimes. Jerry makes a joke and the little club he's playing doesn't just chuckle; it roars with laughter, even if the joke is stupid or obvious. The laugh track makes Seinfeld easy to watch. It takes you out of actually interacting with the show and puts you in a place of comfortable numbness where you get cues to laugh. It creates an experience like that scene in *Fahrenheit 451* where Montag's wife is interacting with her video-wallscreen thing, becoming a part of the story all the while avoiding real creativity or social interaction. It makes for a "TV family." The viewer is alone, but you receive some shadow of that feeling of camaraderie one gets from watching a really funny movie with friends or standing underneath an awning in high school exchanging dead baby jokes.

This self-involvement seems to work pretty well for Seinfeld and other sitcoms of its ilk. The creators of *Arrested Development* have built an entire show around self reference, though it also thrives on the absence of a laugh track and a beautiful subtlety. *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *According to Jim*, conversely, rely on this numbness. In the absence of cleverness or creativity the producers of the show find a weak point in American culture (i.e., laziness, feebleness of family structure, intense isolation) and help the audience pretend that somewhere, somehow, the perfect form still exists.

It's mindless, it's numbing, and it relies too heavily on easy jokes and thoughtless scenarios. I try to avoid spending too much time in front of the television. For the most part, I feel that I'm conscious of and therefore immune to the snare of numbness. I try hard to think.

My girlfriend's roommate always laughs at *Full House* and I simply can't comprehend this. We're watching television at their apartment (I feel like I'm treading on thin ice. I should not write about college life. Or relationships.), and I'm waiting for K. to finish some of her homework. We're going out afterwards, probably to some coffee place. I shoot A., the roommate, a weird look and snort when she laughs as John Stamos picks up one of the Olsen twins and delivers a cheesy line.

Stamos is extremely unfunny to me. The writers of Full House deserve to have their fingers cut off. K., who is taking a ridiculous amount of time at her homework, turns to me. (2)

“Why do you have to be such a snob, Nick?” my girlfriend of two years asks me.

I lie back on the bed and close my eyes, choosing to ignore the question. I mentally, emotionally place myself above A., the girl who lives in a dream world, the girl who chooses to look at the pretty people on the flashing box with their easy-to-mend problems. I think about the ridiculousness of a family so tightly knit yet so smooth with one another, and about the ignorance of the people who accept such a reality as viable. I think about how serious I am and how flighty A. and my girlfriend K. are. I think about how they are wasting their liberal arts education and how I am doing my best to expand my experience beyond the white bread, Full House experience.

My girlfriend breaks up with me a few months later and I cannot get a straight answer as to why she's leaving me. And that's that.

I try to put into clear, concise terms the things that make humor so compelling for the human race. Why it's such a huge part of conversation. Why we quote passages from Seinfeld or reference that one episode of *The Office* (3) whenever something even remotely innuendo-like is mentioned. I spend my time looking through medical journals, reading articles on a “theory of humor.” I search “brain” and “laughter” in Google and get answers that muddle things for me even more. (Apparently, instead of being isolated to the frontal lobe like most emotional responses, laughter takes a kind of circuit that involves the entire brain. It's interesting, but it doesn't help me parse a thing.) I find something E.B. White once wrote—“Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” This is thoroughly disheartening.

I navel-gaze for hours. I watch TV like a man with nothing better to do and I try to find some sort of transcendence in it. I list what I like about comedy, decide it's pretentious and scrap it, write another

list, and then ask my brother what he's into. Words continue to fail me. I listen to other people's jokes in conversation and try to decide if they're good or not. I say things that make other people laugh and I wonder why. They say that comedy's in timing and I find myself counting the seconds between David Cross' setup and his punch lines. I watch, study, meditate on George Carlin and Woody Allen and Richard Pryor. I even suffer through a mindless Dane Cook act. YouTube is my homepage.

When I finally give up in front of my computer at midnight, I determine video is really the only thing that does most comedians justice. It, as does *Seinfeld* or any other sitcom, makes the viewer feel like she's having a conversation with the person, that he's living with him for a couple of minutes. Satire works on the page and so does some other cleverness, but the real experience of being made to laugh only really works between two human beings, whether in a one-sided, simulated relationship or in the flesh.

For the performer in this specific kind of relationship, timing seems to be pretty important, but playing to the instincts of the audience is integral. Whether that's in the wry, dry humor of Allen or in the spastic idiocy of Cook, connecting with something learned and deeply rooted can make or break an act.

The courtroom scene from *Bananas* isn't funny for me. It doesn't have the oomph of existential loneliness of the beginning of *Annie Hall*. In the same way, weird, irreverent sitcom humor is a turnoff for me. Most cartoons have the same childish, thoughtless feel to me. It's not the laugh track; it's just that I've cut myself off from that kind of thought. I have killed these parts of me or at least stifled them from development. I've put away childish things and my own snobbery has flourished in their absence.

What a person finds funny in a comedian has very little to do with the comedian's own verifiably authentic personality. The good comedian brings out thoughts we've already been thinking, words that we've been meaning to say but haven't had a chance to, and, in the case of Andy Kaufman or, more recently, Miranda July, do things that we would never have done.

They connect with our identities themselves. They make us feel like there's someone in the world that understands the complexities of living like us, and they come without the pathetic, grimacing baggage that all of our real friends come with. They know us well because they are us, but we know them in generalities of speedballs (4) and through the occasional revealed vice.

We know that they will not tell us we're getting fat. They will make a joke about it. We know that they will not like some of the same things we don't like. They will make a joke about it. We know that they will keep looking goofy, keep deprecating themselves, and keep slipping on that ubiquitous banana peel. They will make a joke. They are the least offensive people we've ever come in contact with. They are the complete and utter form of the sell-out. They are our lovers, the pornographers of our darkest and most insecure thoughts. They will make a joke. They won't break it off before the anniversary because they are our mirror images. They make jokes.

Notes

1. This point is provable not only by ratings, but also by common experience. Example: Dinner in a college cafeteria, anywhere. Student A comes to the table with soup. Comments are made from Students B, C about the poor quality of the soup. In a misguided attempt at humor and an awkward attempt at defending his choice of entrée, A yells, "No soup for you." Everyone "gets" it. Cold-warm hysterics ensue.
2. She is distracted by her cell phone, which produces a shrill "ca-ring" every time she gets a text message from one of her friends, none of whom I know.
3. "That's what she said!" season 2, episode 2.
4. Jim Belushi and Chris Farley died after overdosing on this mixture of heroine and cocaine.