

Decoding *Seinfeld*: Indications for Studying
the Sitcom Experience from a Cultural Studies Perspective

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Abstract

A pilot study of the sense made of *Seinfeld* by the show's fans was conducted through a Cultural Studies "lens" or perspective. The general research problem was to gauge the salience of the program and program elements for the participants of an electronic bulletin board on the Internet and to skim the surface of the text- work in which they are engaged. A Cultural Studies perspective suggests many issues and concepts that can be brought to bear on the study of *Seinfeld*/audience interactions. This microstudy of the fans indicates they might be rightly conceptualized as belonging to a kind of "interpretive community." Their natural, unintruded, computer- mediated talk evidences negotiated readings and other text- work on episodes. The program's extra- and intertextual references allow for much play on the bulletin board, and some fans are aware of this postmodern aesthetic.

Introduction

A prolific strain in the field of Cultural Studies has been the study of audiences through a conceptual framework that conceives of the audience/text relationship as a dialectical one, an intricate site or moment of interaction in which there is always the potential for the individual to "write" the program herself although the textual structure (and prior media experiences) will be highly influential in this individual interpretation process. Stemming largely from the Geneva School of literary criticism and poststructural semiotics, audience research in Cultural Studies usually can be identified with theories that "conceive of textual meaning as the product of a complex transaction between an inert textual structure, composed of verbal [or other] signifiers, and an actively productive reader, who constructs those signifiers as meaningful signs on the basis of previously learned interpretive procedures and codes" (Radway, 1991, p. 468). The theorists diverge in terms of where they assign the primary power for meaning construction.

Barthes, for example, called the individual an ambiguous site between the text and culture: "This 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)" (1974, p. 10). Perhaps nowhere is this condition of the Subject more profound than in the TV generations, whose lives are increasingly mediated. Fiske, in contrast, in analytically equating consumption with production, sees the "disempowered" as possessing "their own culture which they construct out of cultural commodities as social agents who have a certain degree of autonomy *vis a vis* the dominant ideology: (Cook, 1993, p. 233). Baudrillard (1981) went further, to suggest that audiences challenge the dominant ideology even in their silences and unresponsiveness to the media.

This “active audience” construct, combined with awareness of a culture’s overall system of signifying and representing the world- - and flavored by postmodern theories of the decentered, multifaceted, contradictory nature of reality and personality- - has shaped empirical research in literary and other mass media studies. One difference that Cultural Studies makes to the mass communication discipline is the holism with which content, effect, and culture are often rendered in research and theory. Many scholars whose work has been incorporated into Cultural Studies *have* specialized in discrete moments such as producer, text, or audience, however, there is a notable trend in the field toward more faithfully operationalizing this fundamental perspective: that “interpretation and textual meaning. . . are as dependent on who the reader is, on how she understands the process of reading, and on the cultural context within which she operates, as they are on the text’s verbal structure itself” (Radway, 1991, p. 468).

In this direction, Radway’s work has attempted to account for the concept of interpretive community, which she traces through Eco and Fish. Eco’s discussion of communicative acts presents senders and addressees who make use of codes within particular communication contexts. Codes (and subcodes) can be understood loosely as discursive conventions and paradigms, as exist in verbal languages or the so-called language of film. The role of the audience is the decoding of producers’ encoded programs. Eco has pointed out that “aberrant” decoding is actually “the rule in the mass media,” because the contemporary mass audience is an amalgam of individuals who have been acculturated into diverse social situations and their respective systems of meanings (1960). Fish described interpretive communities in the academy as a loosely connected group of literary scholars who share basic assumptions about the nature of literature, about the goals of literary criticism, and about the nature of the interpretive process. . . . readers who may disagree about how to construct a literary interpretation, but who are nonetheless equally and similarly literate because all can produce coherent readings of difficult texts (Radway, 1991b, p. 468).

The interpretive community concept has been operationalized for the study of the “work” done by popular audiences on mass media texts. Radway’s own *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* is based on the views of culture that point to issues of context, historical situatedness, and time-space specificity in the investigation of a culture’s meaning-making activities. The position of the American Civilization Department at University of Pennsylvania, where Radway completed her book, was that “if accurate statements were to be made about more ‘ordinary’ Americans, the popular literature produced for and consumed by large numbers ought to become the primary focus of culturally oriented scholarship” (Radway, 1991a, p. 3). Radway’s approach to understanding what was potentially a nationwide interpretive community of romance novel readers was to first study a formal/organized group of readers who were centered around a particular bookstore and salesperson in Smithton, Pennsylvania. Her rationale:

If we can detect exactly what it is the readers in a formally recognized group share, and how this common fund of knowledge affects what they “do” with printed texts, we may be able to ask certain questions of apparently unconnected individuals that will also reveal the particular ways in which they behave with printed texts and, therefore, how they are literate (1991b, p. 469).

The (simplified) Cultural Studies perspective that has been summarized above was brought to bear on a microstudy of a U.S. television audience. For a pilot study of the sense made of *Seinfeld* by the show’s fans, the natural and unintruded computer-mediated talk of an electronic bulletin board’s participants was analyzed. The general research problem was to gauge the salience of the program and program elements for the usergroup participants and to skim the surface of the text-work in which they are engaged. Analysis of their discussions opens areas of inquiry relevant to Cultural Studies; many issues and concepts addressed in the literature can be brought to bear on a study of *Seinfeld* audience interactions. For example, the formation of negotiated or oppositional readings could be highlighted; the sense of realism or fantasy could be examined; the question of pleasure could be addressed. In their conversations, *Seinfeld* fans demonstrate themselves to be making sense with the episodes at various levels: textual features, extratextual relationships, identification, and more.

This elite and fairly anonymous group is atypical in relation to the millions of viewing households nationwide. Even sporadic sampling of conversations indicates that the behavior/discourse on the group is fanatic communication, considering the barriers to participation and considering the extent of trivia addressed. Trivia, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. A systematic observation process reveals evidence to support the idea that individuals who have been socialized into the same “codes” are finding each other on the telecommunications/data infrastructure. Just from the pilot study the *Seinfeld* fans can be recognized as a playful and active audience, if not an interpretive community.

Procedure

After occasional and irregular forays into the realm of this electronic bulletin board (EBB), a sample of the discussion group was taken for the actual study. The sample was random in that the seven-day period was chosen by caprice and did not even adhere to a typical calendar framework (e.g., Sunday through Saturday or Monday through Sunday); the sample was systematic in that every article posted to the usergroup during the time period was gathered for study, except four articles that were duplicate mistakes or unintelligible blanks. The total sample consists of 144 articles that have been analyzed according to content and identity of participant.

Content analysis was intuitively informed and consisted of basic counting of topics, tracking the quoted dialogue from *Seinfeld* and other popular texts, and searching for viewers’ rationales regarding either the appeal of the show or their own participation “on the ‘Net.” Participant identity is established by their

e-mail names, host organizations, and any personal information offered by themselves in conversation.

During the seven-day period beginning Tuesday, May 11, 1993, there are three *Seinfeld* episodes broadcast on United States and Canadian television: two reruns shown back-to-back on Wednesday night, May 12, and one never-before-seen episode on Thursday night. Based on some textual features of this latter episode, which the group is calling "Handicap Spot," group members claim that Thursday's episode was shown out of order, that is, it was intended to air prior to several episodes that they've already seen. In this light, and in light of the special hour on Wednesday, the sample might be considered atypical of a viewing week. May is a "Sweeps Month," during which television network ratings are evaluated for reports to potential advertisers and to justify the price of advertising time on those networks. However, the 1992-93 season was subjected to several similar hour-long specials as well as frequent scheduling changes for *Seinfeld*.

Special Vocabulary

The group participants are identified in this paper by their e-mail names, capitalized as proper names to make for easier reading, but with host computers' names omitted to preserve a modicum of anonymity. In addition to this idiosyncrasy, several specialized terms must be defined in discussing this EBB.

The "FAQ" is the *Seinfeld* background information file and frequently-asked-questions list. Maintained by participant Simpson, the FAQ is partly a form of metacommunicating about the this EBB, as it documents members' favorite episodes (from a poll), popular dialogue, and most frequently addressed issues, program elements, enigmas, etc. It also describes the history of *Seinfeld* as part of the television industry, character development, actors' other work credits, sources of *Seinfeld* paraphernalia, and the like. Simpson, who functions in this study as a key informant of sorts, updates the information and credits other individuals (by name) for much of the details.

An "article" is any discrete message sent by any participant; it is numbered by the system and dated when sent (or received?).

A "thread" is a topic that is brought up by someone and followed by others. Threads are easily identified by a subject heading so one can avoid a particular discussion if desired and peruse the usergroup selectively.

To "flame" is to be rude, snide, or nasty [my words] to a participant, usually based on something he or she wrote. "Flame" can be used as a noun and a verb.

"Seinfeldisms" defy definition, but loosely speaking these are clever and funny quotes, key narrative incidents, recurring props, and extra characters that, as woven into the series overall, lend flavor and contribute to the unique and bizarre identity of the series. Simpson's glossary of Seinfeldisms in the FAQ was "inspired both by the 'Seinfeldisms' discussion awhile back on the 'Net and the excellent glossary contained in the April 9th 'Entertainment Weekly' magazine article 'Sein-language' [by Bruce Fretts]."

Findings

Toward community

The evidence indicating participants' socialization into a particular code or discursive formation is at least threefold. Firstly, the members are highly computer literate, as they are able to alter the standard heading format of the bulletin board system and to design their own "signature" files. The signatures are similar to mastheads, but occupy the bottom portion of the article, as in signing a letter; some of them are quite elaborate, including illustrations such as Bart Simpson and the U.S.S. Enterprise made out of keyboard characters. Some of the participants appear to be personnel at computer-related corporations that are listed as the site of origination; most of the others are located at institutions of higher education.

Secondly- - and more importantly- - within these signatures, many participants include quotes from characters of other TV programs or lines from pop songs, for example, "I'm running with scissors! I'm running with scissors!" credited to character Frasier Crane on NBC's *Cheers*. In my mind these extratextual mentions serve one or both of two purposes:

1. They may increase the identification process among participants if their unspoken complements are actually, a), "I think this is a classic line. Don't you?" or, b), "You know something about me by the joke or line that really struck me and the characters I love."

2. Participants may be borrowing some of the ethos of the characters, the programs, the clever writers, etc., by invoking and evoking the humorous situations associated with the lines.

In general the lines serves as inside jokes, and they could be interpreted as marking out the perimeters of tastes and media experiences of a generation or subculture.¹

Thirdly, communication is often facilitated by shorthand and slang that is both general to the national computer networks ("BTW" = "by the way;" "IMHO" = "in my humble opinion") and specific to this group ("NTTAWWT" = "Not that there's anything wrong with that," a recurring line of dialogue in the episode "The Outing").

There are other forms of material that could support the notion of the fans' coded interaction with the program and with each other. For example, on the EBB there is a brief exchange about character Jerry Seinfeld's parents:

Jimhill: Do any of you. . . have parents remotely like Jerry's, and if so, how do you keep from killing them and leaving there [sic] bodies to rot?

¹ However, there appears to be some uncertainty about everyone remembering or even "getting" these references; most participants identify the characters or authors of said quotes. Thus, few of these references exterior to *Seinfeld* are taken as entirely understood.

- Jpenovic: Obviously, you have not spent much time in South Florida. I have lived here for almost 20 years of my adult life, and there are many people here just like Jerry's parents and their friends. That's why I find the episode so hysterical. My parents live in a retirement condo complex down here, and they think that episode is a scream. Actually, they're not quite like Jerry's parents, but some of there [sic] neighbors are.
- Mfbalis: Like Jerry, I was raised in New York and my parents have subsequently gone on to South Florida. In fact my parents are in many ways like Jerry's. It's the whole Jewish retired folks commonality. . . . It's the same kind of household a lot of kids were raised in. We wind up being kind of like Jerry, both in our approach to the parents as well as, hopefully, our sense of humor.
- Retting: Doesn't everyone have parents like Jerry. I do. 'Jerry, you got thin.' 'Too thin?' 'Stop worrying so much about how you look.' All you have to do is substitute my name for Jerry's.
- Soup: [to Mfbalis] Sorry mitch, but I think complaining/whining as you get older is universal over many, many cultures. . . .
- Jam: I am positive that if you asked Jerry himself he would say that his parents were supposed to make fun of the typical, jewish [sic] parent/grandparent. Trust me, I am Jewish, and his parents are exactly like some of my relatives. Contrast Jerry's parents and George's mom with the non- Jewish (no double-dipping) family.

This thread evokes not only an ethnic subculture and a New York experience, but also suggests that participants are theorizing about the appeal of the series and the intent of the authors, as well as identifying with the characters.

The predominance of New York concerns on this EBB suggests that many of the participants are displaced New Yorkers. I say "displaced" because none are currently hailing from the New York metropolitan area. New York references include Psil's May 11 praise, "at least the outside shots are all real NY," and his May 12 lament that *Seinfeld* has been scheduled "opposite the knicks" [New York Knicks basketball game on television]. Some participants are still asking about the location of Jerry's apartment and the diner although these answers are provided by the FAQ. Says Mfbalis, "I believe I heard Elaine say that Jerry lived on West 83rd Street. That looks about right, probably near Amsterdam (I think Columbus Ave. has a lot of brownstones around there -- certainly at 81st)." Simpson has identified a "New York Thing" traversing the group:

Many [on this EBB] claim to have special insight into the show since a lot of the show's humour is based on living in New York City (episodes like 'The Subway' particularly accent this) and there are numerous 'Only in New York' subplots (such as Woody Allen making a film). Anyway, the consensus seems to be that you don't have to be a New Yorker to understand and appreciate the humour, but it helps you empathise [sic] with the characters when they get into situations like the above.

Prior to the seven-day sample, a cohort effect was indicated on the EBB by a brief conversation about *Schoolhouse Rock*, the animated, musical, educational spots run by ABC during the network's Saturday morning children's lineup in the 1970s. It was sparked in April by Egolub, who imagined a *Seinfeld* scenario involving a song from a *Schoolhouse Rock* spot. Said Dobias: "I remember having to memorize the Preamble [to the U.S. Constitution] in high school. Just about everyone in class began singing the 'Preamble Song' from schoolhouse rock [sic]. I'm glad to see it back on TV!" Sepin's criticism of Egolub's suggested subplot express his or her belief that *Schoolhouse Rock* is "way after Jerry's time. . . . he would have been [at least] 21 by the time they started airing. . . . Which means, he would never have heard 'The Bill Song' (or 'Conjunction Junction' or 'Lolly, Lolly, Lolly, Get Your Adverbs Here' or any other *classics*)" [emphasis added]. Oconnor agreed: "Although we all love schoolhouse rock. . . ."

Negotiated readings and other text-work

"*Handicap Spot.*" A debate over the comedic merits and possible offensiveness of the treatment of a handicapped person in the central storyline of "Handicap Spot" is the second-most active thread in the sample, with 27 articles. Note that "Handicap Spot" did not even air until Thursday night, and the sample ends on the following Monday night. Technically, there are at least 17 more articles related to the "Handicap Spot" episode, based on textual features of the episode other than the central narrative, such as sight gags that are associated with prior *Seinfeld* storylines and concern over the mystery of character Kramer's first name (because he says he would name a son "Isosceles Kramer"). However, the central storyline provides the most fertile soil for contradictory interpretations, and even conflict, among the participants.

As pieced together from various mentions in the sample, "Handicap Spot" portrays at least three central *Seinfeld* characters (Jerry, George, Kramer) parking their car either in a handicap space or blocking a handicap ramp (this is not clear). There is a wheelchair-equipped female character written into this episode (and identified as the "Wheelchair Woman" by some participants), and at one point in the narrative she goes careening backwards, out of control, down a hill. Articles indicate that there is also a "mob" preparing to attack the car.

The first recorded reaction to Thursday night's episode comes on Friday morning and is concerned with textual features that relate to previous episodes. The debate itself begins in Friday's third article, which focuses only on the comic value of the episode and appears in the form of information-seeking:

Bscott: Was it me, or was this far and away the least funny Seinfeld episode so far? The situations were cliché, the dialog [sic] was predictable and formulaic. . . and I wouldn't hire the director for a wedding video. I can't believe it. . . Barely worth taping. What happened?

The media criticism continues:

Bamer: I read that someone hated this episode. I don't know, I thought it was pretty good. Name me one other show that could show a person in a wheelchair rolling down a hill like that and still make it funny. They get away with more stuff! . . . But I'll agree there was a lot going on in this one. The Drake, the parking place, the wheelchair, George's parents, but they all tied together at the end. Still I'd rather watch ANY Seinfeld than 95% of anything else shown on TV these days.

Ggolub: Let's be honest. I love the show, but the story of "the Drake" was a letdown. They should have included more on when the angry crowd of people was ready to attack them and their car. I thought this part was extremely funny. . . .

Saeed: [to Bscott] I kinda agree. Although there were some great little things like: 'I'd name him Isosceles Kramer!' Or what about:
Jerry: 'I think I'll get a yo-yo.'
George: 'I could see that.'
The Blind Date episode on Wednesday was HILARIOUS though. . . Even so, just thinking about the Handicap Spot episode brings a little smile to my face.

Garyd: The wheelchair episode last night was classic for two reasons. Well, really one reason. The show made the handicapped lady a person without really making any "oh pity me" references. I mean, I actually didn't LIKE her! Who was she to say Kramer wasn't good looking! The bitch!
But seriously, this was great! Mocking a person for being so shallow can be a funny topic. And so what if the woman was in a wheelchair? She was shallow and deserved to be made fun of! And plus, she should have checked her batteries before she left her house, or at least made sure her brakes worked (would an electric wheelchair really roll backwards if the battery died? I don't think so.)

Less than one hour after this last article, a participant named Sbooth logs on and begins to respond to many of the “Handicap Spot” articles one by one as he encounters them, and the thread takes quite a different turn.

Sbooth: [to Bscott] I’m probably the only one who feels this way, But....
IMHO the 5/13 episode of the show was the worst ever. I don’t offend easily, but this episode was just too much. Just when I thought TV couldn’t sink any lower.....I used to think the show was funny, but I’m not sure after what I saw last night. I’m still reeling mentally from it. I never thought anyone could sink that low. but [sic] I felt that I should say something. It’s difficult to see the difficulties I’ve encountered in the real world parodied with such impunity on television.
Perhaps I am too upset by the episodes. I do have a sense of humor, but I had to make an exception in this case.
My apologies for flaming the show, since I usually enjoy it.

Sbooth seems to indicate that he is wheelchair- equipped and confirms this later. The bulletin board format permits him to respond point- by- point to other people’s comments, by reprinting portions of their articles and denoting original text with bullet points. (These redundancies will not be reprinted here.) This procedure reminds participants of what was said and makes arguments easier to follow.

Sbooth: [to Bamer] I hope they don’t get away with stuff like that. I know I sure objected to this episode. Dissappointed [sic] that a show I really like could pull a stunt like that. . . . After last night I think anything might be better than Seinfeld.

Sbooth: [to Garyd] Interesting reaction. I’m reminded not to get upset the next time I get a hostile reaction when in public. Or when someone talks to someone I’m with as if I don’t exist....It’s a good thing I have television to remind me of just how little I count in the world. And I used to think I was still a real person. How stupid could I be.
Thanks for being honest about how you feel about people who are different.
When I saw the episode, and after seeing comments like this, I often wonder what year it is. 1993- or 1933. . . .
I really enjoyed the crowd trashing the car. Of course if I had been there I probably would have Molotoved the car after Seinfeld and friends had gotten in it. Now, if there were trees around, I would have brought enough rope to deal with them.....

. . . . Some ramps are very steep, despite what the law might require. But I see that you are an expert on the subject.

Interpretations of the program's message and its writers' intents soon come into conflict:

Afo42: [to Sbooth and Bamer] Come on guys, relax! I'm handicapped myself, and I had no problem with the episode. I don't think the point was to poke fun at handicapped people at all anyway.

I don't know when the show was taped, but it may well have been a take-off on the parking dispute between Julia Louis-Dreyfus and the mentally-handicapped Tom Arnold. Hey, after the notorious 'bubble boy' episode, I thought last night was tame.

Garyd: [to Sbooth] I will not submit to the PC police. I will reiterate my positive reactions to "The Wheelchair" in a bullet list so as to remove the obviously negative connotations the previous poster found.

was shallow

1) 'Seinfeld' shows a woman in a wheelchair as a person who

2) I found the situation funny
3) I found it rather 1993, (not 1933) just for that reason; a beautiful woman in a wheelchair who SHOULD have known better not to judge someone based on looks did just that. That made her MORE human (but still a bitch)

. . . . I was only trying to point out how I thought the show illustrated the forward movement of wheelchair-bound people.

. . . . Where did I say you shouldn't get upset when these things happen to you? In fact, I was trying to celebrate the fact that a TV show treated a woman in a wheelchair as a *real woman* foibles and all...

In general, the positive evaluation of this Seinfeld episode by participants is based on a reading comprised of one or more of the following elements: the narrative does not pity or valorize the wheelchair-equipped character; the character was realistic ("human") in that she was "beautiful," "a bitch," contradictory ("foibles and all"); the strategy employed by the show's writers was to take a handicapped person's "constant daily worries" and make them humorous - - she was not being mocked; it's insulting to handicapped people to imply that "everyone should feel sorry for them and never use them in comedy."

For Sbooth, however, the episode really hits home; he says he took it personally to see his real difficulties "parodied with such impunity on TV." According to his articles, he sees no humor in the daily trials and disadvantages

of the handicapped; “people must trade places with me to see why I might be offended.” In addition to referencing “1993” (the Third Reich, presumably), Sbooth suggests that had *Seinfeld* featured racial jokes that night, more people would be disturbed or offended. He also believes that the female wheelchair character was not well developed at all to be considered “real” in any sense. “Maybe had we known something about her character,” he says.

The number of articles is not necessarily proportionate to salience of topic, because the issue-oriented “Handicap Spot” commentary is an exchange among only 17 participants. Seven of the articles are by Sbooth. Most participants on this thread enter the exchange only once. The total number of participants on the EBB during the seven-day sample is 92, and 42 more participants have been counted in random samples since March 18, 1993.

“*The Naked Woman.*” The most active thread during the week, in terms of both the number of articles and the amount of bandwidth used, is referred to as “The Naked Woman” in the majority of article subject headings. Involving at least 35 articles (with two more indirect references optional), this debate concerns Kramer’s ability to see a naked woman in the apartment building across the street - - why does he have to watch her from Jerry’s window, considering he came into Jerry’s apartment with the prior knowledge that she was standing naked in front of her window? This debate had actually begun as early as May 5, as evidenced from the random samples.

During the seven-day period, Psil begins by saying there is no way that Kramer’s window can face the same way as Jerry’s apartment window. Figgins says Kramer’s window *can* be the same direction as Jerry’s. Lowry presents an argument against Kramer’s window being on the same side as Jerry’s, and inadvertently (or purposely) starts two new threads: by making a reference to the apartment hallway being shared by the characters of sitcom *Mad About You* (“that awful show”), and by proposing in his last sentence that baseball player Keith Hernandez lives next door to Jerry’s apartment (“I believe if you look in that apartment you find Keith Hernandez living there.”). The latter is a reference to another episode.

Bh437 submits a floor plan that would allow Kramer to have both a door across from Jerry’s door (a fact not in dispute, based on the visible set) and a window with the same perspective (the fact in dispute). Bh437 adds that he hopes “this will be the end of this stupid thread about the location of Kramer and Jerry’s windows.” Don, calling his article “Enough on the naked woman already,” reiterates an earlier article - - that the show is “FICTION. It can take liberties with reality.” The EBB is soon inundated with elaborate floorplans as well as rationales as to why Jerry would let Kramer watch the woman from his apartment in the first place, considering the narrative context: that Jerry is involved in a contest to refrain from masturbating!

It was not until my third pass through this data, shortly after watching a *Seinfeld* episode that I happened to have on videotape, that I was able to account for the unusual amount of activity on this thread - - activity I call text-work, with a nod to Freud’s “dream work.” Like Don and Bh437 (apparently), I did not tune-in to what Lowry was [really] saying in his elaborate argument:

Yes, but let's think a bit more carefully about this, and consider an additional *crucial* piece of information, to wit: the window from which Jerry and Kramer were viewing said naked woman is *across* from the entry door to Jerry's apartment. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that Jerry's window faces south. Then his door is on the north side of his apartment, and Kramer's entry door is still further north, and I would submit to you that in order for Kramer to have a south-facing window in his apartment from which to view the naked lady, it would be necessary for Kramer's apartment to actually *bend* around Jerry's apartment. We know that this cannot happen on the east side of the apartment, because as we saw in a recent episode of that awful show, *Mad About You*, there's a long hallway that heads down that direction. Hence, Kramer's apartment must *bend* around Jerry's apartment to the west, and to do so it must stretch well past Jerry's bedroom and bathroom, making Kramer's apartment quite large indeed, and definitely not 'like a log cabin.' (The Mystery Woman)

No, I maintain there must have been a *second apartment*, cleverly located on the south side of the building, probably adjacent to Jerry's on the east side. I believe if you look in that apartment you will find Keith Hernandez living there.

The asterisks indicate vocal inflection as if read aloud. The detailed (and confusing) deconstruction of the apartment situation is a reference to a subplot in "The Boyfriend" episode, which was itself a spoof on Oliver Stone's then-recent film *JFK*, in which the protagonist district attorney deconstructs the assassination of President Kennedy. The *Seinfeld* writers, through the character of Jerry, turn the D.A.'s "magic bullet theory" critique into a "magic lugey theory" about who actually spit on Kramer after a Mets baseball game. When Lowry suggests the possibility of "a *second apartment*" he is parodying *Seinfeld*'s "second spitter" routine (and Jerry's vocal inflections)- - itself a parody of *JFK*'s "second shooter." Lowry does not tell us directly what he is doing. There is no mention of "The Boyfriend" episode, the "magic lugey theory," or *JFK*, until the very last sentence: "I believe if you look in that apartment you will find [baseball player] Keith Hernandez there." Hernandez was a guest star playing himself as a central figure in that episode's storyline. Having viewed the Hernandez episode almost accidentally in proximity to this research, I can make more sense of the large amount of debate on the arrangement of the apartments, as many of the articles in this debate can be interpreted as participants' play with *Seinfeld* on inter- and extratextual levels.

Discussion

A brief foray into the realm of this EBB reveals many avenues for detailed investigation from a Cultural Studies perspective. An episode such as “Handicap Spot” could be tested on groups of *Seinfeld* fans to track the divergent interpretations of this episode’s humor and “message.” Divergent interpretations, or aberrant decoding, have been typed in the literature. Morley (1980), working from theories of both Parkin and Hall, used a typology of three forms of audience text- work [my word] for his study of the *Nationwide* audience in England:

- 1) dominant/preferred reading, whereby “the audience interprets the message in terms of the same code employed by the transmitter”
- 2) negotiated reading, whereby “the audience employs a ‘negotiated’ version of the dominant ideology employed by the transmitter”
- 3) oppositional reading, whereby “the audience employs an ‘oppositional’ code to interpret the message and therefore interprets its meaning through a different code from that employed by the transmitter” (p. 23).

Consider the case of Sbooth on the *Seinfeld* bulletin board, who has experienced life as a handicapped person.

Suffice it to say that this conceptual framework has been critiqued and “negotiated” in the field, even by Morley himself, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the issue of establishing the dominant/preferred meaning of the text in the first place, short of interviewing the writers/producers. Furthermore, I would venture to say that “oppositional reading” is actually a misnomer, as it is operationalized by many of the scholars to describe the resistance and counterarguing employed by audience members who 1), encounter a text, 2), understand what the producers are communicating, but 3), find such a message disagreeable [see Condit, 1989]. Such activity is not oppositional “reading” per se, but what I would call oppositional “text- work,” as it is done in relation to the original text stimulus. The term “oppositional reading,” in my mind, would be one which “misses the boat” entirely.

An experiment by Condit (1989) has been relevant and useful in that she narrowed her playing field to one episode of a program (*Cagney & Lacey*) and one issue (abortion). She makes more visible the assumptions that Morley (1980) did not treat specifically. He examined socioeconomic class as a variable affecting decoding, based on some glossed- over assumptions about what sorts of discourses, both political and academic, that respondents would have been socialized into. Said Condit:

. . . the ability of audiences to shape their own readings, and hence their social life, is constrained by a variety of factors in any given rhetorical situation. These factors include audience members’ access to oppositional codes, the ratio between the work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text, the repertoire of available texts, and the historical occasion. . . .
(1989, pp. 103 - 104)

In her study, she is careful to discuss her respondents' exposure to abortion literature and political activism. She is also careful to note that episodes and series do not exist so much as discrete texts but rather in relation to a whole system, such as television broadcasting. Thus, she suggests:

For clarity, then, we might reserve the term 'intertextual polysemy' to refer to the existence of variety in messages on mass communication channels, the terms 'internally polysemous' or 'open texts' for those discourses which truly offer unstable or internally contradictory meanings, and the term 'polyvalence' to describe the fact that audiences routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different value to different portions of a text and hence to the text itself. (p. 108)

Her conceptual framework is relevant to the study of television, a sign system that some analysts have assigned to the realm of postmodern discourse. As Olson (1987) explained:

Postmodernism rejects the realist, naturalist tradition that modernism required to project its illusion of reality. . . . Postmodern discourse lays bare the modernist artifice, exposing the inherently arbitrary and provisional nature of its linguistic conventions. . . . Television has its own conventions of naturalism, arising from cultural rituals of representation. . . . When television undermines its own conventions, it attacks its own illusion of naturalness. (p. 284)

Olson dubs this "meta- television" and devises a typology of the different levels: medium- reflexive structure, genre- reflexive structure, and text- reflexive narrative. His point is that meta- television activity is the "cultural expression of television's second generation," requiring "sophisticated viewers" with "a thorough knowledge of convention." The first generation of TV audiences is precluded from this social situatedness, whereas TV's second (and third) generations are more likely "candidates for playful television reading" (p. 285).

Given the extent of inter- and extratextual references on *Seinfeld* and the extent of such references and other creativity on the bulletin board (which at times is more elaborate than has been mentioned in this paper), Olson's (and others') ideas about play are relevant to this microstudy and to further investigation on *Seinfeld* audience interaction. "Because of television [and other pop] literacy, viewers can appreciate the texts of meta- television, but they also can create meta- televisual experiences, even when the text shows no manifest signs of playing with conventions" (Olson, 1987, p. 285). Of course, the participants on this EBB must be interviewed systematically about their media experiences, academic backgrounds, their affection for *Seinfeld*, their use of the EBB, and so on.

From the bulletin board:

This is the problem and the fun of post- modernism. The Jackie Thomas Show is a show about a show called ‘The Jackie Thomas Show’ starring Jackie Thomas, who is played by Tom Arnold as being Tom Arnold, or at least the Tom Arnold portrayed in the supermarket tabloids. ‘Seinfeld’ is a show starring Jerry Seinfeld as a comedian named ‘Jerry Seinfeld’ who is writing a TV pilot for a show about himself and his friends. Now on JT there was an episode in which the striking writers of JT feud with the striking writers of Seinfeld. One of the JT writers does a funny Seinfeld imitation, and one of the Seinfeld writers does a funny TA/JT imitation. . . . Notice that Seinfeld exists on four different levels of abstraction: 1. The actual show produced by the real people; 2. The action that we see featuring JS & George, Elaine, & Kramer; 3. The show that we see JS & George writing; and 4. The fictionalized version of the show whose writers are portrayed by actors on JT show. Jerry’s appearance on WKRP playing the real- life JS who stars on ‘Seinfeld’ would also fit on this level. Kramer’s appearance on ‘Mad About You’ would fall onto Level Two.

Maybe someone should write a thesis about this.

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