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“Not That There’s Anything Wrong With That”: A Queer Reading of *Seinfeld*

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One particular expression seems to spring to mind whenever one evokes the reference to homosexuality in a television series or serial: “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.” The phrase appears in an episode of the 1990s American-sitcom-turned-cultural-phenomenon *Seinfeld*. In “The Outing” (4.57) a young journalist believes Jerry and George to be a gay couple—they bicker in front of her over an unwashed piece of fruit and George reproaches Jerry with not liking his shirt. She writes an article about it which is then taken up by the rest of the national press, and this to the dismay of both characters. Jerry comments thus upon the misunderstanding: “I’ve been outed, I wasn’t even in!” “Not that there’s anything wrong with that” is the leitmotiv of the episode, uttered every time a character denies they are gay or shows amazement at Jerry and George’s outing—though the fact that Jerry is admittedly thin, single, neat and in his late thirties makes the revelation less surprising to his neighbour Kramer. The sentence was introduced in the dialogue after the episode was almost cancelled when the executives at NBC thought it might offend the gay and lesbian communities and was not politically correct enough. Larry Charles, one of the writers of this specific show and a regular contributor to the programme, kept repeating the frightened mantra, which Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld eventually picked up on as a running joke rather than a warning, to great success what’s more, since “The Outing” went on to become a favourite, especially with the gay and lesbian communities, its catchphrase making its way into everyday talk.

I was not put off when I discovered that Katherine Gantz had already used the same title in her article on the same subject for *Straight With a Twist* and decided to stick with it, first because it is so apt, and second because my reading of *Seinfeld* is somewhat different from Gantz's. Although her analysis is clearly seminal, I decided to opt for a different approach and am not totally convinced by her reading of innuendos in the *Seinfeld* text, especially in "The Virgin" (4.50). In this episode, Marla, described as being "in the closet business," offers to rearrange Jerry's closet, and, being a virgin, she will, according to Gantz, allow Jerry to stay in the closet (to "maximize his closet space"¹) while not being sexually threatening. Indeed Jerry does not have to appear as a closeted gay character for a queer reading to be possible. Nor is the interpretation of the title *Seinfeld* with its upturned triangle as a reference to homosexuality completely convincing. I will therefore attempt to focus on a wider interpretation of the sitcom as pertaining to a specific genre and to read queerness less in terms of the sexual orientation of the characters than in terms of the narrative of *Seinfeld*. While Gantz gives an alternative reading of the show, I will try and identify more intrinsically queer elements.

Jerry Seinfeld: A Dandy in the Age of Mass Culture

In "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag famously describes the modern camp character as a dandy for the modern age; as a sensibility of the unnatural "camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica."² Jerry is typically a character who appreciates the vulgar pleasures of life and turns this appreciation into an attitude, both a lifestyle and an outlook on life: he draws comparisons between the situations and the people he encounters with the adventures of Superman and is a connoisseur of all brands of breakfast cereals. More generally in *Seinfeld*, references to movies and television programmes are rife, the characters (and Elaine in particular) are fascinated with the Kennedys—unfortunately, a prospective relationship with John-John is foiled by Marla—and consumer products and brand names are specifically named and appreciated as central elements of culture: Bosco chocolate sauce, Junior Mints, the Mets, to name just a few. The whole point, or absence of point, of the show—which has often been described as being about nothing—is the minutia with

which modern life is observed. The seriousness of its frivolity makes it funny, but not simply. It is also the particular way elements of mass culture are introduced into the narrative that creates humour: they crop up several times and are often misused. The effect is that an innocuous object or foodstuff finds in *Seinfeld* a comical dimension simply because it is used as a reference to another episode: in "The Secret Code," Bosco tastes different after we learn it is so central to George's life that he uses the word as a code for his ATM card (7.115), and so do Hennigan's, Pez or Junior Mints after they have taken a part in bringing a seriously ill patient in a hospital back to life. The double reading of mass culture elements as straightforward but also in another "private zany experience of the thing"³ makes it relevant to this idea of camp humour, which is something esoteric, as Sontag puts it: "something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."⁴ Of course, that clique will often be a gay one, but the *Seinfeld* foursome of Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer also can be defined as a small urban clique, and you have to be part of that clique, or of the wider clique of *Seinfeld* aficionados (as opposed to occasional viewers) to find humour in such phrases as "Cuban cigars," "master of your domain," "in the vault," "coffee table book about coffee tables," "low, or close talker." If Camp suggests a comic vision of the world that is not tragic and involved, but detached and under-involved, Jerry is one of its dandies, and the whole group, remaining unfazed after George's fiancée Susan dies because of cheap wedding invitation envelopes chosen by tight-fisted George in "The Invitations" (7.134), share the same alternative set of standards and take part in that frivolous neutralization of moral indignation. Is it only a coincidence that the Calvin Klein model Jerry meets on a plane should be called Tia Van Camp (4.52-53)?

Yet, if the humour in *Seinfeld* is camp, the homosexual context or more generally the androgynous or epicene style very often associated with the tag seem to be missing from the sitcom which has no regular homosexual characters. Still, under closer inspection, references to homosexuality abound. The series actually starts out with many mentions of homosexuality which seem to set the tone: in the first season Elaine accuses George of being homophobic when he refuses to sit next to Jerry in the car, then tells him her father thinks he is gay. Kramer is often seen in

compromising positions with Frank Costanza (probably mainly because the two actors, Michael Richards and Jerry Stiller, had good comedic chemistry). The uneasiness of men amongst themselves often sparks reactions and denials. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated how male bonding is often characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality, and how "it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic."⁵ In this, Elaine does not serve as a female lightning rod since she appears as "one of the guys," a woman with very few women friends, probably the most manly of the group when she pushes them back to the cry "get out of here" and one who hears Kramer describe her as "a man's woman, women don't like you" (7.118). Thus, the very composition of the foursome makes the homosexual subtext unavoidable, especially for George who is well aware of what he sees as the danger of his own potential homosexuality. In "The Note" (3.1) the handsome masseur might have made IT move, to his great discomfort. In "The Cartoon" (9.170), Kramer (always the truth-teller) explains the fact that George's girlfriend looks like Jerry by the former's secret attraction to the latter, something the friends eventually acknowledge and pledge never to discuss again (according to Kramer, she was a "fem-Jerry" and George was "all mixed up in a perverse sexual amalgam of some girl and his best friend"). However, there is no uneasiness when actually gay characters intervene. In "The Subway," Elaine is best man at a lesbian wedding (4.30), and acts as a beard to a friend—she poses as a pretend girlfriend to a man who wants to pass as straight in front of his boss—and manages to make him "switch teams," if only momentarily. George "drives Susan to lesbianism" (in his own words) and finds himself attracted to her again after he meets her with her lover Mona at the video-store. Incidentally, Kramer manages to "bring [the butcher] Mona back" when she falls for his animal magnetism, making him the first man she has ever fancied. Then by introducing Susan to the recently jilted Allison, George makes another convert. In "The Cheever Letters" (4.48), the introduction of the famous novelist is a way for George to accidentally out Susan's father. Finally, there is a counter-intuitive introduction of Cedric and Bob as street toughs in "The Soup Nazi" (7.116), but their being camp is merely plot-contingent since, according to Larry David, only gay men could steal

Elaine's antique armoire. These are about the only characters defined as being homosexual to be found in *Seinfeld*.

The camp aspect of the *Seinfeld* humour here plays more on the uneasiness of many characters towards homosexuality than on a completely camp vision of things. However, something we can call "a pink lining" makes it also about sexuality. The reference to the "pink lining" appears in "The Jacket" (2.8) and is the only fault Jerry can find with his wonderful new suede jacket, a fault for which Elaine's father is going to humiliate him. On seeing the jacket, George will exclaim: "and I say this with an unblemished record of staunch heterosexuality: it's fabulous!" This fabulousness is only one among many markers of queer codes and symbolism peppering the show beside the dishing, the coded language aimed at a knowing audience and an urban lifestyle. First, there's the recurrence of musicals: in "The Phone Message," George suggests he sing "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria" as a coded signal to Jerry (2.9), while in the presence of Alton Benes, he cannot get a theme song from *Les Misérables* out of his head ("Master of the house / Keeper of the inn..."), he gets two tickets for *Guys and Dolls* for Jerry's birthday ("The Outing"), but when Jerry is wary because of the incident with the journalist, he insists it is indeed *Guys and Dolls*, not *Guys and Guys*; all the while, when Elaine's plans for a two-line phone as her birthday present for Jerry are foiled by Kramer, she resorts to buying him the complete Bette Midler collection. Bette Midler in person even appears in "The Understudy" (6.110) in which she stars in *Rochelle, Rochelle, The Musical* (those familiar with the show will remember that the mock movie narrates the "strange, erotic journey of a young girl from Milan to Minsk"). Add to it the rhetoric of in and out: in "The Seinfeld Chronicles" (1.1) Jerry jokes about people's obsession with going out: "Out is best, but once you're out, you want in," or George going into true *Godfather* mode and wanting to escape the grip of a girlfriend in "The Outing": "This is unbelievable! Every time I think I'm out, they pull me back in," and you see that queerness in *Seinfeld* is not about gay or lesbian characters or about humorous allusions to closeted homosexuality, but about the fluidity with which these codes are introduced and the fluidity in relationships that they echo. We have said that all the gay characters at some point were involved in a heterosexual

relationship, that they were first heterosexual, or, in the case of Cedric and Bob, play a traditionally straight role. This fluidity in sexual orientation crops up also in gender identification. One of the main comedic mechanisms in *Seinfeld* is the mirroring of scenes or dialogues which are repeated with different characters, usually with different sexual combinations: the sponge bath George witnesses in "The Contest" (4.51) and which makes him lose control over "his domain," meaning he is no longer "king of the castle" (to a knowing audience, this is an allusion to masturbation), is repeated in "The Outing," no longer with a female nurse and a female patient but with a male nurse and a male patient, apparently to the same arousing effect. In "The Babyshower" (2.15), George's fantasy tirade against a woman who jilted him is pronounced by a woman, against Jerry. The most striking of these doublings of the scenes being "The Wig Master" (7.129) in which a shop attendant flirts with Elaine in the presence of Jerry, who is offended, believing the salesman could have assumed that they were together. In another scene, Jerry finds himself having a drink with Elaine's colourful gay friend, who is the wig master on *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* (yet another musical), when a man comes up and asks the wig master out; Jerry is enraged again and chides the man for not assuming that two young men in their late thirties having cocktails outside a fashionable café might be together. These equivalent scenes and repeated dialogues work as anti-normative constructions of genders. Just like other scenes in which it is traditional gender distribution which is upset: in "The Barber" (5.72), Jerry "cheats" on his regular barber with a younger barber to the sound of *Figaro*. "Male Unbonding" (1.2) is about Jerry trying to get rid of an annoying childhood friend, Joel Horneck, and wondering if he can break up with a guy. He approaches the task as if he were a woman: "I don't think we should see each other anymore. It's not you, it's me [a routine George claims he invented]. This friendship is not working." To which Horneck starts crying. Elaine later prods him on: "Deal with it, be a man!" to which Jerry answers: "Oh no, that's impossible," meaning Jerry cannot accept the conventional, straight implications of being such a man. In "The Boyfriend" (3.15), scenes presenting Jerry making a new friend in baseball hero Keith Hernandez are mirrored by Elaine dating him. Jerry is so flustered when Keith does not call soon enough after he is given him his number, he

starts talking like a woman and wondering what clothes he is going to wear. Elaine has to keep reminding him: "He's a guy!" And when Jerry gets jealous, Elaine is flattered, until she realises he is jealous of her. The episode ends on the following phone conversation: "You broke up with him? Me too!" Indeed, Keith had asked the feminized Jerry to help him move, which was too soon since, in a friendship, it is "like going all the way."

"No Hugging, No Learning": A Humorous Resistance to Straightness

Seinfeld is about the rules of social interaction: how do you date, how do you break up, what do you do when a female friend invites herself over to your house ("you read the signs" in order to know if this has any romantic implications, according to George in "The Seinfeld Chronicles," and you do not bring in a second mattress, because it is like "bringing in a second guy"). In "The Deal" (2.14), Jerry and Elaine try to invent new rules to enjoy a sexual relationship without the pressure: deictic pronouns are used to describe what they want: both *this* (friendly interaction) and *that* (bedroom action). By deciding that spending the night is optional, that there should be no next day call and no bourgeois kisses goodnight, they try to bend the rules (to which George at first exclaims: "Where do you get the ego?," meaning, who does Jerry think he is believing he can cross these sexual and gender borders?).

The humour in *Seinfeld* is usually described as being about trivial things and "have you ever noticed?" routines. Jerry is often mocked or dismissed by others using this intro. For example, Kramer will imitate him or even try to submit material in a way that satirizes Jerry's comedy: "what's the deal with peanuts?" But in fact, most of the little stand-up numbers that bookend the episodes (except during the final seasons) are about the difference between men and women, gendered jokes of the *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* kind. One of the sketches, which gets repeated, explains that it is the men who flick through the channels and hog the remote control because women want to know what's on TV, while men want to know what else is on TV, "That's because men hunt and women nest" – interestingly, the next scene shows Elaine at Jerry's channel hopping while Jerry begs her to stop to

watch something ("The Deal"). In another sketch, Jerry will wonder what use women make of so many cotton balls. He will also remark that women do not try on clothes, they stand behind them, or that women need to like the jobs of the men they might date. That is why men make up phoney names for themselves; plus they do not care what the woman does, so are able to utter such a sentence as: "so, you work in a slaughterhouse; want to grab a bite?" (3.1). The theme is very much gendered, and the action revolves around that other pop culture publishing phenomenon, *The Rules* (in true *Rules* style, after a good date, George announces he plans "a Wednesday call"). However, rather than obey them, the friends are going to bend them. Jerry is going to find something wrong with every woman he is dating in order to break up with her: bad laugh, man hands, eats her peas one at a time, Donna likes a certain pant commercial, one girl's toothbrush fell down the toilet, another's breasts are too good to be real. Elaine explains she once broke up with a guy because his bathroom was not clean enough; in another episode she breaks up with Jake Jarmel over punctuation (but then, it was exclamation marks). While the two find faults with partners, George does things wrong or is unable to get rid of women, then he attracts women by wearing a wedding band (6.97). However, it is not only in relationships that they all resist straightness: the only wedding Elaine is willing to go to is a lesbian one. Their friends in the Hamptons beg them to visit: "You got to see the baby!" But once there, the toddler is quite simply ugly. Elaine and Jerry almost feel disgust for the epitome of the straight family. The babyshower Elaine puts together for her friend (probably because she is related to the Kennedys) is a disaster. And when in "The Bris" the two try to be godparents and organize a bris for their friend Myra's baby, everything goes horribly wrong because of a neurotic Mohel (5.69). At some point, Jerry even pretends to be married, and even enjoys referring to his wife, but this is only so that his girlfriend can get the same discount as him at the cleaner's and it very quickly goes pear-shaped when Jerry ends up "having an affair" with someone else he'd like to enjoy that discount (5.81). The queer here is a subversion of the binary and a resistance to straightness. The cast is organized in unstable couplings rather than couples: Jerry is Elaine's ex, he is the best friend and almost the life companion of George whom he has known since his school days, he practically

lives with Kramer, or rather the opposite since it is Kramer who invariably helps himself to the contents of Jerry's fridge (meanwhile Kramer has an extremely close bond with their other neighbour Newman, who, like him, is a particularly odd, or queer, character). Finally, when George and Jerry date, it seems mostly to serve as an excuse to talk together and bond, and when they both decide to marry, it is because they form a pact together (Jerry, following in George's footsteps after he has proposed to Susan, in turn proposes to a woman called Jeannie who turns out to be a female version of Jerry, realising he is going to marry himself, he changes his mind, arguing that he does not like himself very much, in "The Invitations"). In all these situations, it is the opening up of possibilities that makes the plot queer.

That queer bent is also present in the whole narrative itself, and epitomized by what became the on-set motto devised to keep track of the fact that the characters were neither to evolve nor improve: "no hugging, no learning." The intertextuality of the episodes creates its humour and the sketches that Jerry comes up with for his comedy sets are supposed to feed on the lives of the characters; the structure within each episode is therefore circular. Jerry and George work on a sitcom called *Jerry* for NBC and want it to be about nothing; in fact, they never managed to work hard enough on the pilot they were asked to submit (4.63-64), which is the arc section of the whole series. Finally the ninth season ends on a loop with a reference to the buttoning of a shirt, reminiscent of the first episode. The episode, called "The Betrayal" (9.163), bends the micro-structure of the narrative by playing everything in reverse (the title and structure are an allusion to Harold Pinter's eponymous play). In "The Opposite" (5.86), the attributes traditionally associated with Elaine and George are exchanged. Therefore, *Seinfeld* is neither a series nor a serial because there is no development of the characters and yet no episode can really stand on its own. By bending the genre as well as gender, the writers of the sitcom have managed to create a queer narrative.

Life is a Comedy Club

That queer bent of the narrative is made even queerer by the blurring of the delineation between reality and fiction. Jerry is supposed to be playing himself: in his

apartment, there are several posters of Porsche cars which Seinfeld himself collects; the real Seinfeld is also a fan of all superheroes and especially Superman, but also of the Mets; the real Seinfeld was himself “single, thin and neat,” sparking rumours of homosexuality, and only went on to marry and have kids after the show ended. As for George Costanza, he is supposedly based on co-writer Larry David (even though an old school friend of Jerry Seinfeld called Michael Costanza claimed he was the inspiration for the character in a book called *The Real Seinfeld, As Told by the Real Costanza*, and filed a lawsuit against Seinfeld and Castlerock Entertainment for not being credited). Elaine Benes is based on Seinfeld’s ex-girlfriend, the comedian Carol Leifer, and Cosmo Kramer is based on Kenny Kramer, a former neighbour of David’s who, in true Kramer style, went on to organize “*Seinfeld* tours” of the places on which *Seinfeld* was based, thus adding to the confusion and the interpenetration between fact and fiction. But these archaeological elements were only springboards for the creation of fiction. This, added to the fact that New York is recreated in California, introduces the (negative) concept of passing (first used in the American South about black people pretending to be white, but which has also come to include homosexuals pretending to be straight), but also exposes, and thus denounces it.

The idea that identities and references are transparent in *Seinfeld* is deflected by the many aliases that the characters choose for themselves: Jerry is Karl Varnsen, or Murphy in “The Limo” (3.37) to George’s O’Brien, Kramer is H.E. Pennypacker or Professor Van Nostrand, George invents a wishful life as the architect Art Vandelay. In “The Marine Biologist” (5.78), he pretends he has such an occupation in order to seduce an old school friend and eventually goes on to save a whale. During his engagement to Susan, he realises that there is some danger in Elaine befriending his fiancée, because two worlds might then collide: he doubles himself up into two different persons, “relationship George” and “independent George” and predicts the disappearance of “independent George” if the two ever come into contact: “A George, divided against itself, cannot stand” (7.118). Identities can be invented and changed, multiplied through different *mises en abyme*: at the beginning of the seventh season, Jerry and George have grown moustaches over the Summer as a way of taking vacations from themselves (in a very Village People way since these are quite

thick moustaches). Jerry the performer performs an identity that is not himself while remaining inspired by his life or that of Larry David (in the DVD bonuses, David seems to explain all the episodes by something that really happened to him, for example, he did go back to work pretending nothing had happened after regretting quitting in a dramatic way). George often defines himself as an impostor (whether pretending to be Art Vandelay, the architect, or simply being a liar; he remarks several times: “my whole life is a sham”), and Jerry is accused twice of being a phoney by an annoying friend (3.33). Their identities, although repeatedly linked to reality, are performances, and the fact cannot be escaped. When Jerry and Kramer have to exchange apartments in “The Chicken Roaster” (8.140), Jerry turns into Kramer, bursts into his own apartment, helps himself from the fridge and leaves to the cry “giddyup!” while Kramer is the one discussing George’s relationship at Monk’s in an uncharacteristically quiet manner and ending the conversation by saying “It’s a shame.” In “The Bizarro Jerry” (8.137), there is even an inverted identity for all characters in a parallel, Bizarro world inspired by, among other things, *Superman*.

Freedom derives from this opening up of the possibilities for the self. This is made very clear by Jerry’s conscious bad acting (repeated and commented upon by the (fictitious) studio people when he takes part in the pilot they shoot in the arc story). Sontag reflects that it was Greta Garbo’s incompetence as an actress and the fact that she was always herself that made her both camp and great. The theatricalization of Jerry in *Seinfeld* is the key to his campness and queerness, making the reflection on an original (whether an identity or a sex) irrelevant. It is the systematic reversals and the reassignments of genders and of roles in general, added to the creation of a subculture and the embracing of being-as-playing-a-role which make the queerness of *Seinfeld* not a secondary, tongue-in-cheek reading (as might have later been the case in *Friends*, for example, in which the gay writers had fun introducing innuendos in the dialogues), but the very point of the sitcom.

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Primary source

Seinfeld created by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David for Castlerock Entertainment and NBC, aired in the US between 1989 and 1998. Seasons 1 to 7 on DVD. The final two seasons will be available soon.

NOTES

¹ Gantz, p. 180.

² Sontag, p. 289.

³ Sontag, p. 281.

⁴ Sontag, p. 275.

⁵ Sedgwick, p. 3.