

The Culture of Post-Narcissism

Post-teenage, Pre-midlife Singles Culture in Seinfeld, Friends, and Ally – Seinfeld in Particular

MICHAEL SKOVMAND

In a recent article, David P. Pierson makes a persuasive case for considering American television comedy, and sitcoms in particular, as ‘Modern Comedies of Manners’. These comedies afford a particular point of entry into contemporary mediated negotiations of ‘civility’, i.e. how individual desires and values interface with the conventions and standards of families, peer groups and society at large. The apparent triviality of subject matter and the hermetic appearance of the groups depicted may deceive the unsuspecting media researcher into believing that these comedies are indeed “shows about nothing”. The following is an attempt to point to a particular range of contemporary American television comedies as sites of ongoing negotiations of behavioural anxieties within post-teenage, pre-midlife singles culture – a culture which in many aspects seems to articulate central concerns of society as a whole. This range of comedies can also be seen, in a variety of ways, to point to new ways in which contemporary television comedy articulates audience relations and relations to contemporary culture as a whole.

American television series embody the time-honoured American continental dichotomy between the West Coast and the East Coast. The West Coast – LA – signifies the Barbie dolls of *Baywatch*, and the overgrown high school kids of *Beverly Hills 90210*. On the East Coast – more specifically New York and Boston, a sophisticated tradition of television comedy has developed since the early 1980s far removed from the beach boys and girls of California. It is grown-up – or almost grown-up television comedy, it is urban, and its roots are not the feel-good world of the Beach Boys, but the narcissistic conversational culture of Woody Allen.

The beginning – to the extent that one can talk about beginnings of genres that reach back into radio and beyond – was *Cheers*, the mother of recent sitcoms, which ruled the American networks between 1982 and -93, becoming the greatest success series in American television history. The cosy Boston bar was home away from home to a handful of employees and regulars, plus whoever walked through the door, presided over by the ever-present Sam (Ted Danson), ex-baseball player with an ever vigilant eye on the main chance. *Cheers* gave us fast-paced adult talk, breaking new ground in conversational permissiveness and precision. But even this loosely constructed sitcom machine gradually depleted its narrative repertoire, and the defunct concept was milked by a number of spin-offs, notably *Frazier*. The real inheritor, however, was Jerry Seinfeld, the stand-up comedian of *Saturday Night Live* fame, who, along with Larry David created *Seinfeld*

(NBC 1989-98) in 1989, a sitcom that was to rival *Cheers* both in terms of humorous acuity and cult status. The series is based on two extraordinary gimmicks: Seinfeld plays himself, and the series pretends to be about nothing. Each episode (except for the last two seasons) is framed by stand-up monologue by Jerry himself, but the major attraction is the ensemble situation comedy of the four single friends Jerry, George (Jason Alexander), Kramer (Michael Richards), and Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), either in their favourite coffe-shop booth, or in Jerry's small New York apartment, complete with the classic sitcom sofa facing the live audience, and a repertoire of running gags such as next-door neighbour Kramer's sliding sideways entrances.

Whereas *Seinfeld* is deliberately unglamorous, *Friends* (NBC 1994-) is far more yuppie-oriented – or perhaps post-yuppie-oriented. It is the story of six personable New York singles – three of each sex – neighbours in the same apartment building, and again the majority of the scenes are played out either in one of the apartments or on the sitcom sofa of the nearby coffee shop Central Perk. Metaphorically speaking, *Friends* can be seen as a sequel to *Family Ties*, the famous 1980's sitcom, in which the nuclear family still existed, albeit in slightly parodic post-1968-ish version.

Friends is where Alex (Michael J. Fox) – again metaphorically speaking – can be seen to have moved to, after he moved away from his hippie parents in disgust. He has subsequently recognised the limitations of the 80's Reaganite yuppie culture and has sought refuge in the quasi-commune of apartment-clustered single friends. In fact, Monica (Courtney Cox) of *Friends* is Alex's sometime girlfriend from *Family Ties*.

Whereas *Seinfeld* determinedly undermines any tendency towards the emotional, *Friends* is a story about friendship among singles as a haven in an adult, demanding world full of demands, sexual, careerwise and otherwise – a haven in which the six singles are encapsulated in a bubble of security, from which would-be boyfriends and girlfriends are constantly assessed by the collective and found wanting. This Peter Pan world of *Friends* is strong on understated dialogue and ironic repartee, but veers back and forth between ironic detachment and sentimentality – a reflection of the dilemma of the series as a whole which is: how seriously to take the lifestyle problems of these post-adolescent characters.

Ally (FOX 1997-) has taken this dilemma further. The makeshift sitcom format has been scrapped in favour of what is simply termed 'comedy', which is to say no live audience, more 'production value', i.e. a more expensive and more edited production. With Calista Flockhart as the near-anorexic protagonist Ally (her weight problems and her potentially negative influence as a role model is seriously debated in American media), David Kelley, with a track record of unorthodoxy from series such as *Picket Fences* and *Chicago Hope*, has produced a post-feminist psychodrama, which takes the neuroses of post-adolescent singlehood to new heights of intensity. Set in a male-owned, but female-dominated firm of lawyers in Boston with unisex toilets – at times there is more action in the toilets than in the offices – the courtroom drama, more often than not, is upstaged by the sexual and emotional conflicts among the employees. Whereas *Seinfeld* is predominantly, if low-key Jewish, and *Friends* generally white urban, *Ally* reverts to the standard American serial ethnic mix, including both a Chinese and a black lawyer – both women – but apart from that the series is resolutely politically incorrect. To give an example: Ling, the Chinese woman lawyer at one point snarls angrily at a man in a wheelchair who gets in her way, adding, as an aside, "...as if you are not already getting all the good parking spots..."

In *Ally*, the invasion of the workplace by the personal sphere has been taken to extremes, frequently drowning out any sense that any real work is going on at all. On top of that, the series has inaugurated a surrealist visual dimension, in which particularly Ally's fantasies of sex, inferiority and motherhood are literalised in the form of digitised visual manipulations – reducing Ally to half size, extending her a tongue by a foot, or introducing hallucinations of the babies she has never had. Courtroom drama, when it does occur, has moved a long way from the concerned realism of such series as *LA. LAW.* – at one point there is a case brought against God – veering between crazy screwball comedy and unbridled emotionality, often parodying the excesses of litigious American legal culture. One further entertaining dimension about *Ally* is its massive use of Oldies pop music, either performed by singer-pianist Vonda Shephard, or through cameo appearances of singers such as Barry White, whose performance of “My First, My Last, My Everything” on the show meant a relaunching of the career of the old crooner. Indeed, the use of Oldies pop music is consistently used to signify the nostalgic dimension of the emotional archive of the entire cast – nostalgia and neurosis being the overriding mindsets of the *Ally* environment. In this post-Freudian self-reflexive environment, the services of psychoanalysts are of little help. This post-yuppie generation knows only too well all the explanatory models of repression, early childhood trauma etc.

The characters of all three series are – with variations – caught in what Christopher Lasch as early as 1979, in the well-established vein of American cultural pessimism, identified as “The Culture of Narcissism”. They are beyond the civil rights movements, Vietnam, Watergate, and the yuppie optimism of the Reagan era, no longer with any confidence in the larger emancipatory creeds their parents and grandparents clung to. In their place there is a restless individualism, a post-ironic self-consciousness, and a peer group of post-adolescent friends. Larger concepts such as “society”, “politics”, or “justice” are not totally jettisoned, but are seen as problematic, compromised as they are by the rhetoric of the parent generation. Instead, there is a deliberate minimalism, where the emotional minutiae of the personal world are magnified into ironic proportions. All the characters are locked into what – since Gregory Bateson – has been referred to as a *double bind*: a powerful yearning towards and an equally strong fear against “commitment” – to permanent relationships, to parenthood, to a sense of purpose beyond themselves. And the biological clock – a recurrent fearful image in the series – keeps ticking away. As Jerry Seinfeld phrases it in one of the *Seinfeld* episodes: “What’s wrong with us? Why aren’t we married? Why don’t we have wives and children? Why are we not men like our fathers?”

Seinfeld: “No Hugging, No Learning”.

It is my contention in this essay that *Seinfeld* in particular has taken this minimalism to exceptionally interesting lengths. The following is an attempt to characterise this – now defunct – situation comedy as one of the defining televisual events of the 1990’s.

A Short History of *Seinfeld*

Seinfeld is a show which is firmly rooted in stand-up comedy. It is the exclusive creation of two people with extensive stand-up experience – Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, and their background in shows such as the illustrious *Saturday Night Live* is felt in all aspects of the show, from the unorthodoxy of ideas to the irreverence of treatment of themes.

The pilot – *The Seinfeld Chronicles* – aired in 1989 – already contains the major ingredients of the show as we know it: Jerry Seinfeld’s introductory and concluding stand-up routines, the two major locations: the coffee shop and Jerry’s apartment, and the absurd focus on conversational minutiae. Kramer (named Kessler in this first episode) is already in character, preoccupied with the contents of Jerry’s fridge, and the story with its main focus on the etiquette of dating is recognizably Seinfeldian.

The only element missing is the female character – Elaine – who is introduced in the next episode, (the show, according to Jerry Seinfeld, “lacked estrogen” (quoted in Gattuso, p.136)), making up the foursome that was to be the defining main cast for the next nine years.

The show was no immediate success – in fact the tribulations of the show can be paralleled to those of another quirky, groundbreaking show, of the early 1980’s, *Hill Street Blues*, as chronicled by Todd Gitlin in *Inside Prime Time* (1983).

It was not its overall ratings, but its segment appeal that saved it. As Seinfeld put it in an interview:

What made us develop was, despite being very low rated in the beginning, we had a very high demographic profile. Though we were technically bombing, the people watching were what they call advertiser desirable. (Quoted in Gattuso, p.27)

A change in scheduling, however, was to make the real difference to the fortunes of the show. In February 1993, *Seinfeld* was shifted from Wednesdays 9:00 PM into the attractive Thursdays 9.30 PM slot, immediately after *Cheers*. The *Cheers* lead-in made all the difference to the show, improving its audience share by over 50%. Since then, *Seinfeld* was consistently among the top five in the ratings. When *Cheers* went off the air that same year, *Seinfeld* became NBC’s Thursday night anchor, subsequently providing a powerful lead-in for another single-in-the-city sitcom, *Friends* in 1994-95. At the end of the 1995-96 season Larry David left the show. In the following season, the stand-up intro and exit routines were abandoned, making more time for increasingly intricate and wacky storylines. At the same time, the life of the show was threatened by a dispute between NBC and the three non-owning actors Alexander, Louis-Dreyfus and Richards who felt that they were not getting any benefits from the huge profits the show was raking in in syndication – in 1997, Jerry Seinfeld, as creator-producer and actor, was listed by *Forbes* magazine as having a gross income of \$94 million, making him the sixth wealthiest entertainer, whereas the other three of the foursome were making a ‘measly’ \$150,000 per episode. There was a settlement, quadrupling their pay, but they were only to enjoy the fruits of it for one more season. (Source: Gattuso, pp.41-43) At the end of 1997 Jerry Seinfeld decided that the 97-98 season would be the last one – he wanted to go out with a bang while the show was still at its peak, rather than keep on milking the success with a show creatively on the wane, as was perceived to have been the case with shows such as *Family Ties* (1982-89) and *Cheers* (1982-93). The final episode, massively publicized, was aired on May 14th 1998, to an audience of Super Bowl proportions, appropriately written by Larry David. The media frenzy went beyond anything hitherto associated with the ending of tv comedy series – including the much-hyped finales of *M.A.S.H.* and *Cheers*. The final show itself deserves a few comments.

In this episode the foursome are stranded in a small town and are passive witnesses to the mugging of a fat man. Instead of coming to his assistance, they crack jokes. George: “He’s actually doing him a favor. There’s less money for him to buy food”. They

are then arrested by a local police officer and charged with breaking the local “good Samaritan law” which makes it punishable to refuse to come to the aid of a person in danger. There is a long trial scene in which “the New York Four” are confronted with minor characters and guest stars from the previous nine years of the show, appearing as character witnesses against them, making for an ironic summary of the history of the show. Judge Art Vandelay (the name George has been using over the years in his various schemes of deception) sentences the four to a year in jail, which is the last the television audience sees of Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer. An appropriate ironic send-off to a show which resolutely refused any “learning” or moral preachifying, but which was always concerned, in its unheroic way, with the ethics of everyday existence. The final episode is given a lengthy ethical analysis in one of the numerous publications spawned by the success of the show, called *Seinfeld and Philosophy – A Book about Everything and Nothing* (2000).

***Seinfeld* as Situation Comedy**

Situation comedy as a genre is not a specifically televisual form – its roots are in the long history of stage entertainment. What gives it its special place in the history of dramatic genres is its deliberately perfunctory dramatic form, its sketchiness and its staginess. Played out before a ‘live studio audience’ (although this feature is sometimes dispensed with), camera movement is restricted by the missing fourth wall – the audience position – and any variation of location and post-production editing is heavily limited. There is very little in terms of significant camera or editing action, of slow-motion, of inserts, of significant camera angles, the whole signifying repertoire of cinematography. The camera action is unobtrusive, representing rather than constructing characters in action. Although the gestural dimension is in evidence (witness Kramer), it is essentially dialogue-driven. The fictionality of situation comedy, unlike the major dramatic genres of comedy and tragedy, is perfunctory. The diegesis or story-world of sitcom is not a self-contained cocoon. Rather, it insists on its potential openness to “the real world” – that is the audience world – it is interruptable by the audience, its delivery is paced by the audience response. Its interest is not in the far away or the long ago – it is overwhelmingly contemporary.

Seinfeld makes innovative use of these features of sitcom. The presence of Jerry Seinfeld as “Jerry Seinfeld” is a feature deliberately puncturing the fictionality of representation. As Larry David has put it: ““We try to keep Jerry and Jerry as close as we can. We don’t want him to do too much acting”. (Gattuso p.101). Indeed, in “The Pilot”, the outrageously metafictional episode in which Jerry and George try to sell the idea of the show “Jerry – A Show About Nothing” (which is, of course, *Seinfeld*) to NBC, Jerry objects to playing the lead: “I can’t act. I stink!” The frequent presence of ‘real people’ – Keith Hernandez, the baseball player, George Steinbrenner, manager of the New York Yankees, and for a while George’s boss (actually an actor, always shot from behind) and a host of celebrity cameo appearances – is known from other sitcoms, but adds a continuous sense of permeability with the real contemporary world. Add to this the many ways in which the show generates celebrity in anything it touches. The character on which “The Soup Nazi” is based, the proprietor of Soup Kitchen International at 259-A West 55th Street in New York, a chef known for his outstanding soups and strict queueing discipline is now appearing in a food show on a home-shopping cable channel. The character on which Kramer is loosely based – his name is Kenny Kramer – now makes a living organising Kramer’s Reality Tour – a guided bus tour around sites in New York related to the

Seinfeld show. And the man who insists on being the the real-life George (his name is Mike Costanza) – has tried to capitalize on the success of the show by publishing his autobiography.

The relatively short production time of *Seinfeld* – a week – affords an opportunity of topicality and reference to current events impossible with more cumbersome fictional forms. In the episode “The Non-Fat Yogurt”, hours after Rudolph Giuliani had won the mayoral election in New York in 1993, a cameo of Giuliani, campaigning against fake low-fat yoghurt, was edited into a show aired the following night.

The narrative of *Seinfeld* is deceptively simple. The half-hour two-act format – with Jerry’s intro and exit stand-up routines, the predominance of two locations – Jerry’s living-room with the couch facing the audience, and the booth at Monk’s Diner, make for a minimalist setting in which dialogue is foregrounded. There is usually a storyline attached to each of the four characters, sometimes two characters share a storyline. It is however, as pointed out by scriptwriter Peter Mehlman, the situations that generate the comedy rather than witty dialogue in itself. As he puts it, “...there are no jokes in the show”. And it is the weaving of storylines into an intricate pattern of often fateful convergence which is the hallmark of the narrative structure of *Seinfeld*. A supreme example is the episode “the Pez Dispenser” (January 1992), in which the minute container of candy is the motif and engine of plot convergence.

Intertextuality and metafictionality are frequent features of narrative constructedness in *Seinfeld*. In “The Boyfriend” (February 1992), the reconstruction of a spitting episode during a baseball game is reconstructed in infinitesimal detail, mimicking the investigation into the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas. In “The Betrayal” (November 1997), the backward temporal structure of Harold Pinter’s play *Betrayal* from 1978 is borrowed, including the title of Pinter’s play.

And, as referred to already, the self-reflexive/metafictional *jeux d’esprit* of selling the “reality-based” show “Jerry” to NBC is a thread through several episodes, concluding in an hour-long episode “The Pilot”, complete with casting interviews for look-alikes playing George, Elaine and Kramer – in fact, Kramer auditions for, and wins, the role as ‘himself’.

***Seinfeld* – “The Show about Nothing”**

The basic unit of television is not the show but the series, which gives television an advantage in building character over every other narrative medium except perhaps the novel saga. This is also why television is not so much a medium of stories as of moods and atmosphere. We tune in not to find out what is happening (for generally the same things are always happening) but to spend time with characters. In the 1990’s *Seinfeld* was promoted as a show “about nothing” – as if that were unique. All sitcoms are about “nothing” – nothing but character. (Monaco p.488)

The point made above by James Monaco is well taken. We do tune in to sitcoms to spend time in the company of increasingly familiar characters. But Monaco’s comment is also wide of the mark. Sitcoms – including *Seinfeld* – are not about character, hence about nothing. Sitcoms – like all drama – in Aristotelian phrase – are about character *in action*, and the impetus of action – like all drama – is provided by situations producing dilemmas or conflicts. What is special about *Seinfeld* is the way in which it deliberately foregrounds the quotidian nature of its dilemmas – its everydayness. The show’s casting

itself as “a show about nothing” is a promotional strategy for profiling difference in the marketplace of sitcoms, as a sitcom of resolute minimalism. It does not want to present itself as edifying, and it does not want to present itself as empathetic. As Larry David puts it: “No hugging, no learning”. Or, as formulated by Peter Mehlman: “99% of the world is on the verge of tears, what’s the big deal to push them over?” The show may be said to be post-Modernist, not only because of its preoccupation with metafictionality, intertextuality and self-reflexivity – buzzwords of the post-Modern – but equally, and perhaps more importantly, because there is no agenda, no implicit allegiance to the grand emancipatory narratives of Modernism. Of course, comedy was never a problem-solving genre. Its business was always to point to incongruities, between preaching and practice, between the size of problems and our attention to them, between the grotesque consequences of minute actions. Comedic resolutions, as Northrop Frye has taught us, were always imposed, magical, arbitrary, in Shakespeare and elsewhere. One of the most controversial episodes of *Seinfeld* – “The Invitations” – the last episode Larry David wrote before he left the show at the end of the 1995-96 season – makes that point eloquently. In the episode, George is desperate to free himself from the commitment to marry Susan. The *deus ex machina* is provided by the toxic glue on the cheap envelopes of the marriage invitations, the licking of which produces the death of Susan, to the poorly concealed relief of George, who is quick to follow up on his secret infatuation with Marisa Tomei. As Gattuso puts it,

The episode divided fans, who were either floored by the intensity of David’s black comedy or outraged that the series’ sole likable character – one whose flaw was her taste in men – was killed off so unceremoniously.[...] Despite the flood of angry phone calls fielded by NBC switchboards, the *Seinfeld* team got a good chuckle and one of its highest ratings ever. (Gattuso,p.33)

Judging by the audience response, this episode did ‘push the envelope’ (sorry) of the genre of the sitcom, even as determined by the expectations of the otherwise magnanimous *Seinfeld* audience. Yet, the ambition of *Seinfeld* and David was always to delve into areas beyond, or beneath, the attention of mainstream network sitcoms. The examples are legion. A much discussed episode was “The Contest” (November 1992), in which the four characters make a wager about who will abstain the longest from masturbation – (the word was never used during the episode), implicitly establishing masturbation as a natural phenomenon among singles. Another episode is “The Outing” (February 1993), in which a newspaper publishes rumours about Jerry and George being lovers. The ambiguity of their scandalised reaction combined with their liberal lipservice to the acceptability of homosexuality produced one of the catchphrases of the 90’s: “Not that there is anything wrong with that”. The episode won the show a media award from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

What is the special appeal of a show such as *Seinfeld*? Audience figures and recurrent media debates are quantifiable ways of documenting the purchase it has had on public opinion. Its afterlife in syndication worldwide ensures its position as a popular cultural icon of the 1990’s. However, if one looks more closely at the specific ways it has impacted with its audience, it is without doubt the particular conversational idiom of the show which accounts for the major appeal of the show. Hundreds of personal websites testify to this. Its roots in stand-up comedy, with its knack of turning the minutiae of everyday life dilemmas into philosophical conundrums, gave the show an immediacy of appeal which went far beyond the set-up-pay-off-dominated structure of previous sitcoms. It is a paradox of the appeal of the show that however much it refused to cater to

identification and character empathy, the show was overwhelmingly perceived to reflect its audience's idiom and concerns. The way in which a whole range of expressions and catchphrases have entered contemporary American testifies to this: "Yada", "Not that there is anything wrong with it", "get out", "shrinkage" – the list goes on and on. This is not simply a testimony to the extraordinary economical skills of the scriptwriters associated with the show, but just as much an effect of the exceptional authorial control Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld wielded on the show. *Seinfeld*, for all its laid-back conversational casualness, is – paradoxically – an unusually *auteured* sitcom. Over its nine years of production, for all its variety of themes and narrative structures, it has maintained a consistency of approach to the basic ingredients of its own project – a philosophical minimalist conversationalism, an acute sense of the dynamics of ordinary contemporary idiom, and a ruthless honesty in the exploration of the everyday anxieties of post-adolescent urban singledom.

***Seinfeld, Friends, Ally, etc* – Looking for a Paradigm**

It is obvious that shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Ally* are riding the same wave of network orientation towards a particular audience segment: 18-49's in general, more specifically urban singles. As Gattuso has it:

The success of *Seinfeld* has made a cottage industry out of the adult-oriented, single-in-the-city sitcoms. The exception to the "singles" rule was NBC's *Mad about You*, with Paul Reiser as essentially a married Jerry Seinfeld. NBC created *Friends*, which got a "Seinfeldian" billing by the network as "A new comedy about...whatever". Most recently, NBC launched *Caroline in the City* and *The Single Guy* on Thursday night to attract the *Seinfeld/Friends* crowd. ABC's *Ellen* and Fox's *Living Single* are spun from similar threads. (Gattuso, p.29)

There are solid demographic as well as narrative reasons for this. More than half of all adult Americans now live in 'single households'. The purchasing power of this audience segment makes shows appealing to this group interesting vehicles for advertisers. Narratively speaking, young adult singles are the very stuff of which fiction is made. The history of the novel, from Jane Austen onwards, is testimony to the narrative dynamics of the 'not yet married'. They are, as it were, a romance waiting to happen. Their transitional position between adolescence and their social ensconcement within the societal bastions of career, procreation and marriage is guaranteed to invoke themes of existential anxiety with a wide identificatory appeal. Furthermore, within the paradigm there is plenty of scope for variation. Along gender lines, *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Ally* provide a neat distribution of focus. *Seinfeld* is primarily male-oriented, with Elaine as 'one of the boys'. As Kramer tells her in "The Pool Guy": "You're a man's woman – you hate other women and they hate you". *Friends* is precisely balanced in terms of male/female interest. *Ally* has an overwhelmingly female focus. This mirrors a parallel distribution along an axis of, at one end, ironic detachment and at the other end empathetic sentiment, with *Seinfeld* at the ironic end, with *Ally* at the other end, tending towards melodrama, and with *Friends* somewhere in the middle (given to unevenness of scriptwriting), toying with the ambiguities of the ironic and the empathetic.

Are these shows postmodern? The question raises a host of issues which reach far beyond the scope of this paper. From an aesthetic point of view, the application of the usual buzzwords 'intertextuality', 'self-reflexivity', 'metafictionality' will distribute the

three shows along an axis placing *Ally* as very PM, *Seinfeld* as fairly PM, and *Friends* as not very PM. If however, one opts for a broader socio-psychological approach to the shows, which situates the “world picture” of the shows within the vocabulary of sociological criticism from Lasch to Giddens, applying such terms as “narcissism”, “individualisation”, “decline of metanarratives”, “unhookedness”, “risk society” etc., there seems to be a broader sense of uniformity across the range of the chosen television ‘texts’. It is, however, a sense of shared concerns which is deceptive, in the sense that an analysis should not lose sight of the extraordinary variety of textual strategies in the face of those shared concerns. Nor should any analysis of television content lose sight of the specificities and constraints of cultural production which obtain in each individual case. As Jim Collins puts it in his essay “Television and Postmodernism, in an argument with Fredric Jameson’s position of the postmodern as the superstructure of late capitalism:

The problem for television studies, as it tries to come to terms with postmodernism, is how to reconcile the semiotic and economic dimensions of television. Stressing the semiotic to the exclusion of the economic produces only a formalist game of ‘let’s count the intertexts’, but privileging the economic to the point that semiotic complexity is reduced to a limited set of moves allowed by a master system is just as simplistic. The attempt to turn television into a master system operating according to a single logic is a fundamentally nostalgic perspective; the culture of the 1990’s, though judged to be the sheer noise of late capitalism, is nevertheless expected to operate according to nineteenth-century models of culture as homogeneous totality. (p.766)

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