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Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously: Modernism in Popular Culture

Robert Hurd

IN THE WAKE OF AN INCREASING INTEREST in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, much recent scholarship in both literary and cultural studies has addressed the issue of the relationship between aesthetic value and economic conditions. While literary and cultural critics have fruitfully applied and adapted Bourdieu's theories in their respective fields, I would like to bring these fields closer together by drawing here a detailed comparison between the central importance of Gustave Flaubert for the history of the French novel as Bourdieu theorized it and the similarly pivotal emergence of the television series *Seinfeld* as a phenomenon within the history of the American television sitcom.¹ Such a comparison not only shows how finding similarities between seemingly disparate cultural practices can perhaps illuminate some universal features of how such practices develop in "the advanced capitalist world,"² but also points out the limits of such comparisons and the specificity necessary to examine any particular cultural emanation in detail.

First of all, we must dismiss the notion that a comparison between the history of the novel and the history of the sitcom contrasts a high and low genre respectively. On the contrary, *both* the novel and sitcom have been considered *merely* popular forms. While many significant differences exist between their histories, development, media, and audiences, they differ most starkly in their current cultural status. When the novel emerged in the eighteenth century in its modern form and was recognized as a discrete literary genre, critics censured it as a "low" form.³ As Victor Brombert describes the status of the novel in France when Flaubert was writing: "Although the French novel was to assume in the nineteenth century an unprecedented prestige, usurping as it were the traditional preeminence of dramatic and epic poetry, . . . fictional literature was on the whole not taken seriously."⁴ Since this time, the novel has—through the very efforts of writers like Flaubert and Henry James—gradually attained respectability as a genre of "Literature."⁵ While the process of legitimation began in the mid-nineteenth century, the hesitancy to recognize the novel as literature lasted well into the twentieth. But by the

1970s, the novel had become firmly established in American universities: Dickens and Austen were read alongside (and later preferred to) Shakespeare and Wordsworth.⁶

The sitcom, on the other hand, still maintains a relatively low cultural status in contemporary society. In fact, the sitcom is dismissed as a popular genre not only because of its development on the least prestigious popular medium—television—but also because even within the hierarchy of television programs it occupies the most subordinate position. Television critics and viewers have often viewed the sitcom as the most formulaic, repetitive, or mindless entertainment available. Sitcom writers themselves recognize that the sitcom has never had cultural prestige. In an episode of *Seinfeld*, the neurotic character George attempts to impress a woman in a bar by claiming to be a writer. He swaggers, “What do I do? Well actually, I’m a writer. In fact, I’m writing a comedy pilot for NBC right now.” Her response is half-astonishment, half-laughter: “A sitcom? How can you write that crap?”⁷

The lowbrow ethos that *Seinfeld* evokes by disparaging the sitcom in particular is reinforced by the show’s main characters’ attempts to distance themselves actively from high culture in general. In an episode titled “The Opera,” for example, Jerry reluctantly agrees to accompany the other main characters to see Ruggero Leoncavallo’s tragic opera *I Pagliacci* (The Clowns). At the mention of the word “overture,” he gives an impromptu performance of the familiar opening of the Warner Brothers “Looney Toons” cartoons (“Overture, curtain, lights!”).⁸ Any reference to high culture comes either in the form of parody or sheer rejection. Elaine responds to Jerry’s gag by remarking that “it’s sad” that his only “knowledge of high culture comes from Bugs Bunny cartoons.”⁹ Thus there has never been any pretense on the part of *Seinfeld* to take itself seriously as “high culture.” As we will see, this distancing from high culture makes it all the more difficult to detect the processes of modernist aesthetics at work to legitimate the sitcom as a cultural form.

Given how *Seinfeld* pointedly sets its unabashed silliness in opposition to high cultural seriousness, it may at first seem odd to compare *Seinfeld* to the writings of Flaubert. Flaubert wanted his work to be taken seriously and toiled vigorously for perfection, conducting laborious and tedious research—carried out to often absurd extremes—to ensure the historical and scientific accuracy of his fiction and agonizing over *le mot juste*. Superficially, perhaps, nothing could be further from *Seinfeld*’s ethos than Flaubert’s. But if we set aside this only apparent dispositional incongruity, some striking structural similarities emerge between the upheaval that Flaubert inaugurated in the history of the French novel and the one *Seinfeld* effected in the history of the American television sitcom.

The contradiction of *Seinfeld* is that underlying its openly “popular,” antielitist ethos, the same exclusionary mechanisms usually associated

with modernist aesthetics drive its dominance of the generic field of the "sitcom." Columnist Caryn James summarizes this paradoxical formulation: "Knowing a 'Seinfeld' catch phrase like 'master of your domain' makes you an insider, even if you're one of millions."¹⁰ Sociologist of popular music Simon Frith, in his *Performing Rites*, has attempted to explain a similarly contradictory tension between popularity and exclusivity in the field of popular music. Frith notes that producers and consumers of popular culture, of ostensibly nonelitist cultural products, make distinctions between high and low just as their high cultural counterparts can only legitimate their own standards through some reference to the merely popular. For Frith, "there is no reason to believe a priori that such judgments [about aesthetic value] work differently in different cultural spheres." Thus, "a similar use of accumulated knowledge and discriminatory skill is apparent in low cultural forms, and has the same hierarchal effect."¹¹ But Frith departs from Bourdieu when he asserts that it is impossible to "map these discourses onto social class, or trace 'homologies' between aesthetic values and social situations."¹² He suggests that discrimination occurs not, as Bourdieu maintains, as a process by which privileged classes accrue cultural capital, but rather as one that shapes social identity and foments identification with social groups, fan cultures, or subcultures. That *Seinfeld's* audience to some degree exemplifies Frith's notion of discrimination as subcultural identity can be evidenced by the many books, articles, and websites that ask fans to test their knowledge of the show.¹³

Furthermore, *Seinfeld* was able to offer a sense of distinction to "millions" because television, perhaps more than other forms of American pop culture—even film—most deserves the label "cultural industry," in that so many people view its so commonly conventional and commercial productions. But how, then, can we account for such a simultaneously unconventional and popular program as *Seinfeld*? A look back at *Seinfeld's* emergence before it became immensely popular will suggest some answers. Bourdieu can help us here by providing a good explanatory model for the distinction between the "short production cycle" of popular "low-brow" culture and the "long production cycle" of modernist art works—Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, for instance—that report losses in the first few years of their publication, but occasionally become in the long run "modern classics" (usually along with all previous productions by that author) selling moderately but steadily into the future. Likewise, only when viewed superficially and retrospectively can *Seinfeld* be considered a commercial success. The show actively resisted popularity: it even openly invited network disapprobation in its flagrant contempt for the firmly entrenched sitcom conventions so revered by network executives as indicators of commercial success. Creator Larry David, for example, flouted one such convention by adamantly rejecting the expected roman-

tic relationship between Jerry and Elaine. Likewise, his attitude toward the attempt to increase the popularity of the show by improving its time slot (a vital element for success in television) exemplifies the characteristically modernist anxiety towards popularity. When told by executives that the show was moving from a rather inconspicuous spot on Wednesday to a much-sought Thursday night spot following *Cheers*, he responded, "If they weren't watching on Wednesday night, I don't want them watching on Thursday!" *Seinfeld*, then, follows the pattern of initial failure and ultimate success characteristic of the economic narrative of the "modern classic," even as the episodes themselves echo masterworks of modern drama: Luigi Pirandello in the metadrama of "The Pitch," the futility of Beckett in "The Chinese Restaurant" and "The Parking Space," and Harold Pinter's reverse chronology narrative in "The Betrayal."¹⁴

In addition to, and perhaps more significantly than, sharing the "long production cycle" with modernists such as Flaubert, *Seinfeld* has in common with them historical processes and specific mechanisms of taste formation that create hierarchies within specific genres that derive their existence from "industrial" attempts to stabilize generic attributes for marketing purposes. According to Bourdieu, certain producers can permanently transform a discrete generic field by taking advantage of opportunities available to them at specific historical junctures. And this is precisely where Bourdieu's theories of generic and cultural change will prove most effective and where a comparison of a commercially successful TV series like *Seinfeld* and the commercial failure, but eventual artistic success, of Flaubert's project might shed light on the internal dynamics of cultural production in advanced capitalist societies.

But to find universal characteristics of generic change, each genre needs to be rigorously historicized. As Jason Mittel has pointed out, cultural studies scholars "cannot simply superimpose genre definitions from film or literature onto television," but should instead take into account the "particular attributes of the medium."¹⁵ Flaubert was writing when the novel itself was as much a commercial genre as the sitcom is today, arising from a heterogeneous mix of existing popular and traditional forms and genres.¹⁶ By the time Flaubert was writing, different strands and subgenres developed, varying widely within national contexts, but even more so across national traditions. Bourdieu explains that as "Flaubert undertook to write *Madame Bovary* or *Sentimental Education*, he situated himself actively within the space of possibilities offered by the field. . . . In choosing to write these novels, Flaubert risked the inferior status associated with a minor genre. Above all, he condemned himself to take a place within a space that was already staked out with the names of authors, names of sub-genres (the historical novel, the serial, and so on) and names of movements or schools (realism)."¹⁷ Flaubert's ability

to transform the French novel was then partially determined by the received forms and genres against which he situated himself. Bourdieu, in outlining the “relational” nature of the literary field, writes that “every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field.” Furthermore, each position in the field “receives its distinctive *value* from its negative relationship with the co-existent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it.”¹⁸ In any medium, this relational model of aesthetic value reveals the mechanism of negation that creates the distinction between high and low in media-bound genres.

Seinfeld's rejection of existing models of the sitcom resembles Flaubert's disavowals of competing novelistic forms, especially those tied to the morals of the bourgeoisie. The sitcom, as a new cultural form and genre made possible only by the invention of the television, arose from diverse sources as well.¹⁹ By the 1950s, some dominant conventions began to be established; most prominently, the main characters were based on the ideal of the American middle-class family, and the dramatic and social unity characteristic of classical comedy typically marked the end of the episode. Jane Feuer defines the “salient features” of the sitcom: “the half hour format, the basis in humor, the ‘problem of the week’ that causes the hilarious situation that will be resolved so that a new episode may take place in the next week.”²⁰ But despite these unifying elements, different subgenres began to develop as well. “The Norman Lear sitcoms (*All in the Family*, *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*) dealt with nuclear families beset from the outside by a variety of socially-derived problems.”²¹ Later, the sitcom developed increasingly around surrogate families, such as a group of coworkers, or, in the case of *Cheers*, in a social meeting place. Thus as Feuer writes, “The TV sitcom in the 1970s and after also moved away from the nuclear family . . . toward ‘families’ of unrelated adults that formed in the workplace.”²² But unlike the Lear shows, which “implied that solutions within the family were but a means of temporary weekly closure, the MTM sitcom stressed the unity of the family above all other values.”²³ Two qualities, sentimentality and didacticism, that David refers to negatively in his maxim “no hugs, no learning” undergird this comedic (in the generic sense) unity that allows the characters to overcome their problems by the show's ending.²⁴ David's comment reveals a convention often apprehended only intuitively by the sitcom viewer: an assumed set of moral standards that silently directs the show's resolution, often resulting in bathetic moments and didactic conclusions. Thus, the development of an underlying set of common values, which competing models of the sitcom shared, set the stage for the arrival of *Seinfeld*. In accordance with Bourdieu's theory, this peculiarly modernist articulation of aesthetic value

results from a negative relation to the received conventions present in current and historic productions.

Relational value thus constitutes one of the mechanisms of modernist taste formation and manifests itself most clearly in reflexivity, which Bourdieu considers to be “one of the foremost manifestations of the autonomy of the [literary] field.”²⁵ *Seinfeld*'s definition of itself in relation to the existing models can best be seen in the self-referential episode “The Pitch.” The reflexivity apparent in this episode demonstrates a thorough knowledge of previous and current sitcoms. The episode furthermore enunciates what many assume to be the self-proclaimed theory of *Seinfeld* itself—the concept of a “show about nothing.” The most common interpretation is that “nothing” refers to an absence of the preposterous premises found in typical sitcoms and a microscopic inspection of the minutiae of everyday life.²⁶ To George “nothing” denotes a reference to our commonsense idea of what life is really like and how it differs from what we typically view on sitcoms, that is, to the common viewer response, “that would never happen in ‘real life.’” In other words, “nothing,” on the surface, seems to be an appeal to vulgar realism. Reflexivity, then, is neither inherently subversive (as some film theorists have suggested) nor just a modernist mental puzzle (for example, André Gide, Pirandello, Vladimir Nabokov, and so forth); rather, it provides modernist creators a means of forging a distinction through the negation of known conventions and values by raising them to the level of overt subject matter in the production itself and of distancing oneself from rival producers in any given field.

In “The Pitch,” we can see such a distinction when George, the NBC executives having questioned his staunch insistence that the show will only be about uninteresting everyday events, embarks on one of his characteristic tirades: “Okay, uh, look, if you want to just keep on doing the same old thing, then maybe this idea is not for you. I for one am not going to compromise my artistic integrity.”²⁷ Aside from its humor, this scene reveals the deeper connection between the concept of “nothing” and the idea of artistic “integrity.” “Nothing” correlates to Bourdieu’s “negative value”—the rejection of previous and concurrent models of the sitcom. For both *Seinfeld* and Flaubert, the concept of “nothing” means that the predominant emphasis on plot (or perhaps as Flaubert puts it, “subject matter”) will be minimized. In the case of Flaubert, the style itself takes the place of the subject matter. Flaubert imagined that his “novel about nothing” would “be held up by the internal force of its style . . . a book that would have hardly any subject or at least where the subject would be nearly invisible.”²⁸ With the plot or subject matter diminished, *Seinfeld* supports itself by the internal force of its humor. Humor fills the void left empty by elaborate premises—premises hinted

at in some of the other possible ideas of a sitcom that surface in “The Pitch” episode, such as George’s idea about an antique dealer who “gets involved in people’s lives.”²⁹ In this way, *Seinfeld* at once distances itself from the unrealistic situations that it perceives in other sitcoms and evades the alternative possibility of the boredom that would exist in a show truly about “nothing” (for example, going to work, reading, eating lunch, and so forth). In a genre that is defined by silliness, *Seinfeld* finds itself in the paradoxical situation of taking silliness seriously, not by becoming serious, but by jettisoning every noncomedic element—of becoming “pure” comedy, a “sitcom stripped to its essentials,” as TV critic Bill Carter called it. In such a pared-down show, “any and all situations” are “tangential to character quirks—the ultimate source of comedy in most shows anyway.” “‘*Seinfeld*,’” Carter continues, “aimed to be a show that was only about comedy, unleavened by sweetness, sentiment or character development. No one watched the show to see favorite characters face challenges, overcome diseases or feel heartache. The goal was only laughter.”³⁰

Earlier sitcoms, most importantly *Cheers*, may have anticipated *Seinfeld*’s stance towards the sitcom’s traditional didactic and pathetic conventions. Thus, critics also interpreted *Cheers* as a new development toward “pure” comedy, that is comedy less adulterated with other emotions such as sympathy, outrage at social injustice, or the generic comedic satisfaction of order restored: “On ‘*Cheers*,’ the lessons are incidental . . . what the show’s creators aimed to do was deliver pure comedy that was sophisticated but not pretentious.”³¹ But if *Cheers* began a move in this direction, *Seinfeld* followed it to its logical conclusion. By emphasizing certain generic elements, *Seinfeld* was the first show to completely reject traditional sitcom morality (without parodying the genre as did *Married with Children* and *The Simpsons*), while remaining firmly a sitcom. The most fundamental sitcom theme is union, most commonly represented either romantically or in the larger union represented by a family. In both cases, the obstacles barring such a union, and their removal, provide much of the humor. Conservative critic Thomas S. Hibbs astutely senses *Seinfeld*’s almost imperceptible shift into an altogether different realm of comedic “purity”:

Seinfeld marks a decisive break from nearly all the conventions of the classic American comedy. Perhaps the easiest way to bring out the differences is to focus on *Seinfeld*’s dethroning of the family. *Cheers* certainly anticipates *Seinfeld* in this. . . . Yet an important theme in *Cheers* was the relationship between Sam and Diane, and at some level the issue was always whether they would get married. Although there was much fodder for comedy in their relationship, the tone was not finally comic, but that of the sorrowful sense of a possibility lost. Who can forget the maudlin final parting between Sam and Diane, with Sam alone

in the bar whispering, "Have a good life"? . . . *Cheers* is much too sentimental a comedy to fully dethrone the family.³²

An avoidance of a romantic union between Jerry and Elaine has always been one of the central features distinguishing the show from *Cheers*. As Geoffrey O'Brian puts it, "*Seinfeld* is defined by a series of refusals. Romantic love is not even a possibility."³³

Seinfeld's rejection of romantic love uncannily parallels Flaubert's disdain for the sentimentality and idealized notion of love found in many of his contemporaries' works, most significantly perhaps in those of his predecessor, lifelong correspondent, and rival *romancier* George Sand. Despite their forays into the fantastic, critics and audiences of their day have construed both Flaubert and *Seinfeld* as eminently realistic. Such construals, in the novel and the sitcom, have little to do with verisimilitude. What determines such a reception is not so much their straightforward reporting of social facts as their refusal of "happy endings," sentimentality, and endorsement of love. In comparing the idealism of Sand to the realism of Flaubert, Naomi Schor finds that the "opposition between the idealistic and idealizing woman writer and the hard-nosed, earthbound virile writer who bravely confronts reality head-on is a perennial cliché of (male-authored) literary history and criticism."³⁴

But unlike Flaubert's refusals of sentimental conventions, which resulted in novels now internationally recognized as important modern classics, those of *Seinfeld* have gone unnoticed, carried out as they were, covertly, under the guise of "low art": modernism in "popular culture" is thus characterized by an "invisible aesthetic." Far from being some transnational, transmedial, and transepochal coincidence, the similarity of Flaubert's and *Seinfeld's* "refusals" points to a universality of the mechanisms by which special producers effect a "modernist" revolution in disparate popular cultural "fields," simultaneously legitimating a disparaged yet beloved genre and negating certain "contaminating" conventions of the genre, while bolstering "pure" ones. Modernist aesthetics, when viewed from a broader perspective than the Western literary and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with which it is usually associated, is then characterized by the need to differentiate oneself from existing attempts (both prior and contemporary) to offer productions and take up positions in any given (medium-bound) generic field. Flaubert put himself in an "impossible situation" by "trying to reconcile opposites, that is, exigencies and experiences that were ordinarily associated with opposite areas of social space and of the literary field."³⁵ If we view the definition of modernist aesthetics as "detachable"—manifesting itself in diverse epochs, locations, and media—rather than as historically fixed, we can see that it thrives—though often undetected—in the postmodern era.

This negational mechanism is not limited to implicit common values such as didacticism and sentimentality: it singles out specific competitors against which a producer can distance himself and is not above naming names. In doing so, Bourdieu makes this point about Flaubert's oblique reference to Balzac in *Sentimental Education*: "the allusion to the internal history of the genre, a sort of wink at the reader able to appropriate this history of works (and not only the story/history recounted in this work), is even more significant in that it is inscribed in a novel that encloses within itself a reference—a negative one—to Balzac."³⁶ *Seinfeld*, as well, distanced itself not only from its most threatening predecessor, *Cheers*, but also from other contemporary shows. George, for example, having already committed himself to an engagement, feels the loss of his previous single existence most intensely when his fiancée makes him stay home and watch another NBC sitcom—*Mad About You*—a show similar to *Seinfeld* in all respects but one: it is about married life, and thus within it the value of love and its concomitant sentiment must be ultimately affirmed.³⁷

So if *Seinfeld*, like Flaubert, defines itself by "a series of refusals," how can we then account for these similarities occurring in different media across such an expanse of time? Scholars generally recognize Flaubert as an inaugurator of the modernist novel, but he wrote *Madame Bovary* at a time when realism was still the subject of a hotly contested debate in art and literature and naturalism had not yet been formulated. If we think in terms of cultural epochs, *Seinfeld* appears in a postmodern milieu that would be inconceivable to such a romantic sensibility as Flaubert's. A general answer is that Bourdieu struck on an effective description that accounts for the prevalence of certain cultural productions (in distinction to others) that are conceived of as both "good" and "popular," thus "modern classics." Bourdieu's aesthetics run counter to those wishing to draw distinctions between modernism and postmodernism. His account of the autonomy of the aesthetic field begins with Flaubert for the novel, Charles Baudelaire for poetry, and Edouard Manet for painting, and remains consistent with later, more formally and politically disruptive modernist, avant-garde, and postmodernist artists. While literary critics and philosophers often characterize postmodernism as an erasure of distinctions between high and low culture, Bourdieu maintained that the institutional reproduction of distinction holds true as much for Alain Robbe-Grillet as for Marcel Proust. Bourdieu focused on the persistence of the "reversed economy" of the world of art from the nineteenth century until today, rather than on any fundamental economic, social, or aesthetic shift dividing the modern from the postmodern.

One such undeniable shift, however, is the expansion of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer named the "culture industry" fifty years ago into an increasingly omnivorous and ubiquitous social presence.

The proliferation of the “culture industry”—television in particular—is an oft-cited factor distinguishing modernity from postmodernity. But postmodernism does not imply the obsolescence of modernism, but modernism’s absolute absorption and normalization. In the world of high culture, modernism is indeed no longer new. And according to Bourdieu, newer forms such as the *nouveau roman* must by necessity, by the very logic of the artistic field that Flaubert inaugurated, reject earlier conceptualizations of productions in their field. The appearance of similarly modernist patterns of staking a position in a field in popular, or not yet “legitimate,” culture (specifically in new media-based genres such as TV sitcoms) to some degree legitimates that field, in the same way that the efforts of writers like Flaubert helped legitimate the novel as “high” culture. More importantly, homologous systems of discrimination demonstrate the universality of the patterns by which special producers reinvent media-bound genres after a certain lapse of generic time by differentiating themselves from earlier and contemporary generic productions. And though Bourdieu mainly concentrated on high-cultural institutions such as museums and universities, he did acknowledge that forms originally designated as “low”—such as jazz—can undergo a transformation from illegitimate to legitimate status.³⁸

This returns us again to our discussion of Frith’s notion of “discriminatory skill” apparent “in low cultural forms,” of what John Fiske similarly refers to as “popular” or “fan cultural capital,” which “brings with it similar social benefits—prestige, the sense of belonging to an elite minority that is sharply distinguished from those who lack it, and a feeling of self-worth.” Admittedly, popular cultural capital, unlike Bourdieu’s high-cultural kind, “cannot be so readily converted into economic capital,” as it is “excluded from the social (and therefore economic) rewards of critical or aesthetic discrimination.”³⁹ Can we then conclude from this that there is no correlation between socioeconomic class and popular discrimination? Certainly Frith and Fiske are right in claiming that knowing a lot about *Seinfeld* (or Flaubert for that matter) will probably not help anyone get a more remunerative or prestigious job. But “discriminatory skills,” when correlated to certain field-transforming productions in historically developed popular genres, can be linked with very specific audiences in very concrete ways. *Seinfeld* owed its initial success not to sheer popularity, but rather to capturing a demographic group that wielded economic clout.⁴⁰ Although television is something owned and viewed by almost all classes (and identity groups) in America, viewing habits vary greatly according to differing demographic groups. The audience of a program is not only *quantitatively* analyzed by networks, but *qualitatively* analyzed according to income and cultural characteristics that forecast, more or less accurately, consumer habits. Before *Seinfeld* achieved its greatest popularity, it ranked

high among middle-class white men—the most desirable audience for advertisers. As early as 1992, one critic wrote, “Despite ranking only thirty-eighth among last season’s regularly scheduled prime-time shows . . . , it finished at number eleven for male viewers between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four—the audience most desired by advertisers.”⁴¹ *Seinfeld*’s lack of popularity with demographic groups such as married couples with children and African-American audiences seemed not to affect the confidence that advertisers had in it.⁴² By the time the final episode aired, its audience of “yuppies with disposable incomes” enabled NBC to charge \$1.7 million for a thirty-second spot.⁴³

Seinfeld succeeded through the support of a largely college-educated audience acquainted, perhaps, with high-cultural reflexivity and the history of the sitcom genre. The sporadic dissemination of modernism that constitutes postmodernity does not at all contradict the needs of its cultural institutions. Postmodern audiences, as has been repeatedly shown, consist of overlapping and non-mutually exclusive enclaves. But audiences gain familiarity with genres and their conventions through institutions not actively in competition with one another. While *Seinfeld* audiences are familiar with sitcom conventions from the unproductive and “time-wasting” activity of television watching, they are also likely to be college educated, products of a “serious” institution necessary not only for “education” but also for more lucrative employment opportunities. The educated class, which occupies the most privileged positions in postindustrial America, wields relatively large stores of disposable time and income. While television is often considered a “leisure” activity, literature—even novel reading—is still viewed as an intellectually and temporally demanding one. And whereas yuppies are often expected to find meaning in their careers, the world of *Seinfeld* is an aesthetic one, in which the meaning lies in each well-made episode and the show’s thematic negation of the world of work its viewers are bound to. Rather than minutely dissecting “the real world,” as is often supposed in discussions of the meaning of “nothing,” *Seinfeld* transforms it into humor.

Not coincidentally, the show’s producers come from the same demographic as the audience. The allusions made in the show run the gamut from the popular to the middlebrow to the prestigious: Henry Miller’s *Tropic* novels (only checked out for the dirty parts, but never read, of course); *Les Misérables* (the musical, not Victor Hugo’s novel, of course); Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* coupled with Edwin Starr’s “War”; *I Pagliacci*; Svengali from George du Maurier’s *Trilby* becomes “Sven-jolly,” and so forth. But just as Flaubert’s rejection of the novel’s past and present opened up new avenues of creative possibilities, which pushed his works beyond an empty rhetoric of denial, the creators of *Seinfeld* could not have accomplished such a success on mere theory. Flaubert and *Seinfeld* did

not just theoretically envision new possibilities for their respective genres, but capitalized, through their practical realizations, on the openings they perceived. Their generic purifications were not wholesale rejections of the genre, vis-à-vis avant-garde works, but rather redirections and concentrations of certain generic energies to the exclusion of others. And here perhaps we can begin to sketch a rough aesthetic map of postindustrial society: just when genres in older media (for example, literature in print) have been “condescending” to embrace the popular (high culture “slumming” with low), newer genres made possible by new media (television, film, recorded sound)—not only sitcoms, but also rock music and new film genres—will purify themselves in a struggle to legitimate themselves over their competitors within their field and, in so doing, elevate the status of their genre within the cultural field at large.

The postmodern era then sees the diffusion of modernism in a heterogeneous series of nonsynchronous eruptions across multiple discontinuous temporal and spatial sites. Modernism is no *zeitgeist* confined to a specific historical period (for example, 1890–1930), but rather a reaction within a national media-bound genre, not to the commodification of the widely disseminated form per se (in fact, as is seen here) but rather to the popularity of the form based on a set of conventions, at once ethical and aesthetic, that have been firmly lodged within institutions of dissemination (book publishers, libraries, television production companies, and so forth). Such a change requires not only a struggle to find an audience (which more often than not fails), but an institutional struggle. A successful outcome of the struggle can transform the institution-bound genre, as seen in the various failed attempts by the networks to recreate *Seinfeld* after its farewell.⁴⁴ It can also reorganize a hierarchy within a range of a media-bound set of genres (for example, all TV shows: dramas, mysteries, game shows, talk shows, and so forth) and legitimate this set as a whole. Bill Wyman, writing in his “Masterpieces” column for *Salon.com*, likens *Seinfeld* to “Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel,” and considers its final episode “one of the most widely misunderstood works of art of our time.”⁴⁵

While cultural studies has often tried to make claims for popular culture’s legitimacy, it has often done so with a blindness to its own assumptions about how high and low works should be treated, especially given its sensitivity to the dispositions of critics in neighboring disciplines who have typically dealt only with “high” culture—such as literary studies. Literary studies has only within the past thirty years (and often still reluctantly) turned its attention to the importance of audiences and readers in creating “high” literary culture. While reception studies and sociological approaches have significantly contributed to reforming literary studies from its traditional “productionist” leanings, cultural studies

has until recently neglected the sociology of how “creativity” is a function of the interaction between creator and the available options in the existing field—Bourdieu’s “space of possibles.” The few existing studies on the production side of popular culture have tended to focus on the culture industry’s commercially driven (and thus ideologically suspect) imperatives to create formulaic productions. As Frith puts it, cultural studies scholars have been prone to “accept the Frankfurt reading of cultural production” and seek “the redeeming features of commodity culture in the act of consumption.”⁴⁶

But if we are truly going to consider popular culture to be on par with “high” culture, we should take more care to study: how and why only *some* popular culture producers, just as only *some* “high” culture counterparts, possess and can capitalize on an intimate knowledge of the history of forms within their fields; the emergence of an audience that would have a similar mastery of the genre’s history; the relation of popular fields to more “legitimate” ones (for example, Flaubert’s admiration of poetry or *Seinfeld*’s appropriation of modernist drama); and, the acquisition of the practical acumen required to alter these relations in a manner propitious to a transformative “modernist” project. Both literary and cultural studies should attend to the whole circuit of exchange of economic and cultural value—both production and reception—if they are to reveal the true similarities and differences between “high” and “low” culture. Furthermore, only when we afford the objects of popular culture the same critical and historical methodology and attention as we do those of literature, can we in good conscience think them as equal.

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NOTES

1 While Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively on art and literature, the following are the most important and influential accounts of the French literary field and the impact of Flaubert: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Bourdieu, “Champ Intellectuel et Projet Createur,” *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 246 (1966): 865–906; and Bourdieu, *The Field of Culture Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) was perhaps the first and most influential introduction of Bourdieu’s ideas on literature to American literature departments. In the field of modernism, Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) makes claims similar to Bourdieu’s about the new “economy” of literature specific to modernism (in the Anglo-American “high” modernist sense of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and so on). Several collections of essays exploring similar themes appeared as well as books such as Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism? Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997). There are many discussions of Bourdieu and cultural studies. For a good overview, see John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

2 Frow, *Cultural Studies*, 1.

3 J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels* (New York: Norton, 1990).

4 Victor Brombert, *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 19.

5 Following Bourdieu's analysis of Flaubert's role in transforming the French novel, Mark McGurl has convincingly argued that the Anglo-American novel truly began to achieve "high" cultural status through Henry James's efforts to establish the "art novel" as a legitimate art. McGurl, *The Novel Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). McGurl's claim demonstrates the importance of nation and language for Bourdieu's concept of "field."

6 W. B. Carnochan, in his "'A Matter Discutable': The Rise of the Novel," remembers the marginal status of the novel in his undergraduate days at Harvard in the "early 1950s." He recalls that "the novel did not claim the attention that it does now because it did not have the same canonical standing." What courses were offered on the novel were considered "outside the mainstream" (303). He explains that as "English 'literature' was a latecomer to the academy," the novel, "being a latecomer to the territory of 'literature,' had to shoulder its way gradually into the curriculum" (304). Today, as Carnochan notes, the situation is quite reversed: the most popular undergraduate literature courses are in the novel. Carnochan, "'A Matter Discutable': The Rise of the Novel," in *The Rise of the Novel*, ed. Ian Watt, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

7 "The Virgin," *Seinfeld*, written by Ethan Brown.

8 The song, entitled "This Is It," opened the Warner Brothers cartoon show *The Bugs Bunny Show* from 1960–62 and was written by Jerry Livingston and Mack David.

9 "The Opera," *Seinfeld*, written by Larry Charles.

10 Caryn James, "All Right, Goodbye Already! Parting Is Such Sweet Sitcom," *New York Times*, sec. E, May 12, 1998.

11 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

12 Frith, *Performing Rites*, 287, n. 53. Like Frith, John Fiske claims that it is necessary "to extend the metaphor of cultural capital to include that of a popular cultural capital that has no equivalent in the economic economy." He defines "popular cultural capital" as "an accumulation of meanings and pleasures that serves the interest of the subordinated and powerless" consisting of both "the meanings of social subordination and of the strategies . . . by which people respond to it." Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), 18–19. For an extended critique of this argument, see Frow, *Cultural Studies*.

13 "The Seinfeld Aptitude Test" is, to take only one example, the title of a book, magazine article, and a website. The magazine article and website are identical, the latter being an online version of the former, published in *Entertainment Weekly*. The book is unrelated to both.

14 One could claim that the presence of what seems to be "high art" discourse in completely commercialized fields results from the conscious borrowing of these ideas from older, more established highbrow productions. Modernism finds a new home because what is old in one context, the argument goes, may be quite new in another. Jane Feuer indeed maintains that "by the time certain formalist notions of modernism were rendered passé in academic art discourse, these same ideas were just coming into vogue for the yuppie audience of American network television." Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 82. Jerry Seinfeld modeled "The Betrayal" on Harold Pinter's play of the same title, which reverses the typical sitcom structure of a linear narrative of sequential segments. The characters in Pinter's play *The Betrayal* reduce the most cherished of human values of "love" and "family" to the same level as having drinks with a friend, racquetball, and literature.

15 Jason Mittel, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (New York: Routledge, 2004), 171–81.

- 16 See Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*; Hunter, *Before Novels*; Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
- 17 Bourdieu, *The Field of Culture Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 203.
- 18 Bourdieu, *Field of Culture Production*, 30.
- 19 David Marc has shown how the television sitcom normalized its conventions rather rapidly after an initially rough transition from the medium of radio. Radio comedy shows were more ethnic with variegated approaches and formats. Within ten years or so, however, the sitcom conventions familiar to us today had begun to be standardized and characters became almost exclusively white and middle class. Marc, "Origins of the Genre: In Search of the Radio Sitcom," in *The Sitcom Reader*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 15–24.
- 20 Feuer, "Genre Study," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1992), 138–60.
- 21 Feuer, "Narrative Form in Television," in *High Theory/ Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin McCabe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 107.
- 22 Feuer, "Genre Study," 143.
- 23 Feuer, "Genre Study," 108.
- 24 "No hugs, no learning" is the most oft-cited quote from David, or anyone for that matter, about the show. As much as critics both academic and journalistic have quoted it, none, to my knowledge, have provided an original source for the quote.
- 25 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 101.
- 26 Kelley Dean Jolley asks "what kind of show can be 'a show about nothing'? What sort of show is without a plot, without a central romantic couple, without even one completely likeable character?" She answers, "*Seinfeld* is a show about nothing because it is a show about what goes unnoticed because of its familiarity." Jolley, "Wittgenstein and *Seinfeld* on the Commonplace," in *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book About Everything and Nothing*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 109–17.
- 27 "The Pitch," *Seinfeld*, written by Larry David.
- 28 Gustave Flaubert, *Préface à la vie d'écrivain*, ed. Geneviève Bollème (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 62 (translation mine).
- 29 "The Pitch," *Seinfeld*, written by Larry David.
- 30 Bill Carter, "A Show About Nothing Covered A Lot," *New York Times*, December 26, 1997.
- 31 Carter, "A Show About Nothing." "In contrast, 'Cheers' had no social causes, no lessons to be learned, no role models; it was pure unadulterated comedy that was sophisticated and intelligent, not pretentious." Dennis A. Bjorklund, *Toasting Cheers: An Episode Guide, to the 1982–1993 Comedy Series, With Cast Biographies and Character Profiles* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 6. See also Carter, "Why 'Cheers' Proved So Intoxicating," *New York Times*, May 9, 1993.
- 32 Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 146.
- 33 Geoffrey O' Brien, "Sein of the Times," *New York Review of Books*, August 14, 1997.
- 34 Naomi Schor, "Idealism," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 769–74.
- 35 Schor, "Idealism," 204.
- 36 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 101.
- 37 See "The Engagement," *Seinfeld*, written by Larry David. *Entertainment Weekly* called *Mad About You* "*Seinfeld* gets married." But as Francis Davis points out, "It's finally another of those shows about a mismatched couple, a formula long ago perfected by *Cheers*." Davis, "Recognition Humor," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1992): 138. Likewise, *Seinfeld's* negative allusions to *Cheers* through George's obsession with Ted Danson and the show serves to

distinguish it from the predecessor that most closely impinged on its unique position in both the history of the sitcom and the current field of television that inherited this history. See "The Wallet," *Seinfeld*, written by Larry David. Danson not only is the opposite of George, but he was, at the time of the airing of the episode, the highest paid actor on television, netting \$450,000 per episode. See Carter, "Why 'Cheers.'"

38 See Bourdieu, "Champ Intellectuel et Projet Createur," *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 246 (1966): 886–96.

39 Fiske, "Popular Discrimination," in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 112–13.

40 Marketers and programmers have had to adapt their ways of looking at audiences since the advent of cable, VCRs, and DVD players. They now focus on target audiences whose size and spending habits are considered together to gauge the effectiveness of an advertisement.

41 Davis, "Recognition Humor," 138.

42 Ray Richmond, "TV Sitcoms: The Great Divide," *Variety*, April 13–19, 1998. In 1998, the year that it went off the air, *Seinfeld* was ranked second with white audiences and fifty-fourth with black ones. The "black" show with the highest ratings among white audiences was *Living Single*, which ranked second in black households and 115th in white ones.

43 James Barron, "It's Like a 'Seinfeld' Episode," *New York Times*, May 13, 1998.

44 As Don Aucoin reported for the *Boston Globe*, although *Seinfeld* "altered TV's economic landscape," "its most lasting effect on the TV industry may be less economic or structural than simply the way it shattered conventional wisdom." He also notes that though the show's "formula was so idiosyncratic that it could not be directly copied, its success prompted networks to develop a flock of shows in urban settings featuring young single people ('Friends,' 'Ellen,' 'Just Shoot Me,' 'Caroline in the City,' 'The Drew Carey Show,' 'Suddenly Susan')" and that "'observational did-you-ever-notice-that humor became epidemic,' in an attempt to capture the 'Seinfeld' tone." Aucoin, "How a Show About Nothing Changed the Whole TV Industry," *The Boston Globe*, sec. Arts and Film, May 10, 1998.

45 Bill Wyman, "Masterpieces," *Salon*, Jan. 7, 2002, <http://www.salon.com/ent/masterpiece/2002/01/07/seinfeld/index.html>.

46 Frith, quoted in Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, 61.