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The New Queer Aesthetic on Television

Essays on Recent Programming

Edited by
JAMES R. KELLER *and*
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Masculinity and Male Intimacy in Nineties Sitcoms: *Seinfeld* and the Ironic Dismissal

Margo Miller

Before prime-time television had mainstreamed gay and lesbian characters, queer pleasures were widely available in sitcoms with same-sex intimacy and unconventionally gendered characters. Queer characters and queer moments may not have been definite, but they were rarely denied over the course of an episode.¹ During the nineties flood of gay and lesbian visibility, these queer pleasures receded. Coming-out narratives supplemented the system of codes for gay characters, but nonetheless, effeminacy in male characters became explicitly linked to homosexuality, both as a gay cue and as frequent comic fodder for straight men. In *Friends*, Chandler tries to entice his wife to move west by naming songs from the musical *Oklahoma*, to which she responds, "Are you trying to tell me we're moving to Oklahoma, or that you're gay?" These kinds of jokes facetiously censured straight men's queer behavior with exclusive and contradictory categories of "gay" and "straight."

Similarly, a dichotomy between friendship and intimacy supplanted television's history of ambiguous homoeroticism. Prime-time television avoided intimacy between gay characters and grew suspicious of bonds between straight men. In fact, sitcoms began to include comic denials of perceived homosexuality whenever male bonds were confirmed or prioritized. Straight male characters became aware of intimacy and gendered

behavior that could signify gay identity and were quick to dismiss that possibility with a joke. After a series of flashbacks showing physical affection between Joey and Chandler in earlier episodes of *Friends*, for example, they make what may be called an ironic dismissal. Joey intercepts imagined accusations of homosexuality, asking, "Do we do this too much?" Chandler quickly agrees, "I think so. Yeah, get off me." The ironic dismissal defines intimacy between straight men against homosexuality, telling the viewer that the men's relationship was the opposite of what it seemed to be during physical, intensely emotional, or overly familiar displays of affection.² As a result, straight male characters could reflect modern masculinities by deflecting the queer implications of their same-sex intimacy with a quick one-liner: they hug, but they are not gay.

The ironic dismissal quickly became the standard method for sitcom characters to maintain their heterosexuality when their masculinity or male friendships were questioned. Though many ironic dismissals seem innocuous, this trend reflected a new hostility toward queerness in straight male characters. *Seinfeld* is a notable exception to this trend. This show rarely conflates effeminacy and homosexuality and accesses a continuum of men's relationships that include queer pleasures. It consistently experiments with masculinity and foregrounds homosocial relationships. At times, the expectation of an ironic dismissal endangers the men's friendships, but *Seinfeld* refuses to retract or reject its characters' intimacy in order to confirm heterosexuality.

Masculinity

Co-creators Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld conceived of a sitcom about the musings and complaints of an immature but intelligent clique with too much time on their hands. Their dialogue often examined the category of masculinity. Can a man order just a salad? When washing one's clothes, is it effeminate to use the gentle cycle? What about fine fabrics? The characters' questions — by turns frantic or facetious — reveal that masculinity is as fluid and artificial as femininity. Jerry, George, and Kramer exhibit unprecedented interest and comfort in discussions about attire, etiquette, and interpersonal relationships — concerns that often

mark female characters and gay or gay-coded male characters. In the nineties, it was unusual for these obsessions to be articulated by ostensibly straight lead male characters without an accompanying ironic dismissal.

Seinfeld explores alternative forms of masculinity without linking effeminacy and homosexuality in an ironic dismissal. Although *Seinfeld's* characters reject traditional aspects of masculinity and embrace activities like cooking, cleaning, and singing, they never approach the "sensitive guy" characters of other sitcoms. *Seinfeld* does not find it contradictory for men to act feminine or straight men to act gay. Instead, its characters mock masculine conventions and highlight the humor intrinsic to performing heteronormally.

Sitcoms like *Friends* and *Frasier* need the ironic dismissal to draw a line between masculine and feminine and straight and gay in the new male characters of the nineties. They often attempt to set up comedic contradictions in men acting gay — displaying stereotypically feminine qualities or stereotypically gay interests — if they are, in fact, heterosexual. The ensuing ironic dismissals are fraught with negative connotations toward gay men. Chandler's jokes, for example, are often self-deprecating acknowledgements of his suspicious masculinity — "I'm so gay!" — realizations that rely on broad stereotypes and judge his taste in clothes or knowledge of fine dining against Joey's crude behavior.

In *Seinfeld's* world, there is no "man" against whom to judge Jerry, George, and Kramer. Their models of masculinity are absurd caricatures like the ancient-but-ultracompetitive Mandelbaums, Elaine's robust-but-tiresome boyfriend Puddy, and her imperious boss Mr. Peterman. When these characters appear, it is precisely their exaggerated or archaic masculinity that is mocked. Chandler, Ross, Niles, and *Frasier* feel compelled to defend themselves when confronted about their unmasculine traits. *Seinfeld's* characters, on the other hand, compete to be the least manly. A *Seinfeld* joke that does question a character's masculinity finds humor in his resistance to proving his masculinity or in his excessive attention, but ultimate indifference, to gendered expectations.

Even within traditionally masculine spaces like sports culture, *Seinfeld* was brazen about its character's alternative masculinities. Even while they are eating hot dogs and discussing the Super Bowl, Jerry and George

are “just a couple of gals out on the town, shopping and gabbing.” Feminized terms are counterintuitive, but accurately describe these men’s engagement in traditionally masculine activities. The show’s sports references are informed but irreverent. Instead of arguing about who has the better team, the characters debate whether or not Joe DiMaggio dunks his donuts. When George asks Yankee Danny Tartabull to compare the team’s cotton and polyester uniforms, Tartabull resists. Jerry, of course, answers with ease. This type of conversation is a skill, the show argues, that conventional men lack. When Jerry and George meet Elaine’s father, Alton Benes, at a bar, George tries to engage Mr. Benes in a discussion about ordering ice with a beverage. Alton, already embarrassed by their choice of dainty drinks, is uncomfortable and, like Tartabull, first acts confused and then dismisses the conversation as if it were somehow queer.

Seinfeld always finds conventional masculinity comical, but in “The Jacket,” it is also absurdly dangerous. Elaine’s father’s rigid masculinity ruins Jerry’s expensive new coat. Jerry turns it inside out so snowfall will not ruin the suede, but Alton, seeing the pink-striped lining, barks, “You’re not going to walk down the street with me and my daughter dressed like that. That’s for damn sure!” Clearly suspicious of their masculinity, Mr. Benes questions Jerry’s and George’s heterosexuality: he compares Jerry to a sissy he served with in Korea and tells Elaine he thinks George is gay. George and Jerry do not compensate for their queer behavior by asserting their heterosexuality. Alton thinks George is gay because he (George) persistently sings “Master of the House” from *Les Misérables*; at one point, Mr. Benes says to George, “Pipe down, chorus boy.” But Elaine explains that her father “thinks everyone is gay.” The fact that Alton does not base his conclusions upon their “gay” behavior is humorous because it is surprising; in most sitcoms, the assignment of sexual orientation would be grounded in observations of mannerisms. The episode suggests that Alton thinks “everyone is gay” because he compares modern masculinity to his archaic expectations. And despite his masculine posturing, Mr. Benes is not incapable of being queer. When driving home alone at the end of the episode, Alton inadvertently offers his own husky rendition of the infectious *Les Mis* tune. His harsh criticisms of George’s and Jerry’s behavior become still more laughable when

he demonstrates that even the most masculine men cannot perform heteronormativity flawlessly.

Jerry is more comfortable in the company of gay masculinity. In "The Wigmaster," he dines happily with a male acquaintance until another man approaches their table and propositions Jerry's friend. Jerry subsequently upbraids the interloper for his rudeness, wondering how the latter knows that he (Jerry) and his friend are not a couple. Seinfeld is as insulted at being overlooked as the potential partner of a gay man as he is when Elaine is asked out in front of him. He comically confuses stereotypes by joking that his failure to perform homosexuality adequately was "very emasculating." Jerry does not qualify his egotistical tirade; he presents himself as the man's partner and chases off the rival suitor. The incident suggests that Jerry's possessiveness could come from an emotion other than spite. In an episode of *Friends* with a similar premise, Chandler is mocked for defending his romantic prospects as a gay man. Chandler's co-worker sets him up with an average-looking male colleague and says that their better-looking colleague Brian is "out of his league." Unnerved that she thought he was gay and insulted that she does not think he could attract a more handsome man, he offers an awkward and conflicted dismissal: "You don't think I could get a Brian? Because I could get a Brian. Believe you me.... I'm really not."

Jerry is less concerned about being perceived as gay. He understands the cultural markers of sexual identity — he states, "People think I'm gay ... because I'm thin, single, and neat" — and does not resist these stereotypes. Chandler is surprised and disturbed to learn that people sometimes assume he is gay, and the series blames his "vague" gay "quality" on his cross-dressing father and hypersexual mother. His image is presented as problematic, and he jokes about it to police his own behavior, saying "Don't we look nice all dressed up today!" and then realizing "It's stuff like that" that makes him seem gay.

Sitcoms' gay guest appearances usually hinge on their sexuality, but *Seinfeld* establishes its gay male characters through cultural codes, not cliché narratives, and their story lines are independent of their sexual identities. In three episodes over the course of four seasons, a pair of gay thugs makes a mockery of the classic Hollywood convention of vilifying the sexually deviant. They terrorize Kramer, organizing a mob to force

him to wear a ribbon during an AIDS walk in "The Sponge" and stealing an armoire he is guarding for Elaine in "The Soup Nazi." They exact cultural revenge for their vaguely ethnic, street-queen subculture. Although gay characters create opportunities for ironic dismissals, those in *Seinfeld* do not provoke one because they are superficially unlike its main characters. Usually, sitcoms humorously establish straight men's identities in the presence of characters who look and act just like them, but turn out to be gay. The gay male characters in *Seinfeld* are outrageous compared to the safe and highly homogenized representations in other prime-time sitcoms. Nonetheless, Jerry, George, and Kramer remained the defiantly abnormal outsiders of society even compared to these very queer characters.

Male Intimacy

Most nineties sitcoms also use an ironic dismissal to yank the queer subtext out of straight men's relationships. These jokes dissolve the romantic, domestic, or physical elements of a straight friendship with a preemptive statement that the men are not gay. *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, uniquely pulls its queer subtext slowly to the surface and anchors entire episodes with homoerotic undercurrents. It unabashedly displays the intense bonds shared by its insincere main characters. Jerry, George, and Kramer indulge each other's idiosyncrasies and share every detail of their lives. Their familiar commiseration and mutual antagonisms are consistent markers of their unusual intimacy. Selfish and unsentimental, they are more likely to thwart each other's success than encourage it, yet their relationships with each other are their only source of pleasure.

Jerry constantly makes futile attempts to set boundaries in his relationships with other men. He is suckered into buying dinner for fellow comic Bania, suffocated by Ramon-the-pool-guy's constant companionship, obliged to accept gum and wear glasses for George's old neighbor, Lloyd Braun, and forced to "break up with" his annoying childhood friend Joel just as he would a girlfriend. His interactions with other men playfully highlight the procedural similarities of making friends and making dates, the continuities between friends and more-than-friends, and the romantic overtones of professional relationships.

Narrative irresolution akin to the soap opera's circumvents an ironic dismissal in many *Seinfeld* episodes.³ In "The Mimbo," George, always the loser, is infatuated with "cool guy" Tony. Jerry quickly explains that George's attraction to Elaine's new boyfriend is a "non-sexual crush," and the episode goes on to explore what this term might mean. When George becomes jealous of Kramer's budding friendship with Tony, Kramer says that he thinks George is in love with Tony. George reacts by telling Kramer he had better "watch it" on their joint rock climbing trip. George's abrupt exits and avoidance of the subject make the audience more aware of his ambiguous emotions.

Friends and *Seinfeld* both access their homoerotic undercurrents by performing heterosexual couplehood. When Joey monopolizes Monica's phone conversation with her husband, Chandler, it seems that Joey—not Monica—is the one in the long-distance relationship. As is often the case in *Friends*, after the homoeroticism is exposed, the scene abruptly ends. This parody further ingrains the differences between Chandler's two relationships: although Joey is unknowingly acting like a lover, he is clearly "just a friend." George and Kramer, on the other hand, do not accidentally "act like" Jerry's lovers, they are compared to—"are like"—his lovers. When Jerry and Kramer find themselves in bed together reading the paper, for example, their pillow talk resembles a married couple's dialogue.

Jerry's failed attempts at ironic dismissals often extend the homoeroticism of a scene. He and Kramer are seen in bed together despite Jerry's earlier attempt to snub Kramer with an ironic dismissal. When Kramer wants to sleep in Jerry's bed instead of on his couch, Jerry balks. "Why not?" Kramer wonders, and Jerry, annoyed, asks, "Do I really have to explain why?" When Elaine interrupts their argument, Kramer asks her to leave, explaining "We need to get to bed." As is often the case in *Seinfeld*, the ironic dismissal is ineffective. Jerry shares his bed with Kramer after acknowledging the homoerotic implications of the act. In the scene that follows, he is more threatened by the banality of the somewhat queer situation than the physical intimacy.

Comic dismissals of implied homosexuality presume that intimacy between straight men is inherently ironic. According to *Friends'* executive producer David Crane, Chandler and Joey's relationship "is about

two straight guys behaving like a married couple” — “if they were two gay characters, it would be considerably less funny.”⁴ In fact, it might not be funny at all. Joey and Chandler’s respectable relationship constitutes a recurring joke: “we’re acting gay, but we’re straight.” None of *Seinfeld*’s comedy can be reduced to this formula. Episodes that examine Jerry’s professional or highly scripted relationships with other men, for example, revolve around an ambiguity that is not directly linked to sexual identity. *Seinfeld* is generally more nuanced and instead of underlining categories of “gay” and “straight,” has its characters’ peculiar relationships cross boundaries and complicate viewers’ expectations.

The intimacy displayed by straight men in *Seinfeld*’s satires of dating and marriage may be part of the reason viewers laugh at the show, but a scene is never funny solely because the men are supposedly straight. In “The Susie,” George’s girlfriend Allison asks Kramer to break up with George for her, and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish George’s feelings for Allison from George and Kramer’s feelings for each other. They meet unexpectedly in the doorway to Jerry’s apartment, for example, and effectively parody awkward ex-lovers. Handled differently, the humor might hinge on the characters’ heterosexuality, but the comic value in George and Kramer, two ostensibly straight men, attending the “Yankee Prom” as a couple is less significant than their increasingly convoluted relationship and farcical performance of George’s fantasy. George makes his first “great entrance,” but with Kramer, not Allison, twirling through the doors in a backless outfit just as he hoped Allison would wear. Kramer’s tuxedo rips as George struggles to prevent him from stepping into the banquet hall. When Kramer, who has agreed to take George back without Allison’s approval, tells George’s boss that the two of them are “together,” George seems to accept it as a fact. A viewer may find it humorous that, in this final moment, they appear gay, and there is no defensive affirmation of their heterosexuality.

In most sitcoms, the ironic dismissal supports men’s friendships by dispelling the threat of homosexuality, but in *Seinfeld*, men’s obligations to distance themselves from homosexuality are an obstacle in their relationships. When Jerry and New York Met Keith Hernandez meet, exchange numbers, and go to a movie together, their enthusiasm and insecurities make their attraction ambiguous but overt and suggest the

continuities between friendship, romance, and erotic relationships. After Jerry gets back from his “date” with Keith, George asks, “Who paid?” and “Did you shake his hand?” George’s usual attention to detail eroticizes the relationship and renders the questions themselves queer. Kramer and Elaine continually question the nature of Jerry and Keith’s relationship, and it is difficult for Jerry to respond. He never defines his desires or emphasizes that he and Keith are “just friends.” In the end, Jerry withdraws his offer to help Keith move into a new apartment because he considers it too intimate an act for men who have just met, and he ends the relationship to avoid further emotional turmoil. Jerry is not willing to make the ironic dismissals necessary in order to maintain a relationship with Hernandez.

Jerry and George’s obliviousness to the ironic dismissal endangers their friendship in “The Outing,” when an NYU reporter visits Jerry’s apartment to interview him for an article in her university’s paper. She is already under the impression that Jerry and George are a couple when she arrives, and she interprets their responses to her questions and their interaction as evidence. Signs that indicate Jerry and George are partners continue throughout the episode, and the viewer sees their behavior through the eyes of the reporter. George’s persistent obliviousness to the reporter’s point of view — he does not find the question, “Do you two live together?” at all unusual — shows how comfortable and unguarded they are in their relationship. They finally realize they must assert their heterosexuality to contradict their behavior, but by then, even Kramer and their parents will not accept their denials; Jerry and George continue fulfilling gay stereotypes and displaying familiarities that makes them “more than friends.” After reading portions of the published article aloud — including passages such as “Within the confines of his fastidious bachelor pad, Seinfeld and Costanza bicker over the cleanliness of a piece of fruit like an old married couple....” — Jerry resumes the same argument with George, yelling, “I told you that pear was washed!” They are desperate to correct the reporter’s mistake, but incapable of proving that they are not a couple because they continue to act in their usual fashion; their everyday behavior and entrenched intimacy are undeniably queer.

In this episode, it becomes clear how different Jerry and George’s

relationship would be if *Seinfeld* regularly made ironic dismissals of its queerness. Because of the turmoil the article inspires, Jerry's birthday gifts are ruined. He will not accept gay icon Bette Midler's *Greatest Hits* from Elaine, and he will take George's tickets for the Broadway musical *Gyps and Dolls*, but will not let George accompany him as planned. As George concedes, "everything is tainted now!" Instead of reuniting by denying homosexuality, Jerry and George are pushed apart when forced to downplay their intimate connection. Homosexual inferences cannot be cleanly dismissed and are incorporated into nearly every moment of the episode. Intimacy and effeminacy do not threaten their friendship, but the expectations that others have for unambiguous sexual identity do. Ultimately, Jerry and George's "outing" is as inconsequential as any of the other events in their lives, and the repercussions are confined to one episode.

In its critique of homophobia, *Seinfeld* suggested that straight men may sublimate their desires for other men. In "The Boyfriend," for example, Elaine notices that Jerry sounds more jealous of her for dating Keith Hernandez than of Hernandez for dating her and asks which of them he wishes he was. Jerry stalls and pretends to look through his kitchen cupboards for a bottle of scotch, suggesting that liquor is the only honest response to her directness. Jerry recognizes his attraction to Keith and acknowledges his unwillingness to accept or pursue his desires in order to maintain his heterosexuality. George's satiric homophobia often morphs his fear of physical intimacy with other men into a form of homoeroticism. "The Outing" mimics the scene from "The Contest" in which an attractive female nurse attends to an equally sexy patient while George is desperately trying to refrain from masturbation. Exhausted from his futile attempts to prove he is not gay, George sees a hunky male nurse giving a handsome patient a sponge bath and is paralyzed by the men's silhouettes. In this episode, like many others, *Seinfeld* does not expose its homoeroticism like other sitcoms, but keeps its queerness far from subtextual.

Sitcoms that use the ironic dismissal depart from the queer past of television comedy. Sissy-buddy duos Martin & Lewis and Hope & Crosby were good friends overflowing with gay innuendo; the homoerotic subtext of coupled personality comedians Laurel and Hardy was

accepted, if not widely acknowledged; half-hour television programs like *The Odd Couple* allowed audiences to read whatever they wanted into intense homosociality. In many nineties sitcoms, the ironic dismissal cancelled, or at least short-circuited many queer pleasures, but *Seinfeld* expanded the queer cultural legacy that came before it.

Seinfeld converged textual and subtextual readings with its commentary on the intimacy between Jerry and George. In the "The Cartoon" from the final season, George dates a woman who resembles Jerry, and Kramer and Elaine suggest that George likes this woman because he is actually attracted to Jerry. Neither Kramer nor Elaine is surprised, and Elaine initially finds the new evidence of George's attraction too ordinary to merit discussion. Kramer speaks with astonishing directness, and his pronouncements are given a humorous veracity by the episode's other thread, in which he tells a struggling comedian Jerry's true opinion of her talents. It is as if George's desire for Jerry has always been well understood.

Kramer tries to assuage George's fears by telling him, "just because they look alike, it doesn't mean you're secretly in love with Jerry." For George, hearing the formerly subtextual conclusion spoken aloud is even more shocking than his private ruminations about the similarity. Later, Elaine initiates a charged and self-conscious conversation between George and Jerry simply by mentioning that the girlfriend is "quite a handsome woman." George becomes visibly shaken when he hears Jerry's defensiveness. Together, they address their friends' insinuations, casually denying resemblance between Jerry and the girlfriend. When there seems to be nothing more they can say, but the tension between them remains, Jerry utters the final safeguard: "I'm not gay." However, his attempt at a dismissal fails. Even this statement is insufficient to deny the "evidence" that they are, on some level, attracted to each other. George replies, "Neither am I," uncertainly, as if he hopes that his concurrence will end their embarrassment, but knows that affirming their heterosexuality is beside the point; their predicament is not as simple as a miscommunication or mistaken identity. Theirs is not the typical dismissal; the scene argues that their relationship is as queer as it seems.

They turn to Kramer after this unfamiliar territory leaves them uncertain about how to interpret and explain their feelings for each other.

Kramer's insouciance about George "dating a lady Jerry" emphasizes their discomfort. He reiterates the implications by peppering a self-indulgent tirade with references to the situation: "George has a new femme-Jerry friend"; "George is all mixed up in a perverse sexual amalgam of some girl and his best friend"; and "George's parents' reaction upon hearing their son's man-love toward she-Jerry." In Kramer's mind, it is more perverse for George to date a woman who looks like Jerry than it would be for George to date Jerry.

The audience enjoys seeing Kramer textualize — and sexualize — the homoerotic undercurrents of Jerry and George's relationship, hearing that which is not customarily said but is known to have some elements of truth. Watching his girlfriend, George's paranoid thoughts are heard in voiceover: "So what if she does look like Jerry.... What does that mean? That I could have everything that I have with Jerry but that because it's a woman I could also have sex with her? And that somehow that would be exactly what I've always wanted...."

Conclusion

Jerry, George, and Kramer evaded ironic dismissals at a crucial moment in television history. As gay visibility increased, queer pleasures in straight characters were quietly jeopardized. Throughout the nineties, *Seinfeld* presented a queer challenge to this new incarnation of prime-time heteronormativity, as the critical exception to sitcoms' standardized rejection of gay codes in straight male characters and of intimacy between straight men. The show found a way to highlight queer pleasures without limiting them with an ironic dismissal and persistently incorporating homoeroticism into its episodes. The precedent of an ironic dismissal abruptly queered every "unmasculine" moment and then pretended it had never happened. *Seinfeld*, though, would not let this queerness be forgotten.

Notes

I would like to thank Laura Ring, Ron Gregg, and Anthony Ruth for their help with this essay.

1. See Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

2. My theory of the ironic dismissal owes a great deal to Mark Simpson's essay "The Straight Men of Comedy" in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, Stephen Wagg, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998).

3. John Fiske, *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

4. David Kirby, "Open Secret: The Subtle Shift in the American Sitcom," *The New York Times* (18 June 2001).

Seinfeld episodes discussed: Male Unbonding (14 June 1990), The Revenge (18 April 1991), The Jacket (6 February 1991), The Note (18 September 1991), The Red Dot (11 December 1991), The Boyfriend (2, 12 February 1992), The Outing (11 February 1993), The Stall (6 January 1994), The Pledge Drive (6 October 1994), The Soup (10 November 1994), The Label Maker (19 January 1995), The Jimmy (16 March 1995), The Wink (12 October 1995), The Soup Nazi (2 November 1995), The Pool Guy (16 November 1995), The Sponge (7 December 1995), The Gum (14 December 1995) The Wig Master (4 April 1996) The Invitations (16 May 1996), The Susie (13 February 1997), The Betrayal (20 November 1997), The Apology (11 December 1997), The Cartoon (29 January 1998), The Puerto Rican Day (7 May 1998).

Friends episodes mentioned: The One Where Nana Dies Twice (10 November 1994), The One with Mac and C.H.E.E.S.E. (13 April 2000), The One Where Emma Cries (3 October 2002), The One with the Pediatrician (10 October 2002).