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## Applying Insights from Cultural Studies to Adult Education: What Seinfeld Says About the AERC

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## **Applying Insights from Cultural Studies to Adult Education: What *Seinfeld* Says About the AERC**

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**Abstract:** The zany adventures of a glamorous British professor who goes to an important international conference but spends most of her time searching for a TV in order to watch her favourite sitcom. Despite her commitment to "no hugging, no learning", she gains some profound insights into mass culture, adult education, friendship and postmodernity as a result. *Parental guidance suggested.*

### **Prologue: The Convergence**

This paper has grown out of a critical incident in my own learning biography, where a convergence of two cultural events brought together several discrete elements of my personal and professional identity and led me to reflect on aspects of relationships between the mass media and adult education. This is how it came about: early in 1998 I began organising my journey from the UK to San Antonio for that year's AERC. Some time after I had booked my flight it was announced that the transmission of the final episode of the hugely popular television situation comedy *Seinfeld* would take place on 14 May, the day after I had arranged to arrive in Texas. So the fact that I would be in the USA for the AERC meant that I would also have the opportunity to witness a media phenomenon of considerable importance.

As an adult education researcher, I view the AERC as an annual professional milestone which enables me to review the state of research in the field and to make contact with friends and colleagues from around the world who together constitute a significant reference group. I have attended half a dozen AERC events in the last decade and these conferences always provoke me to scrutinise my current professional location and trajectory. As a researcher in media sociology, I conceptualised the final episode of *Seinfeld* as a milestone of a different kind. The finale became a major news story with newspapers predicting the largest audience ever for a sitcom episode and documenting the record-breaking sums being paid by advertisers for commercial slots during the show. Thus the event constituted a powerful case study in the political economy of US television. But the *Seinfeld* finale was also significant to me as a fan of the series. There have been few other cultural artefacts of recent times which have afforded me as much pleasure as this sitcom; no other television show has me cancelling all other engagements (or setting up the video recorder so obsessively).

One source of regret in San Antonio was the absence of other *Seinfeld* enthusiasts with whom to share the experience. Back home in London, my partner was lost in envy at my opportunity to see the show as it was aired; several months after the US transmission, the UK has still to see the finale. A few of my AERC colleagues displayed amused tolerance at my anxiety not to miss a

second of the show, and some of them (particularly football supporters), while not sharing my enthusiasm for this series, empathised with my desire to be part of a tribal group with shared cultural icons. As I was about to leave San Antonio at the end of the conference, I met some Canadian colleagues who turned out to be fellow fans. However, for the most part my attempts to engage AERC participants in deeply encoded Seinfeldian communication were futile. Indeed, many colleagues claimed never to have seen an episode of the show, and some declared that they never watched television at all. A particularly memorable example of incomprehension came from a colleague who believed that *Seinfeld* celebrated a decadent and culturally impoverished lifestyle and who seemed affronted that I should revel in the joys of such a text.

### **Act I, Scene 1: The Plane Ride**

As the aeroplane carrying me back to London took off through the yellow skies of Texas, I fast-forwarded extracts from my internal videotape of the conference and reflected upon what I had learned from the San Antonio experience. As always, when the time distortion of transatlantic travel kicks in between the end of the second movie and the arrival of the duty-free trolley, I drifted into the hyperreal sensation of the postmodern subject. I mused on the delights of meetings with old friends in alien seminar rooms and of shared touristic excursions into the shopping mall of the Alamo. Stills from the *Seinfeld* finale mixed into the montage of conference memories. Questions which have intrigued me in one form or another for the last twenty years and which have provided the motor for much of my professional and personal endeavour over that time formed and reformed in my consciousness:

why are academics so ready to dismiss the artefacts of popular culture as trivial, intellectually superficial and aesthetically worthless?

- should I feel guilty about enjoying *Seinfeld* so much?

The rest of this paper constitutes a preliminary sketch of some answers to these questions.

### **Act I Scene 2: The Flashback**

I became an adult educator in the 1970s, steeped in the British university tradition of liberal adult education. By that time I also had a more or less established identity as a media sociologist. But before I applied either of those labels to myself I was a committed fan of popular culture.

My earliest memories are interwoven with television images; like many other British families, mine acquired a television set around the time of the Coronation of the present Queen in 1953. During my early childhood the days of the week were distinguished from one another by the pre-school television programmes broadcast each day: *Picture Book* on Mondays, *Andy Pandy* on Tuesdays, *The Flowerpot Men* on Wednesdays and so on. My interests in the artefacts of popular culture continued throughout childhood and adolescence but it never occurred to me that these interests might have any connection with school or university subjects until I encountered Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) in the context of an undergraduate sociology course. This was the first book I had ever come across which treated popular newspapers and

television quiz shows as the subject of serious analysis and it was a major revelation. Another text which grabbed my imagination around the same time was Robert Warshow's *The Immediate Experience* (1962), a collection of essays about movies, comics and theatre, which included a particularly memorable essay on the comic strip *Krazy Kat*, entitled *Woofed with Dreams*.

### **Act I Scene 3: The Founding Parents**

While I was misspending my early years in a small Midlands town among superhero comics, game shows, soap operas and the subcultural delights of rock music, British cultural and media studies were hatching out nearby. Two of the most important centres for the development of theory and research on the mass media were established in the 1960s: the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the University of Leicester Centre for Mass Communications Research. The two centres evolved contrasting theoretical and methodological paradigms; Birmingham derived its approach primarily from literary criticism and focused mainly on the content of media texts while Leicester drew on sociology and political economy and emphasised the importance of studying the contexts of media production. By the 1970s, when I became a graduate student in the Leicester centre, both institutions had adopted a marxist model for the study of culture. But although I did not become aware of the common antecedents until later, both centres also shared roots in university adult education.

A number of scholars who were influential in the development of cultural and media studies were also associated with the development of the philosophy and practice of adult education. For example, Richard Hoggart, founder of the Birmingham centre, was concerned with extra-mural teaching in the 1950s (see, for example, Hoggart, 1959). James Halloran, the founding director of the Leicester centre who carried out influential work on the social effects of television in the 1960s, began his career as a tutor in adult education. Other notable scholars whose work helped to shape the direction of British cultural and media studies, such as Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall, also worked in adult education in the early stages of their careers. A painstakingly detailed account of the history of British cultural studies, particularly as exemplified in Birmingham, can be found in McGuigan, 1992.

In recent years the two fields have followed diverging trajectories. Cultural and media studies have moved from being minority interests to major growth areas in British higher education. From their beginnings as subjects followed by a handful of postgraduate students they now feature among the most popular choices for undergraduates, and there is a massive literature dealing with media texts and processes. However, there is little evidence of insights from cultural and media studies being applied to the study of adult education, although writers such as Giroux and Shannon (1997) place the analysis of school-based education firmly in the study of culture. Now and again a conference paper on continuing education surfaces which contains analysis of some aspect of popular culture such as the romantic novel (Jarvis, 1994), the baseball star (Boshier, 1993) or the comic strip (Carter and Howell, 1998), but in general there is little evidence of interest in such features of cultural life amongst adult educators on either side of the Atlantic.

### **Act II, Scene 1: The Show About Something**

*Seinfeld* was first seen on the NBC television network in 1989 and ran for nine seasons, reaching some 180 half-hour episodes. By the time the show reached its final episode in May 1998, it had become the most popular programme on American television and Seinfeld himself is said to have turned down an offer of \$5 million per show to continue with further series.

The premise of the programme is simple: it follows the daily lives of four friends in New York City, chronicling their interactions with one another and with the characters and situations of middle-class Manhattan life. The programme's central character, Jerry Seinfeld, is a stand-up comic (played by Jerry Seinfeld, a stand-up comic). The other three central characters are Elaine, Seinfeld's ex-girlfriend; George, Seinfeld's best friend since high school; and Kramer, Seinfeld's next-door neighbour. The 'ordinariness' of the situations depicted in the show -- waiting for a table in a Chinese restaurant, losing a car in a parking garage, arguing about the messages conveyed in the positioning of shirt-buttons (if the second button on a shirt is too high, 'it looks like you live with your mother'), debating about the optimum milk level in bowls of cereal or the rules about breaking off a relationship -- led to its being labelled 'a show about nothing'. However, this description fails to do justice to the intricacy of the myriad plotlines woven together in each episode or to the finely-crafted dialogue in which every line carries elements of the story forward.

*Seinfeld* is suffused with postmodern themes. To begin with, the boundary between reality and fiction is frequently blurred: this is illustrated in the central device of having Jerry Seinfeld play the character Jerry Seinfeld. In the show's fourth season, several episodes revolved around the narrative of Jerry and George (whose character is co-creator Larry David's alter ego) pitching 'a show about nothing' based on the everyday life of a stand-up comedian to NBC. The reaction of the fictional NBC executives, by all accounts, mirrored the initial responses of those who eventually commissioned *Seinfeld*. The fourth season ends with 'The Pilot', an episode focusing on the casting, taping and screening of the show-within-the-show, Jerry. This episode also illustrates neatly the self-referential quality which is one of *Seinfeld*'s hallmarks. The series finale was so replete with references to earlier shows as to render it largely incomprehensible to those not already well-versed in the personae and preoccupations of the *Seinfeld* universe.

Another instance of what Berger (1998) labels 'the postmodern presence' in *Seinfeld* is its catalogue of intertextual references. The show makes constant allusions to other cultural artefacts, mining popular television from *I Love Lucy* to *Letterman*, and describing a smooth segue from *I Pagliacci* to *Bugs Bunny* in the course of a short scene. Superhero characters from *Superman* to *Green Lantern* are a frequent source of knowing references; Newman, the post office worker who is the focus for Jerry's hatred and scorn, is depicted as Lex Luthor to *Seinfeld*'s *Superman*. 'The Betrayal' echoes the narrative structure and themes of the Harold Pinter play *Betrayal*. The action in this episode moves backwards in time, illustrating the time distortion and tendency to scramble linear narratives which are also common features of postmodern texts.

*Seinfeld* is notable for challenging the boundaries of what are considered acceptable topics for prime-time television. In 'The Contest', Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine enter into a competition with one another to see who can refrain from masturbating for the longest -- or, in the inventive wordplay of the show, remain 'master of their domain' or 'queen of the castle'. The

writers manage the remarkable feat of sustaining dialogue which is simultaneously explicit and ambiguous. In 'The Deal', an episode which is one of my personal favourites, Jerry and Elaine engage in an experiment to enable them to revisit their sexual relationship while sustaining their warm and enjoyable friendship. They agree upon a set of rules (such as an embargo on telephone calls the day after sex, and 'sleeping over is optional') designed to enable them to combine 'this' (the friendship) with 'that' (the sex). The script is written so deftly that a frank discussion of sexual mores is conducted entirely in euphemisms. There are, it seems, no limits to the topics which Seinfeld writers are prepared to tackle: death, disability, ethnicity, sexuality and bodily functions are all favourites, while politically correct attitudes are dissected and rendered risible. In 'The Outing', Jerry and George are mistaken for a gay couple and wrestle with the tension between their desire to correct the error and their anxiety not to appear homophobic, coining one of the show's many enduring catchphrases ('not that there's anything wrong with that') in the process.

### ***Act II Scene 2: The Ethnomethodology***

*Seinfeld is, of course, a text open to multiple readings and decodings. One academic critic characterises Seinfeld as a 'comedy of manners' in the tradition of Sheridan and Wilde and draws on The Civilising Process, Norbert Elias's (1978) historical-sociological analysis of the development of civility in Western cultures, to advance the argument that Seinfeld is a text which 'perfectly captures the complex pleasures and anxieties associated with the continued maintenance and practices of contemporary American manners' (Pierson, 1997: 5).*

*For me a major element in the show's appeal is its sharp social observation and its construction of the everyday as anthropologically strange. I take keen pleasure in the way that Seinfeld illuminates the minutiae of social interaction, such as the micropolitics of present-giving and -recycling ('degifting' and 'regifting'), the art of extricating oneself from unwanted social encounters (using the 'excuse Rolodex') or the implicit rules governing friends' access to each others' property ('pop-in' rights; 'the covenant of the keys'). There are close parallels here with the pleasure I have derived from examples of social scientific literature which have in the past provided me with new insights into behaviour previously taken for granted. Relevant examples are to be found in the literature of ethnomethodology, such as 'Notes on the Art of Walking' (Ryave and Schenkein, 1974) or in the work of Erving Goffman. There are clear parallels between Goffman's discussion of the negotiation of power relations in everyday social encounters where*

*"the work adjustment of those in service occupations will often hinge upon a capacity to seize and hold the initiative in the service relation, a capacity that will require subtle aggressiveness on the part of the server when he is of lower socio-economic status than his client" (Goffman, 1959: 22)*

*and George's plans in 'The Pez Dispenser' for staging 'a preemptive breakup' with a socially superior girlfriend in order to gain and maintain 'hand' in the relationship.*

### ***Act III Scene 1: The Irony***

*At this point I need to return to the question posed in the title to this paper and consider what Seinfeld says about the AERC. Over the years I have played with the parallels to be drawn between conferences and written texts and in 1989 I attempted to deconstruct the process of writing a PhD thesis by turning my own thesis (Miller, 1989) into an imaginary conference. It is to such a line of analysis that I now return.*

*There is an irony in attempting to unpack educational aspects of Seinfeld. After all, one of the show's cardinal rules, articulated by Larry David, was 'no hugging, no learning'. However, I do not take this to mean that the show is devoid of either affection or profound insights. Rather, its creators have been determined to avoid the formulaic narrative clichés and predictable emotional rhythms on which many popular sitcoms are based. The traditional structure of a television script follows a pattern which begins with an everyday reality which is disrupted in the first act of an episode; the unexpected happening is developed in the second act and the world is restored to rights by the end of the twenty-five minutes. Deviant behaviour is generally not rewarded or allowed to persist in the sitcom world, and social gaffes are tidied up and used as the basis for characters to learn, grow and make up. In Seinfeld, social disruption is frequently left unresolved, and suggestions of enhanced maturity are treated with suspicion ('Any kind of growth really irritates me' says George in 'The Deal'). But in its determination to eschew easy answers to social complexities Seinfeld displays a welcome disinclination to underestimate the television audience with shallow emotions or simplistic outcomes.*

### ***Act III Scene 2: The Friendship***

*As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, the AERC constitutes for me an important annual professional milestone. It provides me with a snapshot map of the field of adult education; with a quick immersion in contemporary andragogic discourses; a cultural island on which to explore some current preoccupations. Being a foreign island rather in the style of Bizarro World, it gives me a fresh perspective on back-home realities. These metaphors go some way to capturing the cognitive gains from the AERC experience, but there is an affective dimension to the experience which is missing from the metaphors; the AERC is, above all, about friendship and affinity. Some of the people I have met through the AERC are amongst my most valued friends.*

*Seinfeld is also a text about friendship (and about the struggle to make sense of darkness as well as light in human behaviour). The show, as many critics acknowledge, is built out of ensemble playing and much of its humour grows out of the complex web of obligations and interdependencies in which Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer are enmeshed ('a group dynamic rooted in jealousy, rage, insecurity, despair, hopelessness, and a touching lack of faith in one's fellow human beings' (Tucker, 1998: 13)). The four central characters frequently behave deceitfully or selfishly, but despite being aware of each others' failings and foibles, they remain loyal and tolerant towards one another. Jerry's friends can help themselves to the contents of his refrigerator without explanation or a need for mechanical reciprocity. In the iconography of magazine articles about the series, they are shown in intertextual variants on the gang of four: in the style of the With the Beatles album cover; as 'Fantastic Four' superheroes; as comrades from*

*Star Wars, and (on the cover of Rolling Stone in the week the series ended) as the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow and Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz.*

*The best experiences of AERC are the moments of camaraderie and the feelings of inhabiting a common social reality which are often cemented in shared jokes. I enjoy the sensation of being Elaine amongst people whose Snapple I can share, or upon whose spongeworthiness I can muse.*

### ***Epilogue: The Punchline***

*In this paper I have attempted to highlight an example of the ways in which a popular cultural artefact is an important source of pleasure and meaning in my life. I have tried to demonstrate the value of interrogating my own cognitive and affective reactions to cultural products and to show how images and narratives from popular culture are woven into my daily life.*

*The pleasure I derive from Seinfeld is one shared with many others, if not with many other adult educators. With the growth in the use of media such as the Internet and cable television for educational purposes and the shift towards the information society, it is increasingly important for educators to take seriously the processes by which media texts are produced and disseminated, and to understand the ways in which media images and constructions pervade all our lives. Furthermore, since interaction with texts of popular culture forms the basis for much of adult students' experience of their world, and the sense which they make of their experience, I would argue that in order to strengthen their theoretical understanding and enhance their practice adult educators need to engage with and take seriously media phenomena like Seinfeld. Or, as Jerry and George might have it, 'engaging with media texts ... yada yada yada ... greater understanding of adult education'.*

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