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*The History and Legacy of **Seinfeld***

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The History and Legacy of *Seinfeld*



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Please accept my application for approval of
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Yours sincerely,
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Abstract

Since the early days of American television, sitcoms became a most popular genre. However, not all successful sitcoms have managed to become classics or genre paradigms. This informative thesis examines *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989 - 1998), how it rose to fame, how it achieved its status, and how it influenced contemporary television since its finale. Drawing from various sources, including books, documentaries, and interviews, this essay offers a thorough investigation of the show's production after examining the sociocultural context that led to its pilot. To assess the sitcom's success during its original broadcast, this thesis examines the thematic qualities and storytelling devices of a select pool of episodes. Finally, the thesis tackles *Seinfeld's* legacy by examining its success in syndication, its effects on the sitcom genre, and its influence on pop-culture.

Keywords: *Seinfeld*, sitcom, history, television, three-part analysis

Introduction

Throughout the history of American television, the sitcom has proven its longevity as a defining component of modern pop-culture. Although TV audiences have grown familiar to the genre, the form and content of sitcoms is constantly evolving (Mills, 2009). As time passes and the sociocultural landscape of America changed, so did the situations, characters, and social depictions of popular shows on TV. Though sitcom's representations of people and society are shaped by their environment, the genre generally adheres to certain conventions, including the depiction of families (biological or otherwise), a comedic nature, and a typical runtime of under 30 minutes (Mills, 2009, p. 20). As the genre matures, certain shows have stood out, attracting millions of viewers and significantly influencing content on television. *Seinfeld* is one such show that has received consistent praise from both critics and viewers, and is considered a groundbreaking program (Austerlitz, 2014). Despite the show's success, it faced initial challenges before it eventually gained its dedicated audience that championed it as revolutionary. Claims about its success and impact are abundant, but without proper context, they can often prove misleading or exaggerated. In this informative thesis, we will attempt to offer context on the history, production, themes, and legacy of *Seinfeld*. To achieve this, we will utilize a variety of sources that explore the history of the program's production, the characterization and comedic nature of the situations portrayed, and the show's lasting impact on the sitcom genre.

In the first part of our analysis, we will investigate the sitcom genre to better comprehend its history alongside the primary themes and iconography present in an effort to offer a better context to what led to *Seinfeld*'s airing and subsequent success. To easily access the genre's history, sources that have exhaustively archived the history of the medium of television like *The Columbia History of American Television* (Edgerton, 2007) and *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes*

from I Love Lucy to Community (Austerlitz, 2014) will be consulted. The former provides a comprehensive history into various facets of American television history and proves a crucial resource for attaining knowledge around the rise of TV as a medium and how it attained its enormous audience over the decades. Saul Austerlitz's book is an exploration of sitcoms, providing insight into the development of its themes and styles by focusing on 24 episodes of select shows that have contributed to the development of the genre. However, how can a show with such humble beginnings, one that faced the threat of cancellation during its early years, have had such a profound impact on the established genre? To answer this question, we will utilize Mill's *The Sitcom* (Mills, 2009), which examines the elements that constitute the genre and provides information about the industry responsible for producing these shows.

After the account of the history leading up to *Seinfeld*, a detailed examination of the show's production will be conducted. *Seinfeldia: How a Show about Nothing Changed Everything* (Armstrong, 2017) will act as the main guide of our investigation as it is a dense aggregate of various sources focused on exhaustively retelling the story of the show's production. Using *Seinfeld: The Making of an American Icon* (Oppenheimer, 2002) and *Pretty, Pretty, Pretty Good: Larry David and the Making of Seinfeld and Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Levine, 2010), some background will be provided regarding its creators and showrunners, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David. The DVD release of the show contains a set of short documentaries produced by Morgan Sackett and Darin Henry that offer great insights into the ups and downs of the production beginning with the inception of the idea and concluding with the finale. Furthermore, sources such as *Seinfeld FAQ: Everything Left to Know about the Show about Nothing* (Nigro, 2015) will provide access to information regarding specific episodes and concepts that would be enigmatic to those not extensively familiar with *Seinfeld*.

In the second part of the thesis, a textual analysis on the themes of the show based on close readings of seminal episodes is carried out. The analysis is conducted using findings from different researchers, all published in the book *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain* (Lavery and Lewis, 2006) and Paul Arras' *Seinfeld: A Cultural History* (2020). These sources offer clear and concise examples of thematic choices that elevated the show and separated it from many of its predecessors and contemporaries. This will lead into the last part of the thesis, in which we will attempt to gauge *Seinfeld's* impact on the sitcom genre and discuss its enduring popularity and legacy. In our attempt to demonstrate its influence, various research papers will be examined along with insights from the books mentioned previously.

The purpose of this three-part analysis is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of *Seinfeld* and to determine the validity of claims regarding its ripple effect on the sitcom genre. This analysis will encompass a review and examination of the show's production history, a study of its themes, characters, and situations, and an investigation of its influence on other sitcoms. The aim is to offer a complete and inclusive perspective on the show, serving as an all-encompassing guide to understanding what made *Seinfeld* a cultural landmark.

***Seinfeld's* Place in the Sitcom Landscape**

Regarding *Seinfeld*, Austerlitz claims that the show “revolutionized the sitcom” (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 228). But in order to engage in a thorough discussion on *Seinfeld's* impact and legacy, the context of the genre and of the time period it was created in has to be comprehended. Consequently, the first part of this thesis begins with a brief recounting of the history of sitcoms and its trajectory on television, leading up to the creation of the show. This is followed by a comprehensive analysis on the story of *Seinfeld's* production, from its pilot until its finale.

Here Comes the Sitcom

The rapid expansion of television as a commercial product in the United States between the late 1940s and early 1950s was truly remarkable (Edgerton, 2007, p. 125). A combination of factors, including a postwar America eager to embrace a new form of entertainment and the convenience of the new medium led to television's popularity and its quick ubiquity in American households. This first generation of consumers, referred to often as the “silent generation”, embraced the medium, causing a ripple effect on the entertainment industry with movie attendance plummeting nationwide. “Television emerged as the ideal medium for the nuclear family in postwar America” (Edgerton, 2007, p. 128). After the Second World War and the Great Depression the concept of the American family began to evolve. The nuclear family of the era, characterized by a move away from the extended family tradition towards a suburban lifestyle, provided more privacy for newly formed families. It was common for the household to consist of a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and their children, living their lives privately and securely. To capture the attention of this growing audience, television shows immediately started incorporating the family and the family home as their sources of humor (Mills, 2009, p. 20).

On November 18, 1947, the first situation comedy *Mary Kay and Johnny* (DuMont, 1947-1950) made its television debut (Edgerton, 2007, p. 130). The situation comedy genre, commonly referred to as sitcoms, originated from radio where it flourished in the mid-to-late 1920s. This ever-evolving genre is elusive to precisely define, although sets of recurring elements render it easily recognizable by most audiences. Sitcoms are usually defined as 20 to 30-minute ‘plays’ involving a recurring cast of characters and locations (Mintz, 1985). Though the stories depicted in these shows vary dramatically, one other element that prevailed since the early days of the genre is that in the center of the shows was a transmutation of the American family. This early era was dominated by shows featuring variations of families, with shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952 – 1966), *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957 – 1963), and *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954 – 1960) becoming major hits.

The most significant and influential of these early sitcoms is *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951 – 1957), which captured a major part of television audiences and helped define the trajectory of the genre. The ‘situations’ the titular Lucy (Lucille Ball) faced were most commonly driven either by her desire to enter show business or maintaining a stability in her life, while the source of the comedy came from Ball’s reactions and physical humor (Austerlitz, 2014, 21). Furthermore, the show paved the way for the visual style of sitcoms that followed. *I Love Lucy* was the first sitcom shot in front of a studio audience, which would become common practice for most shows of the genre that followed (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 17).

In terms of cinematography, *Lucy*’s production has also had a lasting impact. Karl Freund, the cinematographer behind the film *Metropolis* (1927), was hired to light and shoot the show. In order to facilitate the action, the editing process, the direction, and the live studio audience, Freund was tasked with constructing a method of shooting the show with three cameras simultaneously.

This allowed the camera to be used without having to be reset, making it easier for the live audience to maintain their interest. In order to achieve this, Freund devised an even, flat lighting setup that would allow for both long shots and close-ups to be shot simultaneously (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 18). Unbeknownst to the show's creators and producers at the time, Freund established the paradigm for how sitcoms would be lit for decades to follow. *I Love Lucy* was the number one show on television for four out of its six seasons and was one of the first shows that proved to be a financial goldmine for its creators, especially after its syndication in 1955 (Edgerton, 2007).

Setting the Stage

The 1960s was a period of instability for the United States, with the socio-political climate becoming turbulent (Edgerton, 2007, p. 203). Still, the growth of national television was not hindered. Sitcoms had become a mainstay of television programming, with *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961 – 1966) starting the decade off as a huge hit. The major networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC were competing against one another for each time slot. “TV had also emerged as the one place where Americans still came together on a daily basis throughout the remainder of the 1960s, even as the nation's social fabric continued to pull apart at the seams” (Edgerton, 2007, p. 204).

To facilitate this slow shift in culture, the sitcom genre had to adapt. To connect with the growing audience that came from TV sets reaching audiences in the Midwest and the South, the president of CBS at the time, James Aubrey, began developing rural sitcoms to complement the domestic shows that were already airing (Edgerton, 2007, p. 246). These shows include *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962 – 1971), its spin-off *Petticoat Junction* (CBS, 1963 – 1970), and its clone *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965 – 1971). During the same period, deviations from the conventional nuclear family started appearing. Early in the decade, *My Three Sons* (ABC & CBS,

1960 – 1972), which featured a widowed father taking care of his three sons, gained immense popularity (Kaplan, 2021). By the end of the 1960s, other shows followed a similar route. *The Partridge Family* (ABC, 1970 – 1974), for instance, featured a widowed mother and her five children on tour for their hit record in a ‘hippie’ van. However, the hit that marked the end of the decade was *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969 – 1974), featuring two families fractured by the loss of one of the parents and forming a new family in their suburban Los Angeles home.

Sitcoms continued their trajectory towards non-conventional family depictions into the start of the 1970s. *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971 – 1979), inspired by the British comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1965 – 1975), started the decade strong for the genre after struggling to get on the air, failing as a pilot twice before being picked up by CBS (Kaplan, 2021). Featuring a working-class white American family, the show broke new ground by challenging tough social topics, criticizing, and often satirizing the opinions and behaviors of the protagonist, a patriarchal, often bigoted, misanthrope. Though the show dominated the Nielsen ratings for five years, it was not the only sitcom to attain such high and consistent viewership (Brooks and Marsh, 2007). *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974 – 1984), and *Laverne & Shirley* (ABC, 1976 – 1983), and *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972 – 1983), all proved to be hugely successful shows that helped the genre retain its relevance, with *M*A*S*H* still holding the Nielsen rating record for most watched broadcast with its finale, which attracted almost 70% of the television sets of America during its airing with an estimated viewership of over 100 million (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 140 - 141.)

Despite the success of the sitcom continuing in the 1970s, the genre lost much of its momentum as the 1980s rolled around. Fewer sitcoms were reaching the air and those that did often struggled to reach the top ratings (Austerlitz, 2014). Instead, television audiences turned their attention to soap operas and action dramas, most prominently *Dallas* (CBS, 1978 – 1991), *Dynasty*

(ABC, 1981 – 1989), and *Magnum P.I.* (CBS, 1980 – 1988) respectively. For the first half of the decade, these shows were competing for the top spot in the ratings before sitcoms came back into the spotlight. In 1982, *Cheers* (NBC, 1982 – 1993) premiered. *Cheers* was yet another sitcom with a slow start which accumulated a large audience over its seasons and secured its time slot– 9pm on Thursdays- for its entire runtime (Brooks and Marsh, 2007). *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982 – 1989) was another big success for NBC. This show was a return to the traditional family sitcom but offered an interesting new spin to the interplay between the main cast by featuring a liberal family with a conservative eldest son.

Without a doubt however, the sitcom that defined the decade was *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984 – 1992). Despite its stigmatized legacy, the show’s importance is hard to disregard. The show was number one for four years before sharing the top spot with another paradigmatic sitcom, *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988 – 1997). “At its peak, *The Cosby Show* averaged between fifty-eight and sixty-three million viewers a week from 1985 to 1987, attracting both high-end niche viewers and the older, less-affluent suburban segments of the mass audience” (Edgerton, 2007, p. 316). NBC had become the king of the sitcom, but there was still competition. ABC’s aforementioned *Roseanne* was competing with *The Cosby Show* in the rating for the top spot, and FOX entered the market with *Married... with Children* (FOX, 1987 – 1997), and *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989 – ongoing), shows that were not competing for the top spots but quickly earned a large and passionate audience (Edgerton, 2007, p. 303).

Defining the sitcom

The industry and the genre had developed significantly between the 1960s and the 1980s. The cultural shifts that occurred in these decades saw new attempts to expand the sitcom audiences. Joanne Morreale (2003) attributes this variety to the genre as a result of networks attempting to

draw growing demographics. The 1960s, rural sitcoms like *The Beverly Hillbillies* catered to socially conservative Americans living in rural areas. The following decade witnessed the emergence of “socially relevant” sitcoms, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family*, which addressed social and lifestyle issues and were targeted at an urban audience of a young demographic (Feuer, 1992). By the 1980s, the genre had reverted to domestic comedies while also attempting to appeal to an upscale demographic through reframed work-family sitcoms.

As the sitcom persisted, networks, audiences, and theorists alike attempted to offer their explanations of the genre. Early definitions of the sitcom, as mentioned earlier, identified it as a half-hour series that revolves around certain characters and locations engaging in comedic situations before returning to a status quo (Mintz, 1985). In his book, Jeremy G. Butler (2020) elaborates on these definitions, identifying two quintessential qualities for the early sitcoms: a repeatable premise, and segmentation of the story to allow for commercial interruptions (Butler, 2020, p. 15). These kinds of elements, however, do not provide any insight into the types of stories that sitcoms tell. Antonio Savorelli (2010) points out such definitions as ‘constructs’ of the industry, and that the definition of the genre changes and evolves as the interests of the audience and the industry change over time (p. 21 – 34). While these broad definitions may have been sufficient in the early days of the genre, the evolving structure and content of sitcoms render them increasingly unrecognizable.

The task of defining the sitcoms presents a challenge due to the many variations and iterations of the genre. Jason Mittell (2004) explains the ways that theorists and researchers of cultural studies have adopted to research genres. Definitional approaches focus on identifying recurring core elements in the text, while interpretive approaches concentrate on interpreting the textual meanings of genres within their sociopolitical context (Mittell, 2004, p. 2 - 6). However,

these methodologies have limitations when attempting to define the sitcom. The sitcom exhibits definitional elements such as the laugh track and the family-home backdrop, but as the genre evolved, shows like *M*A*S*H* chose not to include them. Similarly, interpretive approaches face limitations in providing a definition for a genre because their cultural interpretation of a text usually disregards the historical context of its creation (Mittell, 2004, p. 6). This also proves problematic because there is no intrinsic meaning to the stories the sitcoms present, as they change over the decades to address the sociopolitical structure they are situated in. Jane Feuer (1992) argues that simple definitions for the sitcom genre undermine its ability to adapt to its cultural context, making it appear conservative and static (p. 111). Instead, she suggests that the genre should be examined in terms of development rather than structure, while respecting its aesthetic and textual foundations and analyzing it intertextually within the corpus of works.

Who is Seinfeld?

The close of the 1980s saw NBC as the no. 1 network in America (Edgerton, 2007). As the network was enjoying its final golden years, executives were giving opportunities to young comedians to create new hit shows, especially through *Saturday Night Live* (1975 – ongoing, NBC). In 1988, George Shapiro, a manager of comedians from New York, arranged for one of his clients to meet with two NBC executives, Rick Ludwin and Warren Littlefield, to discuss potential opportunities. Shapiro's client was Jerry Seinfeld.

Jerry Seinfeld is a stand-up comedian born in New York in 1954, son of Betty Hesney, a Jewish bookkeeper of Syrian descent, and Kal Seinfeld, a Jewish sign maker born in Brooklyn. From a very young age, Seinfeld showed interest in being a comic, performing as young as 8 years old for a class fair (Oppenheimer, 2002). As a young child, he spent much of his time watching comedians on TV shows such as the *Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948 – 1971) and began forming his

own skits which he would practice and perform for his family and friends. His first gig as a stand-up happened on the same day he graduated from Queen's College, showcasing his material at the Catch a Rising Star comedy club in New York (Oppenheimer, 2002, p. 116). The young comedian bombed. Regardless, he continued performing in various open mics in New York, improving his ability as a writer and performer.

In the 1980s, Seinfeld started becoming a television regular. In 1980 he was cast for the role of Frankie on the sitcom *Benson* (ABC, 1979 – 1986), a disastrous role for the comedian, who was fired after only a few appearances (Oppenheimer, 2002, p. 177 - 183). Nevertheless, he continued performing in clubs and grasping opportunities to appear on TV. Seinfeld got his first big break in 1981, appearing on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (NBC, 1962 – 1992). After performing, the comedian received an ok sign by the host, something he still considers one of the biggest achievements of his career (Oppenheimer, 2002). Seinfeld's charisma and unique comedic stylings garnered the attention of audiences and earned him a regular spot on the show. The comedian was gaining momentum, and his pairing with the legendary manager George Shapiro, the man partly responsible for Andy Kaufman's¹ success, attracted NBC's interest.

In 1988, Shapiro wrote a letter to Brandon Tartikoff, the head of the entertainment division on NBC at the time, highlighting the young comedian's talents and announcing his vision of Seinfeld having his own show on the network in the near future. Shapiro eventually managed to secure a meeting for Seinfeld and the two executives mentioned earlier, Rick Ludwin and Warren Littlefield (Sackett, 2004). Ludwin was especially interested in Seinfeld. Ludwin was in charge of

¹ Andy Kaufman was an American comedian and performance artist who gained notoriety because he challenged audiences by blurring the line between his performance and reality. In the 1970s he became a household name after his bizarre appearances on *SNL* and his role in the sitcom *Taxi* (ABC, 1978 – 1982).

late night, variety, and specials, and saw great potential in the comedian (Oppenheimer, 2002, p. 236). The meeting was a success for Seinfeld, who was asked to develop anything he wanted, be it a show or a special. The comedian was certain about one thing from the start, that he would not act but play himself instead. Seinfeld was warming up to the idea of writing his own sitcom but would need a collaborator to realize his idea.

The Seinfeld Chronicles

While performing in *To Catch a Rising Star* in New York, Seinfeld became acquainted with another comedian named Larry David. David was also a stand-up comedian performing in New York clubs and occasionally making appearances on the SNL rip-off *Fridays* (ABC, 1982 – 1982), before being absorbed into *SNL* following the discontinuation of the show (Levine, 2010). David's humor was different from Seinfeld's, but they shared a common sensibility because of their similar background, both being Jewish comics from New York (Armstrong, 2017). Despite the differences in their performances and material, their comedic 'voices' matched, which they realized when Seinfeld performed some of David's material at a birthday party of a mutual friend (Armstrong, 2017).

After his meeting with NBC, Seinfeld approached David to discuss working together on a TV show. As they began discussing about the opportunity, they left the comedy club they were working at and visited a Korean deli across the street, where they indulged in discussing and making fun of random food items in the store (Oppenheimer, 2002, p. 236). David suggested that the show should be chronicling these kinds of menial, but funny, conversations. They expanded on the concept and decided to make a show about how Seinfeld got his material, a one-camera show that followed Seinfeld as he deals with everyday minutia. This very first iteration of the show was tentatively titled *Stand Up* (Sackett, 2004).

Problems loomed over the yet unborn sitcom. Littlefield voiced his concerns with the direction the two comedians aimed to follow and the fact that the show would not follow cohesive plotlines (Oppenheimer, 2002). Moreover, Littlefield was worried with the choice of Larry David because of the comedian's lack of television experience. Despite Littlefield's worries, Ludwin was captivated by the idea and became its champion within the network. The comedians were tasked to make some script changes, as well as commit to shooting the pilot with multiple cameras, but the executives greenlit the project. The two comedians joined forces with a producer from Castle Rock Entertainment named Glenn Padnick, a friend of Seinfeld's manager (Oppenheimer, 2002). Padnick would also be a champion of the show, granting Seinfeld and David's reasonable wishes, such as filming the show on film rather than on videotape. After a series of rewrites, a finalized version of the script was ready to shoot, now titled "*The Seinfeld Chronicles*".

The story of the pilot revolves around a woman visiting Jerry from out of town, and the conundrum that occurs from the mixed 'signs' that he was receiving from her. The pilot starts with a stand-up routine from Seinfeld and consists of a series of conversations between Seinfeld, his friend George Costanza (Jason Alexander), and his next-door neighbor Kramer (Michael Richards).

The first step to shooting the pilot was casting the supporting characters. George Costanza is Jerry's eccentric and erratic childhood friend, a character based on David's real-life persona. The two comedians and their casting director, Marc Hirschfeld, saw dozens of actors in Los Angeles, but none quite 'clicked' for the role (Sackett and Henry, 2004). Hirschfeld had cast a young actor with the stage name of Jason Alexander while working on *E/R* (CBS, 1984 – 1985), and invited him to read for the role of George because he seemed like an appropriate fit. Alexander explains in the documentary, *Seinfeld: How it Began* (Sackett and Henry, 2004), about his bizarre

casting meeting, in which he had received only parts of the script. Despite Alexander's low expectations, Seinfeld and David were convinced he was the right actor for the part, since his performance and erratic physicality perfectly matched what they had envisioned.

Kramer's character was the second to be cast for the pilot. Kramer is the whacky, vaudevillian, almost entirely morose, next-door neighbor that barges into Seinfeld's apartment unannounced and uninvited. The first iteration of the character however was slightly different. Though he was still morose, this Kramer was an agoraphobic recluse who had not left his apartment for years (Armstrong, 2017, p. 25). Based and named on David's real-life neighbor at the time, Kramer's role was quite easy to cast compared to that of George. David wanted to cast Michael Richards for the part, an up-and-coming comedian who was notorious for his physical comedy. Richards landed the role immediately, but all the while, Kramer's real-life counterpart was causing issues. Before the final draft of the pilot, Kramer's name on the page was Kessler. This was because the real-life Kramer would not let David use his name if he was not cast as the fictional character (Nigro, 2015). Reportedly Seinfeld was so charmed by the name Kramer that he was adamant about keeping it. Thus, he convinced the network to fulfill a list of demands the real-life Kramer requested, sans allowing him to act in the role.

The Seinfeld Chronicles first aired on NBC on July 5th, 1998. To the surprise of Seinfeld and David, the studio executives took a liking to the show, considering it funny and unique even though it was weird and light on story. The head of the network however was not convinced, citing that the show was "too New York" and "too Jewish" (Armstrong, 2017, p. 32). These issues became magnified a week later during the pilot-testing. In the pilot-testing phase the network issues a few hundred households to watch pilots and write feedback in an effort to gauge which shows should make it in the upcoming fall season. The feedback came back for *The Seinfeld Chronicles*, and the

show received its killing blow, or so thought the two showrunners (Armstrong, 2017, p. 32). “Pilot performance: weak” was on the front page of the pilot’s report. The report highlighted issues such as the unlikable characters, lack of stakes, and bizarre sense of humor. After feedback like this, getting a slot in the upcoming fall season was out of the question. Once more, the champion of the show, Ludwin, lent his hand to the two comedians.

1989 was ending and NBC could lose the rights to the show if they let it fall through entirely. Though the showrunners were not aware of it at first, Ludwin sacrificed a chunk of his budget that was reserved for a two-hour television special for Bob Hope (Armstrong, 2017, p. 33). With this money, Ludwin managed to secure an order of four episodes, with the first season of the show officially premiering the coming summer of 1990. Before production of the first season commenced, some final alterations would have to be conducted to steer the show in the right direction. The first came from Seinfeld himself, who decided to change the title of the show to avoid any potential confusion with a show running on ABC at the time titled *The Marshal Chronicles* (1990). The other alteration came as a note from the network, who strongly suggested the addition of a female character as part of the main cast (Armstrong, 2017, p. 34). This was an appropriate request given that the only major female character of the pilot was a wisecracking waitress portrayed by Lee Garlington. Despite the infamous disdain David had for studio notes, the two showrunners agreed.

Seinfeld: A Slow Start

The production of the first season began in spring of 1990. A significant decision was the casting of Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Elaine. Louis-Dreyfus was a hilarious, snappy, and charismatic comedian that David had worked with in passing during his short stay with *SNL* in 1982 (Sackett and Henry, 2004). David and Seinfeld were immediately captivated by Louis-Dreyfus’ portrayal

of the character, giving the role a depth and quality that exceeded their expectations. After her audition, Lous-Dreyfus was offered the role (Arras, 2020, p. 40). The now iconic cast was complete. Seinfeld and David wrote the four episodes and began shooting soon after, getting Tom Cherones as director. Castle Rock Entertainment were still kind and flexible with the two newcomers, helping them create a more complete look for the show than what they had prepared for the pilot. NBC also showcased an uncharacteristic amount of lenience with the creators, who received few notes and alterations and were left ‘unpunished’ when they decided to outright ignore some of the feedback they were receiving. With the production underway, Seinfeld and David, now officially the executive producers of *Seinfeld*, tried to find a musician to create the theme for their show.

The musician they found was a young composer named Jonathan Wolff, creator of the theme songs in *Married with Children* and *Who’s the Boss?* (ABC, 1984 – 1992). Wolff was approached by and was given the freedom to create whatever he wanted but was also tasked to solve a unique problem. The opening of each episode of *Seinfeld* would begin with a stand-up routine by Jerry. Early in the production, the showrunners realized that this would be a problematic practice because the theme would play over the comedian’s lines. Wolff was drawn by the challenge and agreed to create the entire soundtrack of the show. To solve said issue, Wolff decided that the opening theme would be different for each episode. The musician would change the tune’s tempo and pauses to match the incantations present in Seinfeld’s delivery and timing. Wolff utilized a whacky combination of sounds to create the sitcom’s music profile, relying exclusively on a slap bass and beatboxing noises he would make with his mouth, lips, and fingers (Armstrong, 2017, p. 39). The bizarre combination surprised and fascinated Seinfeld and David, who defended the composer’s choice, threatening to walk away from the show after the network voiced their complaints.

The four new episodes started airing on NBC in May 1990, playing on Wednesdays at 9:30 pm, the time slot right after the weekly reruns of *Cheers* (Sackett and Henry, 2004). Though the show started to receive some positive feedback, and simultaneously find a core audience in young adult men, it was far from a major hit (Nigro, 2015). Despite the middling numbers, the audience quickly grew to enjoy the main cast. Furthermore, the network's executive vice president of program planning and scheduling -the person responsible for arranging time slots and overseeing ratings- debunked the original concerns of the show being "too Jewish" and "too New York", as the show was performing just as well in Chicago and Seattle (Armstrong, 2017, p. 45). Thus, *Seinfeld* was considered as having a potential of becoming a hit. Afraid that they would fall behind with younger audiences, as *The Simpsons* was siphoning a large chunk of the audience from them, the executives at NBC decided to give *Seinfeld* another chance with a second season. This time, the order was for 13 episodes rather than four.

Seinfeld found its footing during said second season. The showrunners and crew were developing the characters and experimenting with new kinds of stories, while trying to perfect the shooting conditions and rhythm. Seinfeld and David had become familiar and comfortable in their allocated roles within the production. Seinfeld was in charge of the entire side of shooting and rehearsing. David was in charge of the writing, as well as supervising the other writers involved such as Peter Mehlman and Larry Charles. Then, Seinfeld and David would work on the final version of each episode's script together, reportedly locking themselves in their shared office for days to rehearse and perfect each script (Armstrong, 2017, p. 48). The comedians attempted to be meticulous with the scripts, obsessing over two aspects especially, originality, and how funny they were. This approach explains how the show began formulating its unique tone of comedy. Two

episodes in the season are emblematic of Seinfeld and David's mastery, the penultimate and the final episode of the season.

The penultimate episode of season 2, "*The Chinese Restaurant*", was the network's biggest. The moment the *NBC* executives read the script they grew concerned that the show would be a disaster. The reason behind these worries is that the episode seemed entirely without story, as it involved the cast waiting for a table in a restaurant for its whole duration (Armstrong, 2017, p. 55). The episode takes place in one location for its entirety, and the story played out in real time. Though each of the three main characters are given a variety of situations to react to and their own little subplots, the executives could not see this as anything but a step backward. Finally, the network allowed the episode to air as is, although they pushed it back on the season's schedule to avoid ruining the momentum the show was building.

The finale of the season is not emblematic because it was predicted to fail, but rather because it is the first example of a storytelling method that David would adopt for many episodes to follow. "*The Busboy*" follows two main plotlines one revolving around Seinfeld and a busboy he gets in trouble, and the other revolving around Elaine and her new boyfriend. There is closure for both storylines, but unlike episodes before it, "*The Busboy*" concludes by connecting the two unrelated storylines into an explosive conclusion (Armstrong, 2017, p. 57).

The premiere of season two was scheduled for January 16th, 1991, but was cancelled as news reels reporting the States' bombing of Baghdad playing it its stead. Though still earning a smaller viewership than its CBS competitor *Jake and the Fatman* (CBS, 1987 – 1992) as well as not being present in the Nielsen rating for the year, the show had formed a strong niche audience (Armstrong, 2017, p. 47). Despite its creator's expectations, *Seinfeld* had inspired enough confidence in NBC, and was therefore renewed for a third 23-episode season.

Becoming a Hit Show

Though season 3 is not considered *Seinfeld*'s 'breakthrough' season, it consolidated the flow behind the writing and production which they would continue for the next seven years. At the start of season 3 the cast and crew changed stages permanently, leaving the Desilu Cahuenga Studios stage to move to the CBS-MTM Studios lot where legendary sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970 – 1977) was shot (Armstrong, 2017). Here they adopted a consistent production cycle that is thoroughly detailed in the short documentary *Running with the Egg: Making a 'Seinfeld'* (Sackett and Henry, 2005a). Writing the episode always started with an idea. David or one of the writers would come up with a story or anecdote that happened (or could happen) in their lives. The writers would go to Larry with ideas every day, hoping that they would get his approval so that they could begin working on a script. After the comedian gave the go-ahead, the writers would come up with a fragment of a script or an entire storyline, which David would weave together with his own or those of other writers to construct the episodes. The writers were satisfied with this approach as they would receive a fair chance of getting their scripts on television, while also getting first-hand experience on other aspects of the production, such as rehearsing and editing (Sackett and Henry, 2005a).

After the two comedians finalized a script their weekly shooting schedule commenced. On Wednesdays, the cast would come together and conduct a table read of the week's episode. Shooting started on Thursdays. The scenes that were shot with one-camera, outdoor scenes, driving scenes, and scenes involving stunts would be shot by the end of the week, proceeded by *Seinfeld* and David spending their weekends rewriting the script until any weaknesses had been ironed out (Sackett and Henry, 2005a). The cast would be reunited on Mondays where they would finish on-location filming and complete any necessary reshoots. Finally, the live studio audience was invited

to the studio on Tuesdays. A comedian, often Seinfeld himself, would warm the audience up by performing a short routine, after which a brief introduction to the episode was presented by the cast before they began performing. To ensure that the audience fully comprehended each episode, the crew of *Seinfeld* would re-enact on location scenes or show them through tapes. Thus, two tasks were being accomplished at the same time, keeping the audience up-to-speed with the plot of the episode, and recording a live studio laugh track even for scenes without one.

The final step in the life cycle of the episodes was the editing. Cutting the episodes together was another arduous task, as it required stitching together parts from different shots, often from more than one takes, while also implementing real laugh tracks recorded on set (Armstrong, 2017, p. 72). The biggest obstacle regarding the editing came from cutting down the episodes. Since the episodes shot were supposed to be just under 30 minutes of footage, it meant that jokes, and often entire scenes, had to systematically be cut from the final product (Sackett and Henry, 2005a).

While the third season was airing, NBC's prime time schedule was changing dramatically. Just before the summer of 1992, *The Cosby Show* was concluding its eight-year run for the network. This meant that one of the network's most important time slots on prime-time TV was open in the first years that competition was catching up to the network, threatening its ten-year rule (Armstrong, 2017, p. 74). Seinfeld's Wednesday slot remained unchanged, but ABC made a major change to their timetable. *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991 – 1999) was tied with NBC's *Cheers* at the number four spot on the Nielsen rankings (Brooks and Marsh, 2007, p. 1693), and was performing as one ABC's best new shows. ABC announced that the show would move from Tuesdays at 8:30pm to Wednesdays at 9:00 pm, directly competing against *Seinfeld*. When the season concluded and the ratings came through, the competition had crushed *Seinfeld*. *Home*

Improvement had risen to third place, while *Seinfeld* ranked 25th. Despite losing to the competition, the network executives were elated by the season's performance.

The production cycle was fixed, and the showrunners had found a direction that satisfied both them and the network. The crew became adjusted to their increased responsibilities and tighter working schedule, while the actors had become so familiar with their roles that they were often working without the need of directions (Armstrong, 2017, p. 73). Furthermore, the show was also building buzz. Its niche audience had solidified and continued increasing faster than before, and magazines started promoting the show's originality and unique comedic stylings. Even critics were giving the show recognition, with *Seinfeld* winning its first Emmy in August 1992, with Elaine Pope and Larry Charles receiving an Emmy for writing the episode titled "The Fix Up" (Brooks and Marsh, 2007, p. 1661). For the first time since the pilot aired, the network was guaranteed to pick up the show for another season, as they did immediately after shooting the season concluded, guaranteeing *Seinfeld's* fourth season in the fall schedule of 1992-1993.

The showrunners, Seinfeld and David, had been fully accustomed to their workflow, meaning that shooting the fourth season was smoother than it ever was (Sackett and Henry, 2005b). To add to that, the network was giving the creators free reign over the stories they were telling, changing their ways from their note-giving habits. Consequently, the episodes for season 4 are proof of the comedians' newfound freedom. In particular, two episodes include essential elements of the identity of the show that defined it for decades. "The Pitch" (episode 2), features a meta story of Jerry and George pitching a sitcom to NBC executives, mirroring the real-life story of Seinfeld and David. "The Contest" (episode 11), found the cast participating in a competition to see who can hold out self-satisfying their sexual desires the longest. Despite some reservations

from the network, they were impressed by the performance of these episodes and how they became topics of conversation across the nation (Armstrong, 2017, p. 76).

The start of the fourth season was the most promising for the show so far, even though the numbers were comparable to the previous. In the middle of the 1992-1993 season, NBC saw another big schedule change. *Cheers* would end its airing mid-season after leading actor Ted Danson quit the show. In the absence of a better show to replace *Cheers*'s time slot, the network decided that the best fit would be *Seinfeld*, as the two shows shared a common audience in young adult men (Armstrong, 2017, p. 76). This choice marked a monumental shift for the show's trajectory.

After the mid-season timeslot change for *Seinfeld*, it received a consistent increase in viewership of about 50%, meaning the season's latter episodes achieved viewership of over 25 million. This was the push the show needed to reach a wide audience, thus marking this *Seinfeld*'s breakthrough season (Sackett and Henry, 2005b). Not only was the show achieving its highest viewership yet, but also critical reception. *Seinfeld* won its first (and only) Emmy for 'Outstanding Comedy Series on Prime Time Television', alongside 'Outstanding Supporting Actor' for Michael Richards, and 'Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series' for David's episode "The Contest" (Brooks and Marsh, 2007, p. 1662). From this point forward, *Seinfeld* entered a five-season streak that saw it top the viewership charts until its conclusion in 1998.

Departures and Closure

Seinfeld was a contender for top show of the States by its fifth season. The fourth season of the show performed admirably in the Nielsen rankings, rising to the third spot from number twenty-five, just one spot behind *Home Improvement*. With its newest season, *Seinfeld* manage to top

these, winning the first spot in the rankings for the 1994-1995 season (Brooks and Marsh, 2007, p. 1694). Season 5 carried the momentum forward, securing their core audience while slowly gaining new viewers with episodes such as “The Puffy Shirt” and “The Marine Biologist”. The executive producers and crew perfected their rhythm. The actors claim that shooting was entirely intuitive because the scripts were always as funny as they could be (Sackett and Henry, 2005a). The fifth season came and went without any issues, apart from the earthquake that struck Los Angeles in 1994 that damaged the set and paused production for two weeks (Armstrong, 2017, p. 115).

With its sixth season, Seinfeld started facing its biggest departures. The crew of the show was solidified in the previous seasons, with all the major production roles being filled by the same people, with the exception of the writers who rotated as some older ones would decide to leave. Season five saw Tom Cheronos, the director of all episodes with the exception of the pilot, leaving the show (Armstrong, 2017, p. 146). Thankfully, the show managed to land Andy Ackerman who would become responsible for all the episodes of the season and all the way through to the finale.

Season seven, however, marked a tectonic shift for the show with David’s departure. Though the show was achieving praise it had never experienced before, the exhausting timetable the two comedians were dealing with as well as the stress of having an entire show on their shoulder was taking a toll on their personal lives. Seinfeld and David would essentially work all year around including weekends. When they weren’t shooting, they were developing ideas for the next season, while the shooting period was spent exhaustively revising scripts (Sackett and Henry, 2005a). The rest of the crew enjoyed holidays and days off as expected- though they often had to sacrifice their weekends because of time constraints- especially the actors who had two weeks off between shootings. Larry David left the show after 134 episodes, leaving Seinfeld take over the entire

production (Armstrong, 2017, p. 148). This meant increased responsibilities for the writing staff that Seinfeld was now in charge of, since they would have to provide better ideas and interesting manuscripts to keep the pace up for the order of 22 episodes for season 8.

As was expected, David's departure changed the dynamic of the production remarkably. Seinfeld knew he would not find the time to exhaust over the writing as David did, but thankfully, he had grown confident in his writing team and chose to provide them with more freedom for their episodes (Armstrong, 2017, p. 165). Furthermore, the showrunner was open to pitches from comedians and writers he was familiar with and expanded the writing staff to try to fill David's absence. The show was already devoid of a traditional 'writer's room', but with season 8 it created a new cycle for generating scripts. The writers would all come together to pitch ideas as they did before. Those who saw their ideas approved would begin working on an outline, which once approved would be developed into a script. Once a script was completed, the writer would choose one or two other writers to conduct rewrites on the episode. Their newly adapted workflow showcased great results. New writers got their moment in the spotlight, the stories were still unique, and the quality did not suffer (Sackett and Henry, 2007).

Season 8 was another big hit for the network, but Seinfeld was getting exhausted. With the eighth season, Seinfeld had helped NBC maintain its No. 1 spot for three consecutive years and raised a profit of \$200 million (Armstrong, 2017, p. 172). Despite the show's success, Seinfeld was given too tall a task and did not wish to continue working on it. The comedian wanted the show to end before it reached its peak, rather than allowing it to drop in quality. This wasn't the sole reason behind this choice however, as the comedian wanted to take a rest from his career-driven lifestyle and return to his roots by performing stand-up (Oppenheimer, 2002, p. 302). In a meeting just before Christmas of 1997, Seinfeld and his agent met with executives from NBC

including CEO Robert Wright, where he was offered an unprecedented \$5 million per episode. He refused regardless, and NBC announced to the public that *Seinfeld* would complete its run with its ninth season.

This decision baffled much of the audience and the press, resulting in *Seinfeld* receiving even more attention than before (Armstrong, 2017, p. 176). As the season was shooting in early 1998, curiosity and hype was building around the series' finale. Some held the belief that the showrunner was tricking them about the show concluding, while others held their own preconceived notions about how the characters should be sent off. To help him deliver a satisfying finale, Seinfeld invited David to write the final episode together. David exited the show on good terms and often questioned his decision to leave his coworker and friend (Armstrong, 2017, p. 148), so he agreed to work on the finale with Seinfeld. In an effort to once again surprise audiences and subvert their expectations, the showrunners decided to have the series conclude with the main cast being sentenced to prison. David and Seinfeld kept the script of the finale under wraps, a preference they adhered to even during rehearsals, as they would shred the scripts and reprint them after each day (Sackett and Henry, 2007).

The cast and crew gathered in front of a live audience for the last time on April 8th, 1998, (Armstrong, 2017, p. 182). The finale aired on May 14th and attracted 76 million viewers, making it the third most-watched sitcom finale in TV history after *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers*. Although the final season achieved the number one spot on the Nielsen rankings once again, the finale was received negatively by most of the audience and critics (Brooks and Marsh, 2007, p. 1695). Reviewers criticized the episode's reliance on self-referential humor and callbacks to previously experienced moments, while fans were left unsatisfied with the conclusion given to characters they grew to love. The show that faced the constant threat of cancellation pulled through, becoming a

cult hit and then the leading network sitcom of the United States in terms of ratings. Furthermore, the rise in viewership proved to be a financial goldmine for the showrunners, executives and the network. In the mini documentary *The Last Lap* (Sackett and Henry, 2007) Seinfeld claims that despite the financial success of the show, his greatest accomplishment is that he created a show that “[...] people look back on it and think it was funny”.

***Seinfeld*: A show about nothing?**

Claiming that *Seinfeld* exceeded the expectations of the team behind its creation would be an understatement. The showrunners and cast have stated that the show was ‘up in the air’ for its first two years of airing (Sackett and Henry, 2004). Though *Seinfeld* and David maintained their belief that the show was funny from the very beginning, they could not have foreseen it becoming a major hit, as they simply wanted to make a ‘funny show’. But what made the show funny, and how did it manage to capture such a large audience? To begin comprehending the contributing elements to the show’s success, an analysis of certain landmark episodes is carried out.

This thesis will examine four episodes from the series: “The Chinese Restaurant”, “The Pitch”, “The Contest”, and “The Finale”. The first episode, “The Chinese Restaurant”, serves as a turning point for the show, crystallizing its premise and showcasing its capability of telling stories that other shows had not yet attempted. “The Pitch” is then analyzed to understand how the show incorporated meta elements into its stories and earned the title of “the show about nothing”. The third episode, “The Contest”, is also from the same season and was highly praised by both fans and critics, leading to an increase in popularity and critical acclaim for the show. Lastly, “The Finale” is examined, as it had the highest viewership but received criticism for how it treated the beloved characters of the sitcom.

“The Chinese Restaurant” – The Minutiae of Everyday Life

“The Chinese Restaurant” is the eleventh episode of the second season. The episode takes place in one location for its entirety and is unique because the events play out in real time. Though the episode is light on plot, meaning it does not progress any major arc or reveal much about the characters, the main players are all given their own individual storylines. Jerry encounters a woman

he realizes he has met before but cannot remember where. Later he finds out that she works for his uncle, to whom he lied to get out of dinner with. Meanwhile Elaine is starving and is progressively growing restless waiting for the “5 to 10 minutes” the manager repeatedly exclaims. Meanwhile George is trying to make a phone call to the woman he is dating but fails to do so after a rude man and a woman delay him. The only member of the cast who is missing is Kramer. This is not an outlier however, as his character was meant to be a recluse that never appeared outside Jerry’s apartment, a character trait that was quickly dropped to give more scenes to Richards (Sackett and Henry, 2005b).

Despite the episode’s bizarre concept and structure, it exhibits a lot of thematic elements that defined the show from the start. Since the inception of the pilot, Seinfeld and David wanted the humor to come from the minutiae of everyday life (Armstrong, 2017, p. 14). The show reflected Seinfeld and David’s tendencies to generate material from daily interactions and silly observations. “*The Chinese Restaurant*” demonstrates the show’s concept perfectly, as it encompasses the general theme behind these situations, while exemplifying how the original concept of the show came about. When the two comedians first met to discuss Seinfeld’s offer from NBC, they both realized that: “Whenever Larry and I (Seinfeld) would chat, it sounded like great dialogue” (Noonan, 1998). The storylines of the episode might be of menial stakes, but the punchy dialogue, and exaggerated reactions make them funny regardless. Moreover, waiting in line at a restaurant is a universally shared experience, meaning anyone can sympathize with these characters to some extent. Sympathizing with the situation though does not make it funny.

In her analysis of the episode, McWilliams observes that the show adopts the concept of elongation to derive its humor. This is the concept of taking a situation that would only take a portion of the runtime and allow it to expand over the entirety of the episode. McWilliams claims

that *Seinfeld* is the first show to give an entire episode to this kind of humor (McWilliams, 2006, p. 82). In order to prevent the episode from feeling slow, the story jumps from character to character, slowly progressing their own storylines while interacting with each other for its entire duration (Arras, 2020). Furthermore, a ‘ticking clock’ is inserted in the episode, as the gang will miss a screening of *Plan 9 From Outer Space* if their dinner is very delayed, raising the stakes of the entire situation.

To wrap up the entire episode, after the cast grows frustrated from the circumstances that have plagued their wait, they decide to quit waiting for a table and leave separately, abandoning the plan to go to the film’s screening. Just as all three have exited the restaurant, the manager yells that their table is ready without the gang ever hearing it. This is yet another recurring device the show often adopts, making the gang the bud of the joke, failing to achieve the menial goals they have set, or having their plans foiled by what happens in the storyline.

Although the writers installed these elements to keep the bizarre episode quick and snappy, “The Chinese Restaurant” was considered doomed to fail by the network. Even Rick Ludwin, the NBC executive that was champion of the show was unsure if it should air (Armstrong, 2017, p. 55). The showrunners persevered and managed to convince the network to air the episode as it was shot. Although it performed comparatively evenly with the rest of the season, the episode received great media attention and critical praise (Armstrong, 2017, p. 57). “The Chinese Restaurant” is a great example of the stories *Seinfeld* excelled at telling. Instead of trying to tackle overarching stories or character arcs, the show focused on highlighting and elevating moments and experiences that audiences could relate to, however boring or menial they initially appear. The characteristic absence of plot might appear off putting at first, since nothing much seems to occur in the episode, but closer attention shows how much is happening in an episode with such a simple premise.

“The Pitch” – The Show About Nothing

“The Pitch” is the second episode of the season and overall, the 43rd of the series. The episode aired on September 16th of 1992, while the third episode is a continuation of its (Nigro, 2015). The episode starts with Jerry approached by a pair of NBC executives after performing stand-up in a comedy club. The executives ask Jerry to come up with and pitch them an idea for a show, which he gladly accepts and shares with George, who becomes ecstatic and eager to participate in the writing. Later on, as the two make fun of how hard it is to distinguish the words ‘salsa’ and ‘seltzer’ when pronounced with an ethnic accent, George proclaims “this should be the show”, explaining that it should just be about people talking. When Jerry asks George what the show is about, he responds with “it’s about nothing”. Costanza repeats this line to the NBC executives, who seem baffled by the statement. As George is backed into a corner, he panics and proclaims that the show shall not change because he is unwilling to sacrifice his “artistic integrity”.

Although the episode features two other storylines, one revolving around Kramer getting a concussion by a man named Joe Davola and the other of George making a romantic pass to the only female NBC executive, the titular pitch is what steals the spotlight. All these storylines are fully resolved in the following episode, but “The Pitch” stands on its own. Once again, many involved in the production were baffled by the episode, worried that the specificity of the situation is a step away from the central model of *Seinfeld* as it would be a situation not many are familiar with. In the “Inside Look” of the episode, an extra feature from the DVD release of the show, Jason Alexander reveals that he shared this sentiment, feeling that it strayed too far away from what the show’s appeal was. He elaborates however, that after shooting the episode he was proven wrong, as he was impressed by how funny the result was.

Meta or intertextual elements in sitcoms date as far back as the 1950s. During *I Love Lucy*'s first season, "Lucy Does a Commercial" focused around the shooting of a television commercial for a show's sponsor, including references to the connection between advertisers and their importance in television creation (Edgerton, 2007, p. 134). *Seinfeld* puts its own spin to this trope by highlighting the thin line between the situations of the show and reality. The episode drew attention to itself, as it created an interplay between the real-life experience of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, and their proxies in the show, Jerry and George. The line "it's about nothing" was repeated throughout the episode and quickly resonated with viewers, who instantly adopted the catchphrase "the show about nothing" to refer to the show (Armstrong, 2017, p. 101). Turns out, the show with the rocky start found what it would be known for, and that something was "nothing".

But how can a show be about nothing? Theorists and researchers have tackled this subject matter to great extents. In *They Laughed Unhappily Ever After* (Ching, 2006) the author explains the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy and its connection to *Seinfeld*. Sartre's book about the nineteenth-century novelist Gustave Flaubert titled *The Family Idiot* (1821 – 1857) explores the connection of comedy with the idea of nothingness. Barbara Ching explains that "The novelist attempted to write about nothing as an escape from the hollowness of the bourgeois world he knew" (Ching, 2006, p. 60). She then elaborates by giving a definition of what can be identified as the "something" in comedy according to Sartre, which is the familiar triumph of hope and despair of comedy. Seinfeld and Flaubert derive humor from a similar source, the banality of the status quo (Ching, 2006, p. 62). Ching also explains that comedy- and any story to that extent- is unavoidably about something regardless of how menial or unimportant that something might be. Therefore, Ching identifies that the nothingness that audiences acknowledged within *Seinfeld* was in fact the recurring comedic theme of situations and episodes contradicting the 'something' that

was the status quo. She adds that for most contemporary shows (e.g. *Cheers*), the expectation is that “all roads lead to a happy home” (Ching, 2006, p. 62). Thus, *Seinfeld* becomes “the show about nothing” by subverting the status quo and instead of rewarding the main cast, usually finds them the bud of the joke, punishing them and eventually imprisoning them for the behaviors they exhibit. This is articulated by the show’s motto within production since its beginnings. The leading philosophy behind the stories of *Seinfeld* according to David was “no hugging, no learning” (Lavery and Lewis, 2006, p. 36).

The connection between nothingness and the show is also explored in *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing* (Irwin, 1999). In Eric Bronson’s chapter in the book, the debate about what ‘nothing’ entails is examined through the discussions of the Greek philosophers Plato and Parmenides in the *Sophist*. Although the Sophists did not comment on the relationship between nothingness and comedy, Plato strongly insisted that there has to be something to nothing (Bronson, 1999, p. 62). To further prove this point, Bronson examines Lao Tzu’s *The Way of Life*, which shares a similar sentiment to Plato’s beliefs that there is always something in nothing. So, despite George’s claims that the show is about nothing, these philosophers would disagree since there is always something in nothing and vice versa. Therefore, despite the claims by the characters, what they refer to as ‘nothing’ in the show, is in a meta sense the thematic identity that the creators gave to the show by trying to separate it from other sitcoms at the time.

“The Contest” - Master of its Domain

The fourth season featured another landmark episode. “The Contest” finds the gang competing against each other in a contest about who can hold out the longest without masturbating. After George’s mother catches him “treating his body like it was an amusement park” in her own

home, he vows to never do “that” again. Provoked by his friends he dares them to join him in a contest to see who can hold out the longest, given their willingness to bet money on it. All four friends participated, and they quickly found themselves troubled by constant erotic provocations. George witnesses a nurse giving a female patient a sponge bath when visiting his mother in the hospital, Elaine finds herself taking classes at the gym with John F. Kennedy Junior, while Kramer and Jerry perversely peep at their nudist new neighbor.

The concept of the episode might sound provocative, but David and Seinfeld meticulously crafted the dialogue to avoid any potential problems from the censorship board. As a matter of fact, the word ‘masturbation’ is not uttered once in the entire episode. Instead, they dodge around the word by using phrases such as “master of my domain” and “king of the county”. The episode came directly from David’s notebook, who allegedly took part in a similar contest during his years in university (Sackett and Henry, 2005b). Despite the creators’ fears, the network let the episode air as is after getting approval of the censors. “The Contest” earned Larry David an Emmy for writing and helped *Seinfeld* win the Emmy for best comedy. David has also claimed that this is his favorite episode (Strause, 2020).

Although the memorable metaphors and lines that allude to sex are funny and quotable, I argue that the episode reached these heights because of a combination of elements. The episode’s concept is funny and revolves around a topic anyone can relate to, allowing for some of the show’s best attributes to come through. To talk about *Seinfeld* without talking about the main cast would be meaningless. Although Seinfeld plays himself, Richard, Alexander, and Louis-Dreyfus act roles very different from their real-life. By the fourth season, the behaviors and patterns of the characters were crystalized, and the actors had become fully emersed in their roles (Armstrong, 2017, p. 71). Kramer was no longer a social recluse, George was completing his metamorphosis into an erratic

narcissist, and Elaine had become more involved in the stories compared to the earlier seasons, which allowed her character to fully materialize.

The four main characters behave very distinctly from each other, but they share one common characteristic. All four of them exhibit immoral or selfish behaviors, with plotlines commonly revolving around them getting ‘punished’ for their decisions and actions (Arras, 2020). Earlier in our analysis, it was mentioned that a trope the show commonly utilized was finishing episodes by punishing the characters in some way, usually because they deserve to be reprimanded for their misanthropic, self-driven, perverted, and sometimes criminal behaviors. “The Contest” showcases how the characters are responsible for nasty and cruel actions in a funny way. Kramer, Jerry, and George show their adolescent mentality by staring across the block into the window of a female nudist. What’s worse is that even Elaine, the feminine voice of the show, does not stop them, because what they are doing helps her win the bet. George further showcases these voyeuristic tendencies when visiting his mother in the hospital, who broke her back when she caught her son during the act. Rather than showing compassion and regret for his actions, George is frustrated by her bickering. He only visits her to catch a glimpse of the routine sponge bath that happens on the bed next to her. Jerry also shows his dark nature in his storyline with Marla the virgin. He puts a front up with her, pretending that he does not care about sex at all, while growing progressively more comically frustrated because of his abstinence, both because of her and the contest. All these storylines accumulate to test the characters and challenge their chances of winning the contest.

Elaine’s participation is important for the time in the context of gender. Having a cis gender woman comfortably discuss this masturbation with three other men was radical for television and remains rare to this day (Sackett and Henry, 2005b). Elaine is portrayed in the show as career driven and a woman who does not want to settle for a man that is less than perfect. She is willing

to break up with her romantic interest if they exhibit even the slightest hints of problematic behavior, retreating to her life within her friend group (Di Mattia, 2006, p. 90). Di Mattia claims that these elements make her an example of a “post-feminist” woman, “freed from traditional constraints and possessing so-called masculine characteristics” (Di Mattia, 2006).

In our examination of the sitcoms, we have delved into the historical evolution of the genre, focusing on the presence of the ‘family’ in the center of its narrative. In Mintz’s publication *Ideology in the Television Situation Comedy*, he expounds on this point by explaining that television sitcoms have traditionally been characterized by their thematic inclinations centered around the notion that “the family is the most important thing” (Mintz, 1985, p. 45). However, by the 1990s, the sitcom genre had diversified from its original definition, with workplace sitcoms like *Frasier* (NBC, 1993 – 2004) and *Cheers* featuring characters not bound by familial bonds. As the genre continued to progress, shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* introduced characters bound by friendship rather than work obligations (Butler, 2020). Although these characters featured do not reside together or share a conventional family structure, their unwavering bond as friends provides them with the freedom to explore unique storylines and situations, such as the one in “The Contest”, which delves into themes that might be deemed uncomfortable within traditional family dynamic. Despite their individual flaws, the characters remain (mostly) loyal to each other, returning to their friend group whenever they inevitably make fools of themselves. *Seinfeld*’s cast frequently engages in actions that might be considered cringe-worthy, immoral, or selfish, but their enduring friendship has resonated with audiences and paved the way for the friends-as-family sitcom (Arras, 2020).

“The Finale” – No Hugging, No Learning

With David’s departure, the tone of the show underwent drastic changes. The last episode he had written “The Invitations” (season 7, episode 24), concluded with George inadvertently killing his fiancé in an attempt to reduce the cost of his wedding by purchasing cheaper wedding invitations. This was one of the darkest moments of the show, made even worse by the representation of George trying to hide his relief that his marriage will not come to pass when he hears the sad news. As mentioned, after David’s exit, the scripts became Seinfeld’s responsibility as well. Seinfeld did not attempt to emulate David’s dark tone and pessimistic storylines. Instead, he worked with the writers to create more absurd situations for the characters (Armstrong, 2017, p. 164). Although *Seinfeld* would still find its inspiration in real-life dealings, the resolutions were becoming more whacky and cartoonish. The other change was the termination of the stand-up segments at the start and end of the episode have been cut, because Seinfeld did not have time to develop the routines given the additional workload (Nigro, 2015).

Audiences did not seem to object to this direction, as viewership did not suffer for the final two seasons, and the sitcom continued its run as the number one comedy for NBC. Hype was gathering around *Seinfeld*’s big finale, especially after the announcement that David would come back to co-write the episode. The sitcom had garnered a dedicated audience over the years, so expectations were high. Media coverage elevated the expectations further in their attempts to reveal how the show might conclude (Armstrong, 2017, p. 177). David, Seinfeld, and even the NBC executives felt cornered. There was no way to satisfy everyone while staying true to the show. Instead, David wrote a finale that returned the show to the mantra that was present since the first seasons: “no hugging, no learning” (Sackett and Henry, 2004).

David wrote a divisive script that saw the main cast literally on trial for all their misdoings over the seasons in the aptly titled episode “The Finale”. The episode starts with Jerry receiving a deal from NBC to create his “show about nothing”, a call back to the plotline of the second season which concluded with his imaginary show getting dropped. Along with the new deal, Jerry receives an NBC jet to fly to a destination of his choice for one week before moving to Los Angeles. Jerry and his friends decide that they will go to Paris, but their travels are cut short by the plane almost crashing after Kramer violently tries to remove some water from his ears. The gang end up in Latham, Massachusetts, where they witness a man getting car-jacked and robbed right before their eyes. Instead of helping the man, they tape the crime and make snarky comments belittling the victim and his situation. They are promptly arrested by an officer and thrown in a cell because they are in violation of the newly enacted ‘good Samaritan law’, which sees civilians punished if they fail to rescue or help a fellow civilian in danger. A trial ensues to establish the characters of the cast and also acts like a series of callbacks to jokes and characters from earlier seasons. After hearing the collective thoughts of the witnesses, the jury finds the defendants guilty and sentences Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer to one year in jail. The show concludes with Jerry performing a stand-up routine in prison, with his friends George and Kramer watching alongside their new prison mates. The one-hour finale achieved the highest viewership of the show but was received poorly by critics and a most of the audience (Armstrong, 2017, p. 84). Over time, different critics and theorists have had the time to fully develop their thoughts surrounding the divisive episode.

Morreale explains that in a ‘postmodern’ climate of the sitcom, shows take these moments a step further by often referencing or parodying other sitcoms. *Seinfeld*’s finale exhibits these traits. In the trial, the self-referential elements take center stage as characters from previous seasons recall funny storylines of the show. Following the “no hugging, no learning” rule however, David gave

these moments a vitriolic, critical character, rather than a tender, nostalgic approach. Instead, the characters are stripped of their familiar New York surroundings and are stranded in a place where no one knows them. It's only fair to be judged this way, since the viewers witness how a bystander would interpret their actions as cruel and indifferent, which they are (Morreale, 2003).

In line with the self-referential tone of the episode, David also attempts to draw a full circle for the characters. As mentioned, the episode ends with a routine from Seinfeld, but the cast shares one last moment, a final meal, before being imprisoned. After the verdict, the main characters are thrown back into the county cell awaiting their transfer to prison and share a conversation. Elaine is questioning whether calling from prison would make a friend she has been rude to in the past forgive her. Kramer manages to get the water out of his ear and is relieved, juxtaposing the fact that he is about to go to prison. George returns to his usual nitpicking, complaining that the guard has not paid attention to their wellbeing because he did not give them ketchup with their meal. Finally, Jerry recites a line that reflects his observational humor that has been present since the beginning of the show. "See now, to me that button is in the worst spot". Mirroring a similar line from the pilot, the finale stayed true to the concept that fueled the show, rather than changing its tone at the finish line in an attempt to adhere to sitcom familiarities (Arras, 2020).

To drive the point home further, David also alluded to and mocked some prevailing theories about the show's conclusion. One was George and Jerry's show being revived by NBC. This popular theorized ending would tie a neat bow around the story by having the characters finish their story as the real-life counterparts started, with the show getting picked up. The episode commences with the meeting going great, fueling expectations, before crushing any hopes of it in the latter half. Another popular theory saw Jerry and Elaine getting married in the finale. Once

again, the episode fuels this idea by having Elaine almost proclaim her love for Jerry in the moments their plane appears to be crashing (Auster, 2006, p. 22).

“The Finale” asks audiences to consider the morality of these characters. In the chapter of *Seinfeld and Philosophy* titled “*The Final Episode: Is Doing Nothing Something?*” (Schick Jr., 1999) the author draws the distinction between bad and evil characters. He elaborates by noting the episode’s effort to showcase how bad the characters are because of their actions. When witnessing the carjacking, they could have yelled for help or dial 911, but they didn’t. This is a bad act, and Theodore Schick Jr. explains that given the ‘good Samaritan’ law, it is natural for the cast to be punished. This action does not make the characters evil. They do not endorse vice or have ill intent (most usually). Instead, the characters just try to restore society to a status quo they egotistically believe society deserves (Schick Jr., 1999).

Although it is hard to argue that the finale is the funniest episode of the sitcom, it is thematically appropriate for *Seinfeld*. It gave audiences one last chance to enjoy these characters, showcased what *Seinfeld* was trying to do from its beginnings, while also providing a thematically appropriate closure to a show about nothing.

Seinfeld's legacy

As the thematic analysis of seminal episodes demonstrated, the “show about nothing” traversed a wide array of topics through its nine-year run. Our three-part analysis culminates in a brief examination of the imprint the *Seinfeld* left on the sitcom genre and the broader television industry, by presenting its enduring cultural resonance through reviews and pop-culture influence.

Syndication and Wealth

Assessing a show's legacy and impact is a daunting task. Evaluating the influence of any historical artifact can be a slippery slope through definitions of success, especially when it comes to artistic media. Seinfeld and David claim that they never anticipated the status their sitcom enjoyed neither did they aspire to achieve it (Sackett and Henry, 2004). Regardless, the show ended up becoming a huge financial success for both showrunners and NBC. Though exact figures for all seasons are elusive, the ninth season of *Seinfeld* found the network charging advertisers \$550,000 per thirty-second ad spot, meaning the network netted a revenue of over \$150 million during the year the final season was airing alone (Armstrong, 2017, p. 168). The main cast were compensated adequately as well. Seinfeld was reportedly earning \$1 million per episode, while the rest earned \$125,000 per episode. However, it was through syndication that *Seinfeld* realized its financial potential (Epstein, Rogers and Reeves, 2006, p. 186).

Syndication is a practice that originated in the early years of television broadcasting. Popularized by Desilu productions (the production company founded and owned by Lucille Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz), the practice turned out to be a goldmine for *I Love Lucy* and most popular series succeeding it (Edgerton, 2007, p. 139). Syndication is the process through which content owners, in this case Seinfeld and David, lease the rights of a show to one or more television

stations, or lately streaming platforms, essentially renting out the rights to air the show (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2017, p. 224 - 225). One of the early requirements for shows to enter off-network syndication, was to be on the air for at least 100 episodes. Sitcoms were particularly well-suited for syndication, as successful ones often meet the length requirement, while their structure makes it easier for viewers to follow the events even if previous episodes have been missed.

In *From Must-See-TV to Brander Counterprogramming: Seinfeld and Syndication* (Epstein, Rogers and Reeves, 2006), the authors detail how the show's true financial success came from its continuous off-network syndication run. *Seinfeld* secured its first syndication deal with Columbia TriStar Television Distribution in fall of 1995 after reaching 100 episodes during its sixth season (Epstein, Rogers and Reeves, 2006, p. 191). Columbia and Castle Rock, the show's production company, earned between \$2.5 to \$3 million per episode of the show, just under what *Home Improvement* was earning in its syndication run. Contrary to other competitors however, *Seinfeld's* ratings did not decline during its initial syndication run. Following its finale in 1998 *Seinfeld* entered its second round of syndication, which saw these numbers rise even higher, making it the only show other than *M*A*S*H* to see a rise in numbers with its second cycle. *Seinfeld* continued its syndication run in the 21st century. In 2021, Netflix picked up the entirety of the series for a five-year run on the platform for over \$500 million, securing the international rights for the series (Battaglio, 2019).

Overall, if one were to gauge the show's success in terms of profitability or collective viewership, *Seinfeld's* triumph is undisputable. The final season was consistently drawing in over thirty million viewers of the young adult demographic that networks were struggling to attract. That same season saw advertisers being charged a million dollars per minute for the show's ad spots, while the finale had the networks charge advertisers two million dollars for thirty-second

commercials (Morreale, 2003, p. 275). *Seinfeld*'s economic success continued into the 21st century, with an unprecedented syndication run and a great deal with its eventual streaming service deals. Nevertheless, though the show's success is undeniable, can the same be said about its influence and longevity within popular culture?

Sitcoms after Seinfeld

The last indicator of the show's lasting impact this thesis will examine is its effect on sitcoms after its success. *Seinfeld* was unlike most of its predecessors within its genre. The show about nothing featured a cast of morally grey characters, refrained from offering lessons about life, and resisted the urge to provide profound meaning to everyday life. Sitcoms had come a long way from the days of Lucille Ball in the 1950s. Did *Seinfeld* affect the trajectory of the genre since it first started airing on NBC? Researchers and reporters have tackled this question before, with many offering their perspective on the show's legacy.

In an interview for the *New York Magazine*, Seinfeld shared what he thought was the show's most impactful factor to its success. Seinfeld states: "I think the show became a hit because we took a little step forward in comedic tone. We gave it our own style. When it first came on, it didn't sound like other sitcoms that were on at the time" (Smith, 1998). In *Seinfeld: A Cultural History*, Arras elaborates on two themes that became prevalent in the TV landscape whose popularization he attributes to *Seinfeld*.

Arras partly attributes the canonization of television anti-heroes to the characters of *Seinfeld* because morally ambiguous characters as leads were not common for the genre. Arras claims that even though the finale might have condemned the characters, it also ushered a change in sensibility that allowed for shows like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999 – 2007) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008 –

2013), which featured anti-heroes of a darker morality, carrying out explicitly illegal acts. Similarly, Matt Zoller Seitz offers this about the show's influence:

“Before *Seinfeld*, there were never any sitcoms that let their characters be purely selfish, treating the rest of humankind as a resource or obstacle while standing back and observing their shenanigans with a jaundiced detachment. But David's “no learning” ethos has since become a mantra for the medium, at least insofar as it has encouraged the writers of sitcoms and dramas alike to be true to whatever their vision may be, and not trouble themselves too much with whether you approve of what the characters say and do.” (Seitz, 2014)

Despite these claims, finding universal characteristics of generic change to the landscape of a genre is impossible without rigorously historicizing it as Robert Hurd (2006) suggests. Hurd explains that *Seinfeld* is one of the first examples of a sitcom exhibiting a lot of traits of postmodern sitcoms. The self-referential humor, philosophy against didactic morals, and refusal to return to the archetypal family are all provided as examples. Hurd's and Arras' opinions on the legacy of the show share a lot of similarities. The one they dedicate the most pages to is the realization of the sitcom sub-genre ‘friends-as-family’. Hurd says that *Seinfeld* progressed the concept that set *Cheers* apart from its predecessors and ushered a new era for sitcoms by rejecting the romantic love and focusing on the interplay of the friend group and their interactions with different members of their community (Hurd, 2006, p. 768). In a sentiment he shared with Hurd, Arras suggests that part of the success *Friends* saw can be attributed to *Seinfeld*'s popularization of this new type of family (Arras, 2020).

If there is one show that can be directly attributed to *Seinfeld*'s success it is Larry David's next forte into television, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000 – 2024). David's show shares a lot of familiar elements with *Seinfeld*. *Curb* follows an exaggerated version of Larry dealing with day-

to-day life in Los Angeles and his interactions with various other characters and celebrities. Though the premise is similar, *Curb's* look and aesthetic is quite different from his previous sitcom. The show is filmed with one camera, and there is no script for the episodes, only thorough outlines for the plot of each one (Levine, 2010, p. 50 - 52). Instead, the comedian surrounded himself with actors that think fast and funny and can improvise the show by just understanding what the scene is supposed to be (Austerlitz, 2014, p. 312). Larry David was essentially given carte blanche with the show, and the freedom associated with HBO meant the show could deal with adult topics and use foul language freely.

Curb experienced some of the same success as its predecessor, especially in terms of longevity. In its 12-season run, David explored a lot of different topics and storylines related to his life and wealth after his success with *Seinfeld*. The seventh season of *Curb* utilizes the show's unique intertextuality to reunite the familiar cast (who are now all playing the 'meta' versions of themselves) and shoot the long-awaited reunion show. Though David and *Seinfeld* have long resisted revisiting *Seinfeld* directly, this unique opportunity allowed the cast to join forces once more without directly revisiting the same characters. Some of the storylines their *Curb* counterparts experienced this season reflected their real-life mishaps and experiences as well, such as Jason Alexander's character in *Curb* constantly makes passive-aggressive remarks towards Larry about the poor reception of *Seinfeld's* finale, or Michael Richard's interaction with Leon (J. B. Smoooves) which almost climaxes into a burst like the actor's racist meltdown in 2006 (Levine, 2010, p. 48). Similarly, the finale of David's show shares a structure that is almost identical with that of *Seinfeld*, as the protagonist's character is literally put to trial.

The turn of the century saw the inception of a new show with the fingerprints of *Seinfeld* and *Cheers* all over it. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX, 2005 – ongoing) is a sitcom featuring a

group of friends (there are blood relationships within the group, but they fluctuate from season to season for comedic effect) owning and maintaining a bar in Philadelphia. An example of a postmodern ‘friends-as-family’ sitcom, *Always Sunny* is dark, violent, and crude (Arras, 2020). In her thesis on *Always Sunny*, Katharine Kimmler notes the connection the dark sitcom shares with *Seinfeld*, since neither show attempts to offer any teachings on the daily dealings of life (Kimmler, 2017, p. 16). Furthermore, Kimmler borrows a quote from a 2017 article that called *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* “*Seinfeld* on crack” to discuss how the former show’s characters are similar to *Seinfeld*’s with the difference that their behavior is no longer that of indifference but of active chaos. In hindsight, the connections between the two shows become even more clear, especially after *Always Sunny* paid homage to *Seinfeld* by recreating the famous “I’m out” scene from “*The Contest*” in the seventh episode of its 13th season.

Examining the cultural impact of a television show on popular culture at large presents a challenging endeavor. Nevertheless, researchers have provided their views on the subject since the show’s conclusion. Vincent Brook, in his book *Something Ain’t Kosher Here* (2003), examines the upsurge of American sitcoms featuring Jewish protagonists. The late 1980s saw a slow upsurge of Jewish sitcoms with shows such as *Chicken Soup* (ABC, 1989), and *Anything but Love* (ABC, 1989 – 1992). However, most of these early ventures failed to garner significant viewership, resulting in cancellations early in their lifespans. *Seinfeld* stands as a unique case study, widely regarded as the most important show of the first generation of Jewish sitcoms, which helped networks identify a potential new trend in this new sub-genre (Brook, 2003, p. 101 - 109). Rosalin Krieger (2003) further elaborates on this topic, explaining how the show found balance in its cultural representation of Judaism by having the explicitly Jewish characters in the series deal with their cultural standing in a white, mostly Gentile, New York society (p. 391).

Other researchers focused on how the characters of the show experienced and reacted to the changing culture around them. In *Humor Noir: A Look at Our Dark Side* (2000), Hirsch and Hirsch discuss the cynical nature of the characters and their behaviors in *Seinfeld*. The authors describe that though the characters exhibit negative traits, specifically immaturity, narcissism, and venality, viewers could come to peace with these behaviors, and eventually even identify with them (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2000, p. 122 - 123). Addressing a similar sentiment, Shane Gunster (2005) discusses the show's ability to continuously find humor in the cast's proclivity towards indifference. Though *Seinfeld* often brings up touchy topics, the characters don't offer a solution or try to alleviate the situation, rather the show uses humor to defuse them. "When things enter the world of *Seinfeld*, their broader affective significance is stripped away, leaving them free to take on the absurd roles called for by the storylines" (Gunster, 2005, p. 218). Finally, Kevin L. Ferguson (2018) offers insight into how the show's stories adapted over its run to address the cultural shift away from the yuppie anxiety of the 1980s into the ambivalence of Gen X (p. 236). He iterates that the first three seasons often dealt with the troubles of representation, while later seasons allocated their focus into diminishing greater issues of belonging by instead focusing on the menial side of the situations. This kind of behavior became synonym with the Gen X slacker, who abstained from actively participating with the greater issues, being content with non-participation by becoming progressively more self-critical and self-regarding (Ferguson, 2018, p. 239 - 241).

Though *Seinfeld* did not redefine the sitcom genre the same way prolific shows such as *I Love Lucy* did, its fingerprints are visible in modern culture and the television landscape. The show managed to capture and shape an audience that was becoming more self-aware in their participation with the media they are consuming (Ferguson, 2018, p. 237 - 238), while also becoming a harbinger of Jewish sitcoms on American television. Though the show struggled to

initially capture a large audience in Europe, its continuous international syndication run proves its popularity even overseas (Cassel, 2006, p. 179 - 181). Furthermore, *Seinfeld* ushered in new inclinations and possibilities for the postmodern sitcom, with shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* being directly affiliated with the show's tone and humor.

Conclusion

The sitcom has been a genre synonym with the medium of television since the days of *I Love Lucy*, a sitcom that captured the hearts of audiences and set a benchmark for production standards within the industry. However, the genre had to constantly evolve to maintain the interest of an audience whose preferences and inclinations changed with each passing era. In the brief historical examination of the sitcom into one of TV's most popular and recognized genres, the relationship between these shows and the shifting values of the American family was investigated. The majority of the 1950s sitcoms used the family home as their narrative setting. This changed by the 1960s onwards with shows such as *That Girl* (ABC, 1964 – 1966), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970 – 1977), *Night Court* (NBC, 1984 – 1992), and *Cheers*, which proposed new types of families.

As television viewership steadily increased, networks hoped to capture the attention of their expanding audiences, competing against each other to create hit shows. The 1990s saw a shift away from conventional programming, with major networks taking chances by embracing counter-culture programming and fresh variations of existing genres. This shift allowed for greater creative freedom for show creators and provided opportunities for up-and-coming talent to showcase their fresh ideas. *Seinfeld* stands out as one of the pioneering shows that signaled a change in television programming. Created by industry newcomers Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, the show adhered to their particular humor and comedic stylings, which showcased how distinct it was from its predecessors. Despite its “no hugging, no learning” mantra and its uniquely flawed but lovable characters have become iconic, its production history reveals the troubled start the sitcom faced.

Seinfeld was doomed to fail for its first years. The pilot episode failed to impress its test audiences and the network executives, who found the show's plotless situations and unlikable

characters lacking. The network could not envision that these attributes were exactly what made the show such as success later down its lifespan. As the show gained a foothold on the airwaves, the showrunners were given free reign over their stories. Coupled with exceptional production management and a talented cast ensemble, the show continued growing over its run. After its time slot was transferred to replace *Cheers*, *Seinfeld* finally managed to capture a major audience, transforming into the biggest sitcom for the network from a humble cult hit.

The petty and vitriolic characters, unique humor, and bizarre situations blended together perfectly to create a unique voice and style. In the decades following *Seinfeld*'s finale, researchers thoroughly investigated the show's themes and philosophy. Although the show gained notoriety as a "show about nothing", this characterization can be misleading. From its inception to its finale, the showrunners maintained their original vision, elevating the minutiae of everyday lives through funny dialogue. The narrative stakes were low, the characters behaved selfishly and remorselessly, and romantic interplay between the main players was cast aside. Departing from the conventional sitcom paradigm centered around family dynamics, the show pivoted towards the struggles of single people trying to navigate societal hierarchies and preconceived notions of their place in the world. *Seinfeld* was not concerned with satisfying audiences familiar with the genre, but rather found its humor by going against the norms set by other sitcoms, the true meaning behind the epithet "the show about nothing". These characteristics resonated with the cultural zeitgeist and created a seminal sitcom.

Seinfeld's enduring popularity confirms the above and showcases its significant impact. Larry David created *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which adopted many of the philosophies of *Seinfeld* to great success. In addition, shows such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *The Office* (NBC, 2005 – 2013) adopted traits that originated in *Seinfeld*, thus acknowledging its cultural

importance. While it would be remiss to attribute the success of these shows on *Seinfeld* exclusively, the latter's contribution remains irrefutable.

Thus, *Seinfeld* proves to be a very interesting case study into television history. We would argue that it belongs to the same category as shows that defined the genre like *I Love Lucy*. *Seinfeld*'s success was lightning in a bottle, a fortuitous confluence of conditions that favored the inexperienced showrunners. They were riding the wave of change that *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers* had already initiated, they were given an unprecedented number of chances to keep the show running despite its failure in the first seasons, giving them the unique opportunity to develop and refine their unique counter-culture comedy which would become the show's hallmark. The incredible feat Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David achieved was creating the show they wanted exactly, which became the biggest sitcom of their time. By challenging conventional sitcom narratives and embracing a more authentic and unique style, *Seinfeld* achieved a level of success that cemented its place in television history as a trailblazer or trend-setter. Despite the simple concept and lack of overarching plots, audiences sympathized with the characters and familiar situations, embracing the step away from the traditional definition of the genre and into new iterations that respected authenticity and uniqueness.

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