Kafka’s Seinfeldian Humor

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at Kafka’s writing as profoundly ambivalent. This ambivalence is articulated within the text as a disjunction between what is promised or expected in the text and what is actually produced and interpreted. I draw comparisons between Kafka and the American television series Seinfeld, where I focus on the disjunction between the order that is demanded of us and the lawlessness of existence. Here, the tragic is transformed into the comic: Kafka’s heroes do not set themselves valiantly against the cruel orders of fate. They find themselves subjected to scenes of hope, of waiting, or promise, of apparent (yet endlessly deferred) revelation. Seinfeld not only allows us to think of Kafka differently, but – more importantly – it allows the problem of humor to generate new ways of thinking about authority and reading.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 October 2019
Accepted 4 June 2020

KEYWORDS

Seinfeld; Kafka; Jewish humor; situation comedy; Adorno

1. Introduction

Art calls for interpretation, and yet, the process of interpretation generates a tension between the assumed author’s struggle with the text and the way the text is interpreted. To read a work is to assume an author’s intention, even if our surmise of that intention is always other than the work we are given. In the particular case of the two mediums I will be considering in the essay, I will argue that there is an identifiable mode of humor – running from Franz Kafka to the American situation comedy Seinfeld – that thematizes the necessity and impossibility of interpretation. Here I follow Theodor Adorno for whom “Art’s promesse du bonheur means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis. The measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness is taken by the force of negativity in the artwork” (Aesthetic Theory 15). In this quotation, Adorno accepts that art promises happiness, but such happiness never arrives. even so, Adorno’s Marxist sympathies demand some social transformation...
through art – even if that transformation is not happiness itself. Despite Adorno’s claim that the social character of art contains an implicit promise of happiness, what sets Kafka apart is that his art does not offer an image of an undamaged life. Rather, Kafka stages what might best be thought of as negative hermeneutics since his stories offer some meaning, especially as parables, but also negate that achievement of sense. Reading Kafka with Adorno in mind allows us both to make sense of Adorno’s claim for art’s promise, while also finding in Kafka – especially a Kafka read in the wake of Seinfeld – another way of thinking about art that does not consecrate high modernism. Adorno celebrates high modernism precisely because its purely formal composition of order intimates a life that would not be torn between the organization of concepts and the suffering of real existence; undamaged life is hinted at whenever art presents an order that is not found in life itself. In Kafka, when read in relation to a tradition of humor, there is not even formal resolution. Alternately, what we are given is the absurd experience of this life, our life, as tragically distanced from an irrepresible hope. Even if society were to transform in an attempt to ameliorate the irrepresible dilemma we find ourselves in, it would be fruitless. This dilemma is, as played out in Kafka and the American television series Seinfeld, the disjunction between the order that is demanded of us and the lawlessness of existence. Here, the tragic is transformed into the comic: Kafka’s heroes do not set themselves valiantly against the cruel orders of fate. They find themselves subjected to scenes of hope, of waiting, or promise, of apparent (yet endlessly deferred) revelation. (I will argue later that the same is true of Seinfeld’s anti-heroes.) This both confirms and problematizes Adorno’s claim regarding art. Both Kafka and Seinfeld challenge the way things are, and yet despite the suggestion that life must eventually be better, everything remains unchanged. There exists no such thing as an undamaged life.

When Adorno writes of the “real fear” and revulsion of Kafka’s writing this would seem to situate Kafka in the grand tradition of Judaic tragic writers: “Yet the real fear triggered by prose works like Metamorphosis or The Penal Colony, that shock of revulsion and disgust that shakes the physis, has, as defense, more to do with desire than with the old disinterestedness canceled by Kafka and what followed him” (15). Nothing would seem to be more serious than Kafka’s ongoing deferral of sense, authority, (un)fulfillment, and coherence. It is for this reason that Adorno criticizes the notion of aesthetic disinterest, as though art were nothing more than a formal endeavor. In his frequent invocation of Kafka as exemplary of an intense but distanced hope, Adorno is seeking a new way of thinking about art and writing that maintains both its radical difference from the world as it is and ought to be, and its ongoing relation to the world precisely by way of negation. Nothing would seem to be more tragic than Adorno’s Kafka, and if Adorno demands some form of aesthetic interest it would seem to be an earnest engagement in world-transformation, beginning with a transformation of the very forms and concepts through which we express hope (“Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka” 255). As I have already suggested, Adorno writes in the tradition of Marxist thought, where diagnosing the world is insufficient; what must follow is a transformation of the world. In Adorno’s case this transformation would yield a utopia where the rigid generality of concepts would not destroy or silence the complexity and multiplicity of existence. Beginning with the same disjunction between the promise of concepts and the negativity of existence, Kafka’s mode of humor suggests a different path: the radical politics of weak hope.
2. Kafka's ambivalent writing: Freud, humor, and Seinfeld

There are three registers of this politics of weak hope, all of which devolve on the promise and deferral of a less damaged existence. First, Kafka's writing should be seen as profoundly ambivalent. This ambivalence is articulated within the text as a disjunction between what is promised or expected and what is finally given. There is an ongoing striving on the part of Kafka's characters for some type or revelation or fulfillment, and yet what ultimately arrives is not so much a tragic negation or denial but an absurdly disproportionate deflation. Humor is structural to the content of Kafka's writings, where grand journeys and strivings are met with closed doors, burrows, machines, and talking animals. Here, one might think of the content of Kafka's writings as deploying humor in both a broad and narrow sense. Broadly, there is an absurd disjunction between the weight of the law and the weakness of those who hold law's power; more specifically, there is an existential discord between an ongoing faith, hope or striving and non-arrival.

Second, according to Sigmund Freud, laughter and jokes are ways by which the intolerable becomes somehow expressible (146). What cannot be said finds some form of transformed expression. This applies both to obscene and offensive forms of humor – where the crudity and injustice of the world are able to be articulated; but it also allows us to think of humor beyond the joke to include the distinction between the enjoyment of art, as opposed to the frustration of existence. In general, one might think of all the ways in which art and language make sense of a senseless world, or all the ways in which hope and direction are generated by narratives and theories, including the grandiose theories of justice, of the law, and of divine redemption (Adorno, “Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka” 267). What Kafka’s closed doors, talking animals, and inscriptive machines express is an ultimate lawlessness, negation or void: “By avoiding contamination from what simply is, art expresses it all the more inexorably. Already Kafka’s power is that of a negative feel for reality; what those who misunderstand take to be fantastic in his work is ‘Comment c’est.’” (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 27). For Adorno, it would seem that a talking ape and a singing mouse are closer to the truth than the sober and balanced tales of “realism.”

What has been generated as reality is a world wrenched into the rigid reason of concepts; what is true would be radically other than the conceptual coherence of everyday normality. Reading Kafka’s humor is a confrontation with the disjunction between meaning and negativity, and an attempt to battle with the critical resistance to the laughter generated by reading Kafka.

Finally, if, according to Freud, laughter is the body’s way of releasing a nervous energy that reason cannot assimilate (146–151), Kafka’s texts are one ongoing convulsion of laughter. In the readings of his texts there exists an aspect of humor that is connected to the problem of authority. In order to read a text, one must assume that it has some sense that one might discern, and yet any posited sense is always other than the text itself. Authority is at once necessary, but impossible (Derrida, “Before the Law” 183–220). It is the infinite deferral of hope, alongside its ongoing promise, that constitutes authority: a waiting before the door of the law. Yet, if the law is nothing more than what is produced by waiting, it is ultimately an effect of a deference. The trials that bureaucracy, civility, normality, maturity, and familial decency impose upon us generate authority. It is not that there is a law or meaning that we obey, but rather it is the practice of obedience (waiting, hoping) that produces the law. The absence of the law, and the reduction of law
to this theater of deference, is that which cannot be confronted rationally. Reason, especially in the form of practical and measured thinking, cannot respond to the absence of all reason, or the groundlessness upon which law and authority are manufactured. One response to the absurdity or inhumanity of the distance of authority is humor, and it is this path that is pursued by Kafka and Seinfeld. Where Adorno would insist on not allowing works to remain at the level of nihilist humor – and would almost certainly have been horrified with the pop culture parallel to Seinfeld – it is possible to see Kafka read through Seinfeld as offering not so much a radical critique of the world that demands transformation, but a more tragic/comic acceptance. In the tradition of humor, there is a passivity and absurdity in our relation to the law: everything that might be used to talk about meaning, lawfulness, coherence and authority – all the language and concepts at our disposal – already partake in a formed lawfulness: what cannot be admitted is the groundlessness before the law. The response to that lack of grounding is humor.

More specifically, the humor of the disjunction between the weight of authority and an ultimate lack of all foundation can be found in Jewish humor. We might consider the ways in which Freud – like Kafka – thought of humor in a particularly Jewish manner, having to do with the sheer contingency of existence that is at odds with all the sense we consciously strive to make of the world. Jewish humor is less concerned with puns (the sheer materiality of language), or slapstick (the often clumsy and rebellious moves of the human body), and far more with the existential predicament of the disjunction between the form that we give to the world and the brute chaos of the world in actuality (Freud 55–60). For Adorno, the forming tendency emerges from thought’s confrontation with life, and the ongoing enlightenment tendency to render things similar and manageable. In this context, Jewish humor accepts and deflates the rigidity of logic and reason. In order to elucidate this particularity of Jewish humor it is helpful to turn to a more recent manifestation of the humor of weak hope in Seinfeld. Seinfeld not only allows us to think of Kafka differently, but – more importantly – it allows the problem of humor to generate new ways of thinking about authority and reading.

Freud’s theory of humor was based on a conception of the rational and dutiful psyche and its repression of what cannot be admitted or expressed. Despite major differences, Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter bears this similarity: our day to day existence relies on coherence, order, and not paying attention to the differences that do not mesh with our reason (175). We laugh when that coherent order appears as rigid and lifeless. Slapstick comedy presents the human body not as an image of self-command but as clumsy, unwieldy, and implausible. To read Kafka as humorous is in part to endorse this early twentieth-century sense of humor emerging when the everyday familiarity and ease of life appears to be forced (either by Freud’s repression), or simply by the concepts and language we use to make life manageable (Bergson). Rather than invoking a theory of humor to read Kafka, there is an active theory of humor in both Kafka and Seinfeld. This is why humor is a possibility of reading, not something that one can find in Kafka. When Kafka presents Gregor as an insect, it is possible to experience it as tragic, as Kafka presenting humanity as if to live in modernity were to be nothing more than a bug’s life. However, all that is required to laugh at this scene is to consider its elements in the exact ways in which components were put together in Yiddish theater. Imagine a human being dressed as a bug, still assured that he is fully human and needs to go about his day’s work. Or to take our cue from Seinfeld, imagine an adult in New York increasingly infantilized
by being forced to obey a whole series of everyday commands: ordering one’s soup in the right way, making sure one’s dating practices or wedding invitations are executed with a full sense of the law. Looking at Kafka through Seinfeld can be read as humorous because of the notion already articulated in Freud and Bergson that there is an inhuman dimension of life that we cannot face. More accurately though, instead of applying a theory of humor and finding it in the text, the theatrical tradition of humor that inflects Kafka and Seinfeld allows us to “stage” these scenes (or read these scenes) in a vaudevillian manner as well.

3. **Yiddish theater comes to America: Seinfeld**

Kafka’s work is profoundly indebted to Yiddish theater, Yiddish folklore and the traditions of Jewish humor. Kafka was deeply enthralled with the repulsive, yet humorous way that Yiddish plays were staged, and this characteristic is often found in his works. Many of the comedic elements in Kafka’s writing can be traced back to Eastern European folk humor on which the comic dimensions of the Yiddish plays are based (Beck 42). As the traditions of Jewish humor and Yiddish theater in Europe made their way across the Atlantic, they had much to do with the vibrant success of the Yiddish theater and vaudeville during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in New York. Part of this had to do with the increasing number of eastern European immigrants, along with influences from the Yiddish playwrights Abraham Goldfaden and Yacov Gordin (two playwrights frequently mentioned in Kafka’s diaries and letters). The Yiddish theater serves as a part of the larger story of the development of the American stage. There are common roots in Yiddish Theater and folklore that allow one to relocate Kafka’s work in the context of an American sitcom, and these roots are clearly found in Seinfeld. Aligning elements in Kafka and Seinfeld is a method for reading, reading as if one were watching a staged comedy. The “Yiddishization” of English is a strong element in American comedies, not only because many Yiddish words are used, but also because the intonation and the ironic inflections can be easily traced back to folk Yiddish humor (Encyclopedia Judaica 595). It is possible to chart a genealogy of contemporary New York humor that would make out the migration of Yiddish theater and Jewish folklore that inflected early vaudeville. This indeed, is the context within which the claims of this essay are made. However, my task is somewhat different: what might it mean to read Kafka, today, from the point of view of a comedy that was manifestly about nothing, and that ended its series with an apparently nihilist resignation of irresponsibility? In a broader project, I also look at this influence as seen in the Amazon series: The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, which also concerns authority and the right to speak (although from a more feminist angle). It is possible, then, to trace influence from Kafka to the contemporary sitcom. My concern in this essay is not with influence, but rather how Seinfeld helps us read Kafka.

4. **Making out during Schindler’s List**

Consider an example from the Seinfeld episode “The Raincoats,” where Jerry and his then girlfriend Rachel are spotted “making out” while at the movies watching Schindler’s List. In the episode, Jerry’s parents and Newman grant Schindler’s List all the weight and reverence that perhaps ought to be bestowed on art after Auschwitz. The very problem of
art after Auschwitz, of writing or speaking about the Holocaust is central to Adorno’s refusal of art after Auschwitz: perhaps nothing is less worthy of humor than genocide.\(^3\) It is just this inappropriate nature of the response – of “making out” while watching a film about the Holocaust – that is typical of Jewish humor. Rather than pay respect, or even offer critique, Jerry continues carelessly with his life – a life that keeps seeking meaning but finds itself laughable. Jerry appears to not be viewing the film, acting as though the kitsch of Schindler’s List is of no concern to him. Yet, for all his attempts to avoid facing the weight and horror of the past, he is nevertheless called to account. Jerry is ashamed and desperately apologetic when confronted by his parents and can do nothing more than despair at life’s capacity to expose him to these moments where he becomes an _unwitting_ and _fragile_ opponent of authority. This unspoken authority tells us how we must behave when confronted with different reified norms of history, or societal pressures. Jerry does not _really_ feel guilty but is more shocked at the gravity of how his action has become interpreted, by his parents nonetheless. There is a humor in the absurdity between his parent’s demands for respect and what they are actually presenting him with as worthy of respect: _not_ the Holocaust, but its Hollywood packaging.

It is possible to see this scene as an allegory of reading: rather than assume that one must accept the propriety of Schindler’s List – a sentimental redemption of the Holocaust – Jerry remains with the pleasure of his own existence, and yet that attempt to ignore the weight of Schindler’s List comes back to torment him, at which point he protests its absurdity. By reading Kafka alongside Seinfeld we can sustain this ongoing foreignness of one’s own language and world. The absurdity and humor in both Seinfeld and Kafka express an essential non-belonging. While not being the first to identify the problem of alienation in Kafka, tying his sense of the painful finitude of existence to humor allows us to tackle one of the formal features of Jewish humor. There is no proper response to the horror of the Holocaust and any seemingly respectful presentation (such as Schindler’s List) makes an ostensible claim to resolution: even in the worst moments of history there was a Nazi with a heart. Mel Brooks once stated when asked about his feelings toward the Germans and the Holocaust: “Me? Not like Germans? Why should I not like Germans? Just because they are arrogant and have fat necks and do anything they’re told as long as it’s cruel and killed millions of Jews in concentration camps and made soap out of their bodies and lamp shades out of their skins? Is that any reason to hate their fucking guts?” (Dorinson 87). Brooks is making light of the gravity of the Holocaust, which is both ironic and deviant, much like making out during Hollywood Holocaust epics. To read Kafka with an eye to humor is to refuse the Schindler’s List take on culture; it is to refuse the notion that art may somehow give us the moral law in the wake of brutality. Jewish humor might be thought of as – like Jerry – having to sit through the feigned weight of the law, even if the law is an insult to the suffering and horror of existence and history. In this respect one might think of the writings of Shalom Aleichem and his mode of humor, where his hapless characters elicit sympathy _because_ of their heedlessness of the law.\(^4\) Schindler’s List is a form of narrative solace, of humanization; its very form as a tale of goodness triumphing over evil is a granting of sense to the senseless. Laughing at the seeming disrespect that Jerry and Rachel show for that order, laughing at a failure to take the weight of Schindler’s List seriously, is at once typical of Jewish humor’s response to the order we make of existence at the same time as it is a mode of reading and pedagogy. Both within the text, when we read Kafka’s or Seinfeld’s
characters ignoring and stumbling in the face of the law – and with the laughter such scenes of comic hopelessness elicit – we can define Jewish humor as both a staging of buffoonery alongside as the reader or audience being situated in an almost forced position of disrespect.

If we look at “making out” while watching Schindler’s List as a scene or metaphor for reading, we are given a tableau of disrespect, a refusal to take the weight of propriety seriously: we are then confronted with the piety and morality that would seek to find solace in at least some fragment of the Holocaust. Jerry and Rachel behave inappropriately and thus show no respect according to societal norms. Their situation marks a disjunction between the desires of the world and the pious forms that we are taught to consume. When Jerry’s parents eventually hear of the disrespect shown toward Schindler’s List they are horrified. What is important to note is that Jerry’s rebellion is hardly that of a tragic hero or rebel waging war against the machine. His is a hapless, barely intentional disruption of an order and normality that is as rigid as it is irrelevant. While the scene of reading or viewing within Seinfeld is one of apparent indifference, a closer reading reveals something about Jewish humor, respect, and the tragic. Schindler’s List is not the Holocaust, but a Hollywood mask for the horror. It generates a faux sentimentalism. In a similar manner, Kafka’s fictions are populated by figures of faux authority: Klamm, police, academics being spoken to by an ape, parents, and the doorkeeper. This scene is typical of a humor found not only within Kafka’s works, where characters are absurdly and haphazardly mismatched against a seemingly arbitrary authority, but also in the modes of reading that Kafka’s particular style invites.

One such parallel between Kafka and Seinfeld would be that of the parable “Vor dem Gesetz,” and the episode “The Chinese Restaurant.” In Kafka’s parable, you encounter a man standing outside of a door waiting to be told when to enter, while in Seinfeld, you have Jerry, Elaine and George waiting to be told when they can sit at a table. In the end, all characters’ efforts prove fruitless. The man never is allowed entry and the three characters in Seinfeld end up leaving; only the audience hears when they leave the restaurant that their group name is finally called, “Seinfeld, four!” What these two scenes disclose are allegories or metaphors of reading: we stand before authority waiting for its call, but the law remains silent. We set ourselves before the text, yearning for its sense, but all we have is the sense we compose. If we refuse to interpret and bow before the law, we are left with nothing more than laughter. As Adorno notes, Kafka’s works demand and refuse interpretation (“Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka” 256). Like Jerry before his parents, an account must be given of why he was making out during the movie, even if one is ultimately unable to make sense of the imposed demand. Making out in Schindler’s List is an apt figure for the situation of reading Kafka. We can either, like Jerry’s parents and Newman, demand deference (a deference that amounts to silence), or we can make out (respond with non-responsive pleasure).

Of course, any work, including Schindler’s List, can become the object of interpretation, canonization, and reverence. Many adaptations of Kafka’s work, especially those with a comic dimension, were deemed to be inappropriate, and unworthy of the weight of his work. Kafka’s connection to Jewish humor is more specific than claiming a form of influence and continuity that runs through Kafka to contemporary American Jewish humor. Laughter is a form of refusal far more profound than argued resistance; it is a recognition of the absurdity of authority’s postures. Consider the man who waits
dutifully at the door of the law: the door that is at once meant for him, and yet also a door that will never be open to him. As much of the commentary on this scene might suggest, this predicament may be taken as allegorical of the human condition as a hermeneutic prison. As speaking beings we are always condemned to express our desires and hopes through the language we are given; as political and historical beings, we make our way through a world – with others – amid a law, culture, history, and convention that we did not author. The law is always already written, always already there. Any attempt to think the foundation of the law or the genesis of authority is one more narrative; any attempt to open the door of the law is condemned to ask the law’s permission. One response to this contingency in the world is an endless and respectful reading; we can never grasp ultimate foundations, but we are condemned to try. Even if the law is inscribed behind (or on) our backs it is never something whose original sense and authority we can grasp. The sense that there may be law gives some propulsion to reading, and yet the sense of the ungraspable is the effect of striving for meaning. No matter how many times we cry our way through Schindler’s List, the hope that the film imparts to the world gives the lie to all those who died (and will continue to die) in a life that can only impose law violently and contingently.

5. Finding meaning in a meaningless world

One way to read Kafka, is to take the Seinfeldian path: in the face of the weight of his corpus, and the endless waiting and deferral of meaning his enigmatic works seem to demand, we can laugh. We continue to read, and make sense of Kafka through humor; but reading him alongside Seinfeld illuminates the ways in which his works stage disrespect and make fun of the labor of meaning. We can assert that the door of the law is just a door. Or, to be more concrete, what we are given in the corpus of Kafka is a text that subverts its own authority. Kafka both stages scenes of unworthy and yet implacable authority, and also, in doing so, renders his own texts enigmatic: like parables they play out scenes of law and judgment, but also suggest that such tales offer a moral or law (and yet such a morality of law is intimated, never presented). The notion that there is a meaning that Kafka somehow conveyed through writing needs to be reversed: it is the text itself that creates the possibility of meaning and reading. Humor exposes the ways in which we read as if we were finding some prior pre-textual sense. Kafka’s text is a door that is making us wait, and yet it is also ultimately clearly going to signal to us that any hope we have of grasping what lies behind the door is not for us. To say that there is not hope for us, is to say that hope is intimated, but it will never arrive, because it is an effect. The hopeful waiting of theorists like Walter Benjamin and Adorno invoke the sense of an unfulfilled promise and the postponement of such; such weak hope is also a dominating thematic in Seinfeld. No matter how badly Jerry or George want something, when they actually do get it, it disappoints them, and therefore would have been better had it remained in perpetual postponement. Such a predicament is, however, not tragic: it is not that of a noble subject confronted with the grandeur of fate. It is rather humorous: there is something absurd about the weight of authority. The more demanding the law appears to be, the more it takes the form of a machine that literally marks our bodies and holds us down, the less sense the law makes. The
more power has to enforce itself, the more stringent and contrived its measures, the less powerful – and more absurd – it appears to be.

One might ask what it would mean to read the American present in general with an awareness of this Jewish humor that is present in Kafka and *Seinfeld?* Such a question pertains to structure rather content: what if all texts were to be read as if they were as enigmatic and distant as Kafka’s parables of the law? If we think about the context of teaching a literature course, we are reminded how students often expect us as educators to have the answers when it comes to reading. Teaching is often seen as the provision of answers, and the conveyance of cultural capital, giving students the authority finally to read for themselves, but always with some anchoring theory or methodological apparatus. I would suggest that another approach is possible, and that is that we approach the text, not with a prior theory or method but as an encounter. What happens if we read Kafka in an almost child-like or bewildered manner, as if it were not already canonical? Yes, we have context and assumptions – as we do when we turn on an episode of *Seinfeld* having watched other comedies; but what we do is encounter each text as a text in a field of texts. No single text – the joke theory of Freud, the existentialism of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche – can provide the law for another. Rather than thinking of teaching as providing students with answers, it might be better to think of the texts we teach as problems: in the case of Kafka (and with *Seinfeld*) what is constantly staged are the problems that everyday individuals face when confronted with what appears to be so burdened with meaning that one feels almost comic in any attempt to generate sense. It is imperative to look at Kafka in the present within American culture and by doing this, one can also read America differently: what if America were to be thought of less as the “land of the free” and more as the “land of disrespect?”

6. Deceptive genres of television and literature

Within Kafka’s texts, we are dealing with a performative contradiction: a text presents itself as something to be read and understood, and yet it is as though some texts have as their meaning that they should not be reduced to meaning. It is as though the text were declaring, “do not read me!” This performative contradiction offers another way to theorize the humor of Kafka’s corpus. The form or structure of a certain type of humor or joke may not always be humorous in terms of the content. We expect a piece of work that appears to embody the form of a report or legal hearing to be taken seriously, when in actuality it represents a disregard or even an absence of authority. This contradiction can be identified across seemingly different cultural forms, but is similar in its relation between form and content. Moreover, if we look at *Seinfeld*, it is a repetition of a very familiar American genre, or a genre we thought we knew: the interior sitcom was made famous with *I Love Lucy* or *The Honeymooners*. This tired genre is deceptively familiar; and yet it is this very homely familiarity that is undermined in *Seinfeld*, which offers none of the hope or feel-good resolution of earlier forms. It is flipped because it is not what it seems. Like the sitcom *Seinfeld*, Kafka’s work was formally innovative at the time of his life (Sokel 116–117), in the same manner that *Seinfeld* was considered to be a breakthrough television series. *Seinfeld* was new during its time, but it was not so unprecedented that it came from nowhere. There are two traditions at work in this contemporary sitcom: American and European and a seeming
untranslatability that is experienced in both Kafka and Seinfeld. This is not an untranslatable language so much as a specific relation between content and form in Jewish humor. In this respect, this is what makes a text literary – especially in its modern mode – is that the particular mode of expression is crucial to the content. In humor, this is even more so: jokes rely upon verbal absurdities, paradoxes, and puns that are often tied to the singularity of an idiom. This mode of humor – where, for example, authority is at once distant and arbitrary – marks both Kafka and Seinfeld. This connection enables us to reread the present, and ask what it means to have a relationship to authority or power, and to take a counter-authoritarian standpoint, since there is no higher power than the text in its immediate materiality.

What does it mean to align the distance and contingency of authority with humor? First, we might tie this to the tradition of the absurd: where the lack of foundation, grounding or moral certainty can elicit no response other than the body’s convulsion in laughter. The laughter of the absurd is a form of humor that proceeds from the absence of the law’s sense (Esslin 402). Second, this link between disrespect in the face of law’s contingency can be seen explicitly in the nexus of Seinfeld and Kafka. Seinfeld was often called the show about nothing. On the one hand this was a refusal of the end-oriented closure of previous sitcoms, where however farcical and buffoonish the characters and their actions had been there was always some resolution. The familial or marriage framework held firm, despite the upsets in shows like I Love Lucy and The Honeymooners. By contrast, instead of providing temporary disruption within marriage and family structures, Seinfeld displayed one failed romance after another, and one more attempt to escape one’s family after another. To say that the show was “about nothing” was both to declare its failure to yield marriages, bonds and families, but also to declare that the show had a negativity at its core. Increasingly, episodes of Seinfeld were about the incapacity to find (or want) meaning. Jerry and George decide they are going to write a sitcom that will be about nothing. The intended irony of this paradoxic statement coming out in full force in the episode functions as a self-declaration to the audience of what the actual show was about (or not about). Seinfeld provided commentary on itself, often including scenes of seeking meaning (and laughter) within the episode; it was a comedy about a comedian who nevertheless kept being the object of laughter rather than its author. It is that irrationality that yields laughter, a laughter that follows from the disjunction between the law’s implacable weight coupled with it playing out in the space of everyday life. In the same way, Kafka’s fictions are replete with characters whose lives are oriented to nothing: waiting for a law that never speaks. Just as Seinfeld depicted characters who are comic in their subjection to the most arbitrary of rules (how to order soup, how to watch a film), so Kafka’s writings depict characters who appear before authority without recognizing that it’s their ongoing and witless deference that allows authority to continue.

7. Authoritative figures

One crucial connection that I explore deeper in another project, is the father-son conflict as depicted specifically in Kafka’s Das Urteil between Georg and Father Bendemann, and that of the characters George and Frank Costanza from Seinfeld. The omnipresent authoritative figure that we experience in Kafka’s works plays a vital role in the dynamic
that made *Seinfeld* such a success as well. By highlighting in particular the father-son conflict, a common trope present in much of Kafka’s prose, we see how, although this conflict is a dominant high-literary theme, Kafka’s particular way of approaching it is relevant for popular American culture. It is Kafka’s self-deprecating, yet redemptive humor, with its strong roots in Jewish humor, that strikes the nerves of its viewers or readers, past and present, in German or in English translation. Looking at the American TV sitcom genre, there exists a self-imposed maintenance of the basic social unit with relation to how a family, relationship or even a job should look. And in Kafka’s body of work, there are familial situations with the initial appearance of the basic social unit, but they are absolutely absurd and empty. The symbols of American life in a sitcom are suddenly repeated but in an empty form.

This disdain toward the adult world or the father-son conflict is defiant of authority and of the nation of “proper” or dutiful reading, where ultimately the relationship to reading is a reading of authority. The standard notion of reading has always been enabled by a conception of authority (tied to the author as master) and can be related back to teaching as mastery. By contrast, there is a disrespectful notion that comes with a more radical sense of teaching, since students expect teachers to have the answer, but we do not. *Seinfeld* is an exemplary case, both as a mode of reading and dramatization, and as a style of disrespectful relationship to authority. *Seinfeld* or Seinfeld-Kafka becomes exemplary, and the more ambitious thing to do is to look at what is happening in notions of American politics, irony, and cynicism, and how we might live after or without authority.

8. Conclusion

Kafka’s work exudes anti-authority in such a commanding, authoritative manner that a structural paradox of contradiction exists. Kafka’s corpus commands authority but does so by constantly expressing the emptiness of authority because of its meaninglessness. This is the paradox, or performative contradiction of Kafka; it is as though his texts authoritatively preclude any experience of authority. The enlightenment adage or imperative “Think for Yourself!” can only be obeyed by refusing all direct imperatives (Adorno and Horkheimer 145–153). Therefore, to obey it is to disobey and vice versa, and this is what leads to the symptomatic way that people interpret Kafka, as if there were something bigger than what was on the pages that he was trying to tell us. Why, then, should we treat Kafka’s, or any literature, with respect? If we do not obey what literature tells us (and it does attempt to tell us how things should, would or could be), we are being disobedient, and yet (modern) literature also commands us to read and think for ourselves. This is in fact what provides the humor that lies in the paradox of Kafka’s authority figures. The particular structure of humor is an interpretative paradox, or a paradox of content and form. Who has authority when it comes to a piece of literature? Well, we do, as readers. We control whether it is read or not, or how it is even read. We control how we interpret a piece of work and as Adorno states, artwork demands (or refuses) interpretation and we are doing just that.

The inability to reach the law and the meaninglessness of authority of any kind – political, judicial, scriptural, or familial is exactly a source from which the humor stems. There is a humor both in the described absurd distance and height of the law, and in
the formal devices Kafka uses to convey these delays and deferrals. The promise of redemption that is ultimately never achieved is at the core of both Kafka’s works and episodes of Seinfeld. The crucial relation is played out in all art between the promise of happiness and the negation of that promise, the negated promise within a work that is played out in the work’s reception. Can we continue to interpret art as stand-alone pieces of work? Yes, we have no other choice; otherwise we just continue to repeat what others have said in fear of saying or doing something wrong. We have to break the rules, challenge and yet resist the systematic methods altogether. I do not make the claim that a text should be interpreted in anyway one sees fit, but rather that the closer we get and the more we try to grasp what the text’s intentions are, the more it eludes finality.

To conclude, with Seinfeld, a hilarious rigidity of habits exists that can be transposed to our relationships of reading and to authority. Therefore, how we read, why we read, has much to do with being against authority and the pointlessness of life. The law only remains the law if it keeps its door closed, just as Kafka’s proper greatness is sustained by a critical industry that would not allow the majesty of his modernism to be deflated by comparison with a U.S. sitcom. This connection allows us to read Kafka alongside Seinfeld by opening the potentiality of reading. It is not just that a text can be read in several different ways, through different theories and in different contexts: humor is a way of responding to this predicament of the resistance of reading. Any reading is ultimately at odds with the text itself: both Kafka and Seinfeld present situations of improper or fumbled reading as comical. In “Before the Law,” the man who stands before the door of the law is reading; the door is a sign that there is law, even if all we are given is the resistance of the sign. Jerry’s making out in Schindler’s List is reading; his refusal to pay respect to the film is not just an allegory of reading, but an allegory of not reading as a refusal of authority. Scenes from Seinfeld resonate with scenes from Kafka (and are humorous) because of a disjunction between the contingency of life and what becomes constituted as respectability.

Notes

1. Seinfeld ran for nine seasons from July 5 1989 until May 14 1998 and was considered to be the “show about nothing.” It was created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld. The show portrays four main characters: Jerry Seinfeld, George Costanza, Elaine Benes, and Cosmo Kramer, whose mishaps and misfortunes are depicted through everyday situations such as, dating and relationship issues, going to the movies, going out to restaurants, buying a suit, soup, glasses, going to the dry cleaners, etc. The main characters often find themselves in Jerry’s New York apartment or in their favorite corner restaurant Monk’s, where the events throughout an episode unavoidably come together at the end, in an often coincidental and twisted way. Culturally, Seinfeld has played an important role in shaping and informing the feelings of Americans about everyday life.

2. In very different ways this inversion of the relation between law and authority has been at the heart of differences among twentieth-century theorists. Both Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben have worked through Kafka’s parable of the law. For Derrida there is always a promise of a law to come (that can never be fulfilled, because all we have are signs of the law). For Agamben, it is the sign or inscription of law that creates an ongoing difference between a life that simply is, and a life that would be captured by what can be said and regulated. On the importance of Kafka’s parable for Derrida and Agamben see Kevin Attell,
3. “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.” A collection of Adorno’s works, including this quotation are discussed in: Petra Kiedaisch and Theodor W. Adorno, Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012).

4. Shalom Aleichem (1859–1916) was the greatest humorist in all of Jewish literature. His immortal characters, life in the shtetl Kasrilevka which he invented, and overall his attitude of looking at sad things with humor, made him the best loved and most popular of Jewish writers. His irony is bitter-sweet and his characters, in spite of their naive behavior, are always lovable. Shalom Aleichem does not laugh at them, but brings the reader to laugh with them see Skolnik and Berenbaum, Encyclopedia Judaica. V. 9, V. 9, 595.

5. Such commentary includes: Heinz Politzer, Franz Kafka, Parable and Paradox (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962); Walter H. Sokel, The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka. (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Walter H. Sokel, “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Franz Kafka” The German Quarterly 52, no. 3 (1979): 364–384.

6. See: Brook, Something Ain’t Kosher Here 6; Paul Bühle, Jews and American Popular Culture (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007), 247; Armstrong, Seinfeldia 148.

7. See: Hibbs, Shows about Nothing 2012; Nigro, Seinfeld FAQ: Everything Left to Know about the Show about Nothing (2015) Internet resource; Armstrong, Seinfeldia: How a Show about Nothing Changed Everything; Bühle, Jews and American Popular Culture, 1.

8. Seinfeld. Season 4, Episode 3. “The Pitch.” Written by Larry David. Directed by Tom Cherones.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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