

Seinfeld and postmodernism essay sample



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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain whether the television show called Seinfeld can be perceived as a postmodern show. In order to answer this question literature review was conducted in combination with analysis of the episodes from different seasons so it will be possible to notice and review the characteristics of the postmodern worldview across the Seinfeld's seasons. The analysis showed that Seinfeld's series have characteristics that can be defined as postmodern. Consequently, Seinfeld can be perceived as a postmodern show.

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The connection between Seinfeld's series and postmodernism was reviewed. In order to comprehend the topic it was decided to start the analysis with the literature review on the postmodernism and continue with the content analysis of the Seinfeld series. Alter-Muri's and Klein's (2011), MacGregor's (1992) and Jones's (1997) articles about postmodern art were reviewed for the better understanding of the effect of the postmodernism on the postmodern art. Klaver (1994) and Olson (1987) explained the effect of the postmodernism on television's content. Hurd's article provided background information about the postmodern worldview. Benhabib's (1984) article described the epistemologies of the postmodernism. Jameson (1991) explained the cultural logic of the late capitalism. Gunster (2005), Hirsch & Hirsch (2000), Pierson (2000), Morreale (2000), McConnell (1996) provided more information about Seinfeld and its description as a show " about

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nothing". For the content analysis the following Seinfeld series were reviewed: "The pick," "The contest," "The dinner party", "The fix up", "The race", "The airport" and "The cigar store Indian". Additionally, examples from the following series will be used in the seminar paper: "The pen", "The pez dispenser", "and The parking place," "The junior mint," "The non-fat yogurt," "The couch," "The label maker," "The rye," and the "Slice".

Introduction

The goal of the current paper is to analyse the content of the show Seinfeld and decide if it can be addressed to as postmodern series. In order to analyse the series it is crucial to understand what is postmodernism. As far as modernism appeared before postmodernism the term modernism will be examined in order to understand deeper the meaning of the postmodern. For the proper understanding one should address the following questions: How did postmodernism appear? What are postmodernist values? How the postmodern worldview can be defined? What is the effect that the postmodernism had on our culture, education, architecture, literature, media and artworks? What is the meaning and significance of the appearance of the postmodernism?

In the second part of the seminar paper Seinfeld series will be reviewed and explained from the postmodernist perspective. Series will be analysed according to the definitions of the postmodern representations and world's understanding. It will be analysed if the postmodernist representation has an effect on TV series. Also different scholar opinions regarding the "show about nothing" will be presented in the paper in order not only to answer the <https://assignbuster.com/seinfeld-and-postmodernism-essay-sample/>

question stated above, but to provide different perspectives on the series. Additionally, it is important to understand the effect of the series on the audience members. Furthermore, it is vital to comprehend if series contribute something new to the society that can lead to a significant change in one's worldview.

Postmodernism

In order to characterize the term postmodernism the world modernism should be defined first. The term modern is used as an adjective for definition of variety of things from gadgets to artworks. At the same time modern refers to a time period from 1870s through the middle of 1960s. Modernism was grounded in the beliefs of the enlightenment period in which the western scientists and philosophers began to disbelieve in the authority of the Judeo-Christian God. The modernists believed that science changed the foundation of traditional authorities and truths and it will redefine people's understanding of the world. From modernist's perspective one's nature and self is seen as unified, coherent and autonomous, which means that a man is capable of rationally perceiving and comprehending the world (Hurd, 1998). In contrast to modernism postmodernist view tends to relish uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox. The most general characteristics of postmodernism are fragmentation and pluralism. Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of ultimate principles and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical or religious truth which will explain everything for people- these traits are characteristics of modernism. At first the word postmodernism was used only by art critics.

However in 1979 the book "The postmodern condition" by Jean-Francois Lyotard was published in French. According to Lyotard (1984) postmodern is "incredulity toward metanarratives". Where incredulity happens because of science's progress and narration is losing its functions since it is disseminated in clouds of narrative language features that are denotative, prescriptive and descriptive. For Lyotard the postmodern is that which rejects the solace of good forms. It is a consensus of taste that cannot be shared collectively. Postmodern explores new presentations in order to feel the sense of what cannot be presented. Hurd (1998) in his article "Postmodernism" stated five traits of the postmodern worldview. Firstly, it is said that the quest for truth is a lost cause. Postmodernists argue that a universal and objective truth can never be reached. Furthermore, if one claims that he knows the truth than he is deluded. Secondly, it is claimed that a person's sense of identity is a composite constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture. Consequently a person is influenced by the society he lives in and he cannot think about himself as an autonomous, self-conscious person.

Thirdly, the languages of our culture (the visual and verbal signs that we use to represent the world to ourselves) "construct" what we think of as "real" in our everyday existence. Therefore, "reality" is subjective and it is constructed through language. Fourthly, "reality" is created by those who are in power. According to postmodernism's theorist Michel Foucault the one who controls the use of language will be in charge of not only society but its cultural and political domains as well. Fifthly, people should neutralize the political power inherent in language by "deconstructing" it. Postmodernist

Jacques Derrida argues that people often create messages where one of the beliefs is more favoured than the other. Thereby people need to show that the part which was not favoured can become favourable, that their needs can be appreciated more than the needs of those who hold the political power. Postmodernism affected many different aspects of our society such as education, architecture, artworks, literature and television. From the postmodernist point of view truth is relative. Therefore there is no truth but its interpretations. According to postmodernism one should choose a point of view and perceive the world accordingly. Another characteristic of postmodern education is its emphasis on multi-cultural comprehension of the world (Hurd, 1998). In the debate on the nature and significance of postmodernism architecture occupies a special place.

The decay of urban environment and the dehumanization as well as agglomeration of the space are characteristics of the postmodern architecture (Benhabib, 1984). Postmodernist art consists of social interactions and the elements in society that sponsors them. As far as postmodernists deny the existence of a single ideology or theory values should be made transparent by the artists and the viewer. Consequently meanings and interpretations can be put in discourse. Postmodern art does not emphasize the content or formal aesthetic qualities of art. In postmodern art it is essential to the artist and to the viewer to deconstruct and reconstruct the meanings of the artwork rather than interpret an art piece (MacGregor, 1992). Therefore the ambiguity of interpretations results in the fact that the viewer extends the creative process started by the artist (Jones, 1997). Integration of postmodern principles in art allows artists to utilize

what is available as an art material. For example, Kiefer's installation called "Twenty Years of Loneliness" was constructed from 300 Kiefer's paintings that were placed in a pile to burn. Postmodern art concepts are used by art therapists to assist those who need help with self-esteem and self-expression, because it can show one's uniqueness and creative point of view (Alter-Muri & Klein, 2011). Postmodern literature and linguistic arts retreat before the democracy of the visual (Jameson, 1991, p. 318). Postmodern literature can be viewed as spatial, chaotic, fragmental and with a free text structure.

Additionally, it created new genres therefore a thriller was able to coexist with an essay; the autobiography with the historical document etc. The era of postmodernism had a significant impact on imagination and storytelling. It affected not only fiction literature but pontiffs of theory as well. Postmodern literary practice failed to create specific analytic instruments for professional reading (Spiridon, 2012). In the last years television developed into a stream of messages rather than a series of discrete messages. The concept of integrity of texts disappeared and was replaced by endless textual material across time and space. It results in the construction of the borderless television mega-text. As stated above one of the characteristics of the postmodern text is its fragmentation. A viewer will watch a vast variety of texts on a television channel including programs and advertisements. In October of 1989 Energizer broadcast parody-advertisement of its competitor-Duracell. At that time Duracell broadcasted ads where a pink bunny was compared with other bunnies that worked on different batteries. Energizer's advertisement showed how a bunny was walking out of the door.

Afterwards Energizer created ads where the bunny was attending dinner parties and running faster than football players, etc. These advertisements represent not only the idea of the mega-text on television which is based on interruption of the stories but architecture of interrupting texts. Therefore television becomes a quintessential postmodern construct that consists of innumerable messages. It allows audience members to deconstruct and reconstruct messages and view them from their own perspective.

Furthermore, remote controls allow people to decide to which content to be exposed to. Consequently, through the volume of material and fragmented messages presented, television enforces its audiences to become postmodernist writers who recognize and manipulate the texts that they want to perceive. Television allows audience members to become active viewers (Klaver, 1994). Television texts must incorporate to a greater or lesser degree to self-consciousness the characteristics of television assemblage. Television comedies often use audience-awareness techniques in context of the situation comedies. Characters that are aware of the audience members were presented in such shows as: Burns and Allen, Gidget and Abbott and Costello.

Additionally, television becomes aware of itself when during the show another show mentioned. As characters demonstrate awareness of the audience they also create more awareness of their roles in the show and the process of show's creation (Olson, 1987). For example, in the 4th season of Seinfeld, Jerry's Seinfeld character is asked by NBC producers to pitch an idea for a TV show. Jeremy and George conceive and pitch an idea for a "show about nothing" in a storyline that closely mirrors the idea of Seinfeld

television series. The first generation of television viewers feel restricted by TV's mega-text they resist meaning through illogic, irrationality, unreality and incoherence. The second generation of television viewers accepts the amount of messages perceived and reconstructs it. The third generation shows the signs of playful reading.

Therefore they developed the ability to choose the content and how to perceive the information that was viewed (Olson, 1987). Consequently postmodernism has evolved in people's daily life and it will take on a deeper significance as the free play across texts, genres and media becomes more complex and widespread. The significance and meaning of the postmodernism is in the fact that people are able to choose their own truth and they cannot be judged because their opinions, thoughts and feelings which are different from other peoples' worldviews. Additionally, postmodernism gives the possibility to explore and understand one's creativity and provides the opportunity for self-expression. Furthermore, postmodernist worldview may be completely new for one's comprehension since it teaches to see and perceive not in a unique and centred way but rather in a borderless and fragmented way. Consequently, different way expression results in new artworks, architecture, and literature and media structure that were significantly different from their classical representations and understandings. Analysis: Seinfeld and Postmodernism

Seinfeld was originally aired between July 1989 and May 1998 and was one of the most successful television programs in 1990's. TV series brought \$200 million profit each year to NBC channel which was half of network's income (Gunster, 2005). "A show about nothing" that is Seinfeld's catch phrase.

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However actually it is a show about bumbling: bumbling the way people do through their lives and years expecting that something will happen and their lives will significantly change. Our lives are consumed with minor events and people use those events in order to make their lives funny. The centre of the show is Jerry Seinfeld a struggling stand-up comic played by Jerry Seinfeld who is the show's main writer and co-producer. His friends are: Elaine played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus who is Jerry's ex-lover and cannot find a boyfriend, George, who was played by Jason Alexander, is a balding middle-aged man who as well as Elaine suffers from bad luck in love. Kramer, who was played by Michael Richards, looks weird and has clumsy body movements. However during the series he ends up always in a better situation than his friends who appear to be more rational (McConnell, 1996).

Researchers claim that Seinfeld has played an important role in shaping and informing how we understand our everyday life. According to Morreale (2000) the program has exploited its significance in a variety of ways, for example, by the use of " postmodern stylistic devices" to create a virtual community of viewers connected by their knowledge of the characters and humour. Additionally, audience members can also identify with the immaturity, narcissism and venality and the four main characters (Hirsch & Hirsch, 2000). Seinfeld's deconstructive considerations started the creativity that was begun by the characters for the invention of new forms of social life and absurd world. Scholars described the de-familiarization of the everyday life as the essence of the show. The complex messages of the show can be reconstructed and deconstructed by the viewer creating a complex system of self-regulations (Gunster, 2005). Seinfeld series respond to postmodernity.

In the episode "The Pick" aired in December 1992, George and Jerry discuss how latter's girlfriend saw him touching his nose. George asked: "Was it a scratch or a pick?". Jerry said that it was a scratch.

Afterwards he added: "Don't you think I know the difference between a pick and a scratch?" George asked if there was any nostril penetration. Jerry replied that there has been some accidental penetration. From this scene it can be clearly understood that the difference between a pick and a scratch is not important and absurd. The situation is presented ironically that is why the main characters discuss it seriously. These types of discussion express and satisfy a desire for temporary forms of distinguishing. They are momentary distractions that have no broader significance (Gunster, 2005). All in all, there is no unique truth and it is not highly important to find it. It can be concluded that in this scene can be found characteristics of the postmodern worldview. The language also plays an important role in the Seinfeld's episodes. In "The fix up" that was originally aired in February 1992 George asks Jerry to explain in details the characteristics off woman's hair. George is not satisfied with the description of hair as "long and dark". Costanza needs to understand if her hair is "flowing", "cascading", "thick" and "lustrous". George wants to know: "if you stick your hand in the hair, is it easy to get it out?" Descriptive language is important for characters because this is how they will be able to understand the world in a better way.

Consequently their inner reality and worldview is constructed by the language since it bursts their imagination. The everyday life is not limited by the linguistic practices and social beliefs. It includes many insignificant objects from daily life. In the episode "The dinner party" originally aired in

1994 Jerry and Elaine react dramatically when two people purchase the last chocolate cake- " babka". Jerry said: What are we going to do now? If we cannot get babka the whole thing is useless." Many of the episodes such as: " The pen," " The pez dispenser," " The parking space," " The junior mint," " The non-fat yogurt," " The couch," " The label maker," , " The Rye" and " The slicer" an object becomes highly significant for characters far out of proportion to its traditional meaning in everyday life. With the exaggeration of meaning characters escape from banality of everyday life. It is the irrelevance of the specificity of these objects or the difference between objects that makes them so amusing.

Additionally, the fact that one believes that the differences are highly important makes the situation more humorous (Gunster, 2005). The commitment to trivial difference enables the strategy of ironic agency that is instructive for those looking to find new forms of fun, action and knowledge. It rejects the principled stance of using humour in order to engage in broader and important cases. Seinfeld's characters invent new possibilities for social action without analysing because all situations seem to them unworthy on the second thought (Gunster, 2005). The displacement of narrative progression became a characteristic for the most television programs, especially for situation comedies. However in Seinfeld it was developed and became one of the important characteristics. The lives of the characters are dominated by the repetition of certain patterns and behaviours. They do not progress because they do not learn from the events that took place in the past. This brings Seinfeld series closer to the postmodernist worldview. Remarkable characteristic of Seinfeld is the fact that it represents such

topics as politics in a simple and inoffensive way. Issues are treated in the same way as such as shopping, driving, eating, going to a movie etc. The series asserts that personal characteristics are not the basic properties of the social elite.

The show represents that all people are defined by their society and habits (Pierson, 2000). Jerry persistently shows indifference to the fact that he is Jewish. In April 1994 "The Raincoats" episode was aired, Jerry asks: "You were making out in Schindler's list?" Jerry endorses the harmonious racial politics symbolized by black and white cookies and George advocates the death penalty for those who double park ("The dinner party," February 3, 1994a). Elaine is happy with her relationship with a communist. Kramer warns children before the Christmas that the toys they receive as presents from their parents were made in sweatshops ("The Race," December 8, 1994e). The difference between how an airline treats business and economy passengers motivates Elaine to proclaim: "Our goal should be society without classes" ("The airport," November 25, 1992c). In the episode "The cigar store Indian", Jerry's gift of a wooden Indian to Elaine insults the Native American Winona who was played by Kimberly Norris.

Common expressions such as "making a reservation" became a linguistic obstacle. Jerry's relationship with Winona ends up when he is unable to take back his indirect comment that Winona's request for him to return her copy of TV guide makes her an "Indian-giver". Rather than politicize events mentioned above the effect is to depoliticize politics by inserting it into day to day discussions. The exaggerated representations of racial and political identities can be laughed at in everyday life (Gunster, 2005). Seinfeld brings

absurd and small matters of the social life and raises them into the arena of the televisual discourse. The sitcom asserts small details such as finding a restroom in a mall and parking. Material concerns will never be repressed by the political dictates and official high culture. People will take care of minor details (Pierson, 2000). Despite the limitations that were put by the high culture and television stations. Seinfeld episodes discussed such taboo and material needs as constipation, vomiting, urination, masturbation and exhibitionism. In the episode "The Contest" Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer enter into an unusual wager in order to determine who can refrain from masturbation for a longer time period. After a short time period Kramer makes a decision to give in and pays off his gambling debt.

The winner of this competition will be declared a "Queen" or a "Master" in this domain. The contest evaluates sexual functions in a discourse on a higher level. Additionally, it parodies existing social hierarchies by making the declared member a royal member. This can be attributed to the postmodernism because people this way neutralize the political power inherited in language by "deconstructing" it. Therefore "Queen" and "Master" gain new ironical meaning (Pierson, 2000). Pierson (2000) claims that Seinfeld and his friends continue to remind audience members that civility is an on-going process that involves matters that may seem trivial as the cultural value of holding onto a parking space. In showing viewers a stable group of people who deal with trivial problems Seinfeld portrays the density of social standards and habits.

Pierson concludes that the even in the flexible and postmodern American culture Jerry and his friends need to keep up with their appearances.

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Consequently, in Pierson's point of view Seinfeld is not a postmodern television show. On the other hand, Seinfeld holds many postmodern characteristics. Seinfeld is normalizing the sectioning of the time and human experience into serial, isolated experiences. It goes beyond insofar as its humour is explicitly predicated upon the transformation of these segments which might otherwise be lived as empty and meaningless into some occasions for laughter and pleasures, probably meaning. Even though it is said that Seinfeld is a show "about nothing" there is little doubt that its popularity is rooted in how it changes the everyday with affective potentiality. While its storylines of a well-crafted comedy are difficult to replicate Seinfeld continues to change people's way of thinking about the world and its main domains.

Conclusion

The goal of the current paper was to research the question if Seinfeld can be described as postmodern television show. The term postmodern was defined as a worldview that tends to relish uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox. The most general characteristics of postmodernism are fragmentation and pluralism. Hurd (1998) defined five characteristics of the postmodern worldview: the quest for truth is a lost cause; person's sense of identity is a composite constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture; the languages of our culture (the visual and verbal signs that we use to represent the world to ourselves) "construct" what we think of as "real" in our everyday existence; "reality" is created by those who are in power; people should neutralize the political power inherent in language by "deconstructing" it. Furthermore, it was found that postmodernism affected

many aspects of people's everyday life, such as: education, literature, architecture, art and television.

The analysis of the Seinfeld showed that the television show has certain postmodern traits. For example, show's characters don't aim to find the universal truth. Additionally, the language usage is important for them since this is how they perceive the world. Furthermore, characters try to "deconstruct" the importance of political authorities by ironically showing that there are things that are highly important for ordinary people. Characters of the Seinfeld have an influence on each other therefore character's persona consists of notions that are acceptable in the society that he lives in.

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