

Jerry Seinfeld: an embodiment of the American dream on the TV screen

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Özet

New York'ta bir stand-up komedyeni olan Jerry Seinfeld ve üç arkadaşının günlük hayatlarından yola çıkan *Seinfeld* adlı sit-com "hiçbir şey üzerine" bir dizidir. Buradaki hiçbir şey kavramı, New York'un merkezinde yaşayan insanların hayatlarındaki hiçbir şeyin bile fazlasıyla eğlenceli, ilginç ve heyecan verici olduğu konusundaki Hollywood söylemini yansıtan bir Amerikan rüyası resmi çizmektedir. Amerikan rüyası, dizide, iki katmanda alt metin olarak belirmektedir: Birinci katmanda ışıkları hiç sönmeyen New York'ta her zaman canlı ve renkli olan hayatlar, ikinci katmada ise yalnızca kendi hayatının hiçbir şeyliğini meta haline getirip bunu pazarlayarak milyonlarca dolara ve uluslararası üne kavuşan bir kişi olarak Jerry Seinfeld'in ulaştığı Amerikan rüyası. Bu alt metine paralel olarak dizi boyunca kendi kendini yaratan Amerikalı sterotipinin ve 1980'ler sonrasının neo-konservatif politikalarıyla daha da güçlenen apolitik ve kendinden başkasını düşünmeyen karakter tipolojisinin promosyonu gözlemlenebilir.

Anahtar sözcükler

Seinfeld, Amerikan rüyası, televizyon, sit-com, meta.

Abstract

The sit-com *Seinfeld* based on the lives of the stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld and three of his friends is "a sit-com about nothing." The concept of nothingness here illustrates a picture of the American dream which reflects the Hollywood discourse on how fun, interesting and exciting is even the nothing in the lives of those who live in the center of New York. The American dream appears in two layers as the subtext of the sitcom: In the first layer the all time colorful and fun lives in New York where the lights never go off and in the second layer the American dream that Jerry Seinfeld has reached by turning the nothingness of his own life into a commodity and by selling this becoming a millionaire and an international celebrity. Parallel to this subtext, throughout the sitcom a promotion of the self-made American stereotype and the apolitical, self-centered character typology which has risen particularly in the post 1980's in accordance with the neo-conservative politics, can be observed.

Keywords

Seinfeld, American dream, television, sitcom, commodity.

1. Introduction

In this essay about the television sit-com series *Seinfeld*, I am going to discuss that Jerry Seinfeld the person turns his own life into a commodity, and by selling this commodity he reaches the American dream. I will argue that throughout the sitcom a promotion of the American dream is being made. I will also comment that in the sitcom the individualistic, self-centered character type which is a product of the American dream is being illustrated as an ideal personality model and his life is being presented as an ideal life style.

In the first part of the paper I'll give a very brief idea on the American dream asking the question: Is there a concrete concept of the American dream? I will show what I see as the American dream and how I apply this to the Jerry Seinfeld situation in two layers: In the first layer, I am going to discuss the American dream that Jerry Seinfeld experienced before he turned his life into a sit-com and became a millionaire with that. In the second layer I am going to focus on the American dream that he has reached by turning his own life into a commodity. I will argue that the first one is the American dream from the eyes of the audience of the sitcom, who are the ordinary people. On the other hand, I will introduce the second one as the dream of the person whose life is dreamed about by these ordinary people. This will be an account of the

multiple layers of the American dream being reflected on different classes in the social hierarchy.

I will conclude by portraying the personality model promoted in the series, and this model's location in the historical and material context of the contemporary society.

2. Everybody's American dream: American dream and subjectivity

American dream is mostly thought and accepted as being a widespread aspiration of many Americans and non-Americans all over the world to have a good life in America. For Americans its basis is laid in living a better life than their parents did. For non-Americans this comparison does not make much sense, as their life in America will be a completely new thing from their earlier life. Thus it is incomparable with the life of their parents who lived in for instance in Nigeria, Estonia or in Turkey, as living in the U.S. is supposed to be different in all ways from what they have experienced in their own countries. Certainly it will be better than what their parents had, but as in the new world life will be so different it is not possible to take the lives of their parents as a base for comparison.

2.1 The basic needs fulfilling American dream

A house with a garden, a car, financial security for today and future are the characteristic themes of the American dream. It is important to note that these are the basic human needs. In that sense American Dream is actually what everyone should be able to have anyway. The thing that makes it a dream is that, in the capitalist economy basic human needs are difficult to be fulfilled for the majority of the world population. This sense of the American dream is in fact, not different from what a socialist would try to supply for all of the individuals of a socialist society: Basic material conditions to live a happy and satisfying life. In this sense American dream can be seen as what should not be the dream but the reality for everybody. In this sense of the concept, the american dream is not a rapacious thing. We can call this, *the basic needs fulfilling American dream*. The song *The House I Live In* written by E. Robinson and L. Allen and sung by Frank Sinatra, recorded in January 19, 1946 by Columbia Records is a good example for this dimension of the American dream. The song's lyrics: "What is America to me?/ ... The house I live in/ A plot of earth, a street/ The grocer and the butcher/ Or the people that I meet. The children in the playground/ ... The wedding and the churchyard/ The laughter and the tears/ And the dream that's been a growing/ For more than two hundred years. ..." illustrate a modest fantasy world, where the dreamed objects are not the greedy demands of the consumer society but the minimum requirements for a materially fulfilled life-standard.

2.2 American dream as a form of psychological escape

Another version of the American dream can rise from the nationality of it, where the *American* label constitutes the most important part of the dream. This is valid mostly for the people outside of America, for whom American dream means a dream-like life, which they see in Hollywood movies. They watch Hollywood movies and live in a dream-world created by these films. As all these Hollywood movies take place in America, this dream-world becomes America itself, and the American dream-world takes place in the psyches of those who watch these films. Their dream of leaving the

whole life that they have got and going far away becomes identified with the image of America. This is a psychological mechanism that goes far beyond a wish to change of socio-economical classes. This is connected with the image of America that *we*- those who live anywhere else than America- create in our imagination. We can define this as *psychological escape form of American dream*. It can be useful to divide this form of the American dream into three: The continent dream, the suburban dream and the city dream.

Many people all around the world watch Western films and dream of being in America. Huge highways to horizons, a different world of imagination in each state, a big car with a strong sense of individual freedom and being open to encounters are the basic motives of the continent dream. Like we hear in the famous Chris Isaak song "Blue Hotel on a lonely highway" or in a film of Wim Wenders such as "Paris Texas" this dream has a lot to do with discovery through the huge continent which leads to a self-discovery.

The suburban dream is the life of the happy American family. A modern father figure like Bill Cosby, strong but not restricting family ties, happy summer breakfasts in the garden are the main themes of this. An exciting student life in smart colleges, both fun and respectable, adds to the attraction of the dream for the younger people.

New York with its lights all around, the soothing feeling of romance in the films of Sunday night cinema clubs on television channels, the never dying fun, never sleeping cities are just a couple of the themes that lay the basis of the city dream.

2.3 The ultimate American dream

On the other hand; for many people American dream has to do with having one's own business, to be one's own boss, thus owning the means of production. From here emerges the ladder that goes to being really rich. Self-made man, a main and central concept of the American dream belongs to that vision; self-made man creating his wealth from zero is an important pattern in all the success stories of the American dream.

This perception of the American dream can lead to a mentality where the dreamers' eyes are not on the basic needs for a materially fulfilled life, but, on being a part of the ruling class. Thus here, the dreamer is not only *American-dreaming* of getting out of the working class but to be a member of the ruling class. We can call this *the ultimate American dream*. James M. Jasper says: "... the real excitement of the American dream, today more than ever, is the fantasy of being rich, not comfortable. We may complain about the rich, but we need them for our reveries." (Jasper, 1957, p.132)

3.1 The two layers of the American dream in the Jerry Seinfeld example

3.1.1 The psychological escape

The television sit-com series *Seinfeld* is a very unique example being the direct reflection of an *ordinary* person's life. The word ordinary here is going to form our basis of the division between the two layers of American dream exploring our example of Seinfeld. It is important to note that, although Jerry Seinfeld works as a stand up comedian in the sitcom he is not a very famous man living a glamorous life. His working as a stand-up comedian is portrayed as an ordinary thing in the sitcom. This

does not add anything to his daily life. Instead, the excitement in his and his friends' life comes from its nothingness, as this is a sit-com about nothing.

In the sitcom two layers of the American dream keep flowing. The first layer of the American dream that is being promoted in the sitcom is the life of the real person Jerry Seinfeld. This is an inspiring dream for particularly the young audience all over the world who dream about U.S. and for those who live in U.S. but not in New York. In this layer the American dream we aspire is almost all to do with being in the center of New York. As the sitcom is about nothing, actually this dream is also about nothing. Dream is in the tissue of the picture of New York, even apart from it there is nothing in this picture.

Money is never a concern for any of the characters that we see in the sitcom. Jerry is a stand-up comedian but we don't have any idea on how often he makes his shows, in how many venues or how much money he earns. Elaine has got a job in a publishing company. George is unemployed but we never witness this creating a problem in his life and we never know how Kramer makes his life, but it doesn't seem to matter. They are never broke and this is one aspect of their lives to dream about. Nobody lacks a roof over her top, nobody is in debt, and nobody is carrying the burden of unemployment. There is nothing to worry about. This is the main sense of nothingness in the sitcom that makes it so easy for people to dream about.

Even though all the characters in the sitcom are neurotic, in their lives we don't see a feeling of anxiety that is created by their neurosis. Things never get bad enough to stop the fun. They all have fun, even when they have some troubles, as these troubles are never serious enough to create anything more than exciting small talk. The characters in the sitcom are never bored, they are never depressed. There is never a fear or risk of insomnia in New York, because lights in New York never go off completely. The lives of ordinary people living in upper north side of Manhattan is itself a dream for millions and millions of people all around the world, even though there is nothing extraordinary about it. Furthermore, their life is a dream because there is nothing extraordinary about it. This is the message. On that level of the sit-com, a version of what we called above the *psychological escape form of the American dream* is promoted. It can be interesting to note that somewhere quite far away from New York, in Istanbul, some of the bars that are accepted to be the coolest and most fashionable have got names such as Manhattan, Bronx, New Yorker. The power of popular culture figures on life style decisions of people can be seen even as an authority effect:

... because of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity. Reflexively organized life-planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity. (Giddens, 1991, p.5)

3.1.2 The ultimate American dream

On the other level of the American dream message there is what Jerry made out of his own life: the sitcom about his life that brought him millions of dollars. J. Seinfeld turning his life into a commodity and selling it reaches to what we called above the

ultimate state of the American dream. This is hidden under the first layer. The message is that, if you know how to use it, only to have a life can give you the chance of reaching to excessive amount of wealth, *to win the lottery*.

This state of American dream can also be seen as the dream of the dreamed ones. In that respect it also fits to the notion of the American dream as having a better life than our parents. The life that we will live, the American dream that we are going to reach will be a dream in our parents' eyes, while our kids will have the American dream of living a better life than we did. In that case they, the dreamed ones, will have their own dreams. This goes spirally towards the higher and higher steps of the social hierarchy until the point what we call as the ultimate state of the American dream. It would be helpful to point out that in that state of the American dream apart from money there is also fame and glamour. This is the second layer of the American Dream that is promoted in the sitcom *Seinfeld*, what we called above as the ultimate state of the American dream.

This form of the American dream as the dream of the dreamed is a helical where one gets inside there might be no way out. This is the reflection of the struggle of the individual to jump classes, to own more and get to a better position in the social hierarchy. This is where the distinction between to possess some material goods and to possess an identity vanishes pathologically, destroying the individual, the self, the soul. On his essay about Erich Fromm's book *To Have or To Be* Funk says:

Fromm's starting point in *To Have or to Be?* is the observation that orientation towards having is today a great phenomenon having its footing in the economic and social conditions of a society which has too much and as a consequence can succumb to temptation to define itself by having. In the structural conditions of the present economy, the present organization of work and the present co-existence, the roots for the abundant loss of one's own psychic forces can be found.

4. Isolated, neurotic and egotistic: Not the good Samaritan

In the sitcom *Seinfeld* we do not see the real person Jerry after he reaches to the ultimate state of the American dream, we see him until this happens. Creating a sit-com based on his own life, he turns his life into a commodity and by selling it he makes a fortune.

In this step of this essay we will argue that what we see in the show, the sitcom character Jerry as the reflection of the Jerry in the real life, and his friends are all portraying the stereotypes of personalities that the promotion of this ultimate form of the American dream is aiming at.

According to Lasch, a basis is needed,
... on which to make connections between the narcissistic personality type and certain characteristic patterns of contemporary culture, such

as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time,
fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play
spirit,
deteriorating relations between men and women. (Lasch, 1979, p.33)

Exploring the psychological portrayals of the characters and discussing their self-centered, egotistic patterns of personalities on psychological grounds is something out of the scope of this paper. That is why to prevent any sense of misuse of the term, instead of calling the characters narcissistic we will prefer to call them self-centered and egotistic. That would prevent us from spreading to the area of psychology and behave like some critics that Lasch criticizes for using the term randomly:

Narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym of selfishness and at its most precise a metaphor, and nothing more, that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self. (Lasch, 1979, p.33)

In this section, we will only focus on some certain examples of the self-centered and egotistic features of the characters. According to Adorno;

it seems timely to investigate systematically socio-psychological stimuli typical of televised material both on a descriptive and psychodynamic level, to analyse their presuppositions as well as their total pattern, and to evaluate the effect they are likely to produce. (Adorno, 2002, p.158)

The four main characters of the sit-com Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer are all living on their own. They don't have strong family ties; in contrast they believe that a certain distance between them and their families have to be kept. They don't have serious relationships, their affairs with the opposite sex never goes beyond brief sexual encounters. One of the very characteristics of the sit-com is that in 180 episodes that we watch we do not see a single character in love with someone. Nobody gets heart broken, or feels upset about losing someone. In the episode *The Voice*¹, Jerry tells Claire- the woman he dates with in that episode- about the voice that comes from her stomach. This upsets Claire and she leaves him; only to come back after a short while to say that if he does not imitate this voice again they can come together. Jerry does not accept that, he prefers to be able to imitate the voice. Certainly, this is a parody and it is a sit-com where things are not taken seriously but rather made fun of. Still, this is a good example of the way the characters in the sit-com approach each other. In the *Seinfeld* world nobody is important. People come and go. The constant flow of people is another important theme in the sitcom. In each episode there are a number of new people in the lives of the main characters. They know so many people. There is an excess of people. They keep encountering people on the street whom they know from the college years or from some other places. They keep meeting new people. This aspect fits completely to

¹ Air Date: October 2,1997 (All air dates are taken from "Seinfeld and Philosophy").

the fantasy of fun and excitement never ending in New York. Even George, a bold, fat, short guy without any self-confidence, does not have any problems with dating good-looking women. He even finds himself in trouble ending an affair. George, Jerry and Elaine discuss with each other on after how many dates they can break up on the phone and after how many dates they have to actually meet the person to break up. In the episode *The Sponge*², because of the lack of contraceptive sponges in the city, Elaine becomes selective in choosing the men she sleeps with. Apart from that sort of a practical reason we don't see them a concern like that.

We almost never see any of the outside characters more than one episode long. They all expire after one episode. People are not worth to be kept longer than an episode. Because there are so many people around the main characters, they seem to be behaving as if they are trying to liquidate that excess of people.

In the sitcom we never see any of the characters alone. This supports the theme that they never feel lonely, or solitude and they never will. In the city there is a constant flow of people, and everybody is replaceable with another. Their friendship with each other fits to that as well. We never see them in a position that this friendship is tested. They never have to do something important for each other. We all know that if they have to, they are not going to do that. But this is not revealed in the sitcom, because the essence that is being given there is, in that dream world in Manhattan, friends are to share fun with. Not to share sacrifice, love or emotional support.

This is also connected with the fact that they never reflect their feelings. In the episode *The Serenity Now*³ Jerry's new date recognizes that he never reveals his anger and tries hard to see him mad. In the end she manages to do that, but this brings an unexpected result. When one feeling is revealed other feelings get revealed too, such as love and caring. Jerry tells George that he loves him, and proposes to Elaine. They first get shocked and don't react in a positive way, but then George tells his life story to Jerry opening all his heart to him. This shock brings Jerry to himself and gets out of that situation of trance full of love and caring. At that moment Elaine comes saying that she accepts the proposal, but Jerry just says that nothing like that will happen. He leaves them in the room and gets out. The other two do not seem disappointed at all, as from the beginning they felt there was something completely wrong with Jerry behaving in that way.

In another episode called *The Pool Guy*⁴, Jerry tells the man working in the swimming pool and who tries to become friends with him and thinks that Jerry doesn't want that because he looks down on him as he works in the swimming pool. Jerry tells him: "Look Ramon, you're, you're a nice guy. But I, I actually only have three friends. I really can't handle any more."

To be in a friendship or a relationship is the most difficult thing for these urban, cosmopolitan, contemporary New York -Manhattan characters. George gets engaged to Susan after a pact that he makes with Jerry promising that they would both change. Soon after the pact Jerry changes his mind but unfortunately by then George is already engaged. After a couple of episodes, during the wedding preparations Susan gets

² Air date: December 7, 1995

³ Air Date: October 9, 1997

⁴ Air date: November 16, 1995

poisoned because of licking the poison in the envelopes of the invitation cards. Even before the funeral of Susan, George makes another attempt at Maria Tomei, a woman that he has fancied for a while.

As mentioned above, the fun and excitement is constant in these people's lives. We barely ever see them watching television with blank eyes. All together they have got things to do, if nothing sit in the diner and chat. Certainly, we barely ever see them reading a newspaper or a magazine, let alone a book, apart from Elaine sometimes, as she works for the publishing company. In the episode *The Ex-girlfriend*⁵, George complains that he could not get his books from the woman that he just broke up with. Jerry asks him if he had read them and when George says that he did, Jerry asks: "*What is this obsession people have with books? They put them in their houses - like they're trophies. What do you need it for after you read it?*"

The best example of their self-centered, egotistic personalities appears in *The Finale*⁶ episode where the four get arrested because of breaking the Good Samaritan Law. The officer tells them that under this law they are required to help or assist anyone in danger as long as it's reasonable to do so. Having heard that George asks Elaine; "*Why would we want to help somebody? That's what nuns and Red Cross workers are for.*" According to Theodore Shick Jr.; "... we learned that Jerry's, George's, Elaine's, and Kramer's 'selfishness, self-absorption, immaturity, and greed' was not only immoral, but also illegal in some jurisdictions." (ed. Irwin, 2000, p.183)

5. Conclusion

The end of 1980's and the beginning of 1990's was a period when the ultimate success of the New Right was spreading all around the world. Ronald Reagan in US and Margaret Thatcher in Britain were declaring their victory against any sort of left wing, even liberal opposition. The cold war was ending, with each East European state disconnecting itself from the Soviet Union, and Soviet Russia dissolving into pieces. Under these conditions, to be a leftist or even to have any sort of social and political consciousness was regarded to be abnormal. The propaganda that capitalism won over communism, right won against left was making good sense for most of the people. Those who tried to change the world, for example the 68 generation as the latest example of the big movements of the left were now a far away nostalgia for the museums. The times came now when the individual instead of society and the personal instead of social and political seemed to be winning.

On the other hand, especially in America and especially in New York, these were years of a vital economy. With the new technological reforms, computers entering to offices, there were new job possibilities all around the world. For a young and clever person who would make the right moves at the right time a very successful and wealthy life seemed very accessible. The concept of the yuppie, another sort of self-made man, "a young upwardly mobile professional person; someone under 40 who prospered during the 1980s" (dictionary.reference.com) was appreciated highly. These were the

⁵ Air date: January 23, 1991

⁶ Air date: May 14, 1998

years when de-politicization of the youth reached at its peak point and anybody who cared anything else then himself started to be regarded stupid.

To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. (Lasch, 1979, p.5)

Seinfeld was a sitcom which became very popular in those years. It corresponded with this social context very well. The shiny dream city New York, with its characters clever enough to make their ways to the center of the city, *aware* enough not to be interested in anything else then themselves and *cool* enough not to have any emotions of love and devotion to anyone. The most popular sitcom of 1990's⁷ *Seinfeld* marked this new type of the individual in its very essence. That is why it became so popular. Unfortunately, this famous, *cool* American individualism has still been spreading all around the world not with any less speed than that of Mc Donald's restaurants or Coca Cola.

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⁷ Another world wide popular NY sitcom of the last decade *Sex and the City* is also still attracting millions of audience in every country that it is aired.