REAL-IZING SITCOMS
KRAMER’S REALITY TOUR AND THE
FINE LINE BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY
IN TELEVISION’S MOST DISPARAGED GENRE

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For Shelley, my partner in life and in television.
# Table of Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................................. 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................... 5

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................... 6

THE ROOTS OF REALITY ............................................................................................... 10

Live=Real ....................................................................................................................... 13

The Legacy of Liveness ................................................................................................. 14

REAL TO REEL SITCOMS ............................................................................................ 16

Fictional Characters Peddling Real Products ................................................................. 17

Real Actors Playing Themselves? .................................................................................. 19

Real Geography ........................................................................................................... 26

Real Characters ............................................................................................................ 31

Seinfeld: Real-Life, Yada, Yada, Yada ......................................................................... 32

REALIZING THE SITCOM: KRAMER’S REALITY TOUR ............................................. 37

History of the Tour ....................................................................................................... 38

In the Theater ............................................................................................................... 40

On the Bus .................................................................................................................... 46

Tourism for Fans .......................................................................................................... 50

A Tour of New York? .................................................................................................... 55

Kramer as Site and Performer ....................................................................................... 60

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 64

WORKS CITED .............................................................................................................. 65
List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Mark Bennett, Home of Ricky and Lucy Ricardo, 2000, etching 17 1/2” x 22 1/2”, courtesy of Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica

Figure 2: Molly Goldberg Greeting Viewers at Home and Advertising Sanka, c. 1949, photograph, courtesy of The Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago

Figure 3: Burns and Allen Title Graphic, c. 1950, video still, courtesy of CBS

Figure 4: George Burns and his Magic Television, c. 1950, photograph, courtesy of The USC Archives of Performing Arts

Figure 5: Friends Title Graphic, video still, courtesy of NBC

Figure 6: “The Real Kramer” Debuts, 1996, digital photograph and video still, www.kennykramer.com

Figure 7: Card Promoting Kramer’s Reality Tour (front and back), Deborah Gar Reichman

Figure 8: Stage Show (Kramer’s Reality Tour), digital photographs, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (BKG)

Figure 9: KraMart (Kramer’s Reality Tour), digital photographs, BKG

Figure 10: Tour Bus (Kramer’s Reality Tour), digital photograph, BKG

Figure 11: On the Bus (Kramer’s Reality Tour), digital photographs, BKG

Figure 12: Tour Sites Montage (Kramer’s Reality Tour), photomontage, www.kennykramer.com

Figure 13: Tom’s Restaurant Group Shot, 2001, digital photograph, www.kennykramer.com

Figure 14: The Kramers Three, power point diagram, Shelley Curnow

Figure 15: Poster for Kramer’s Reality Tour, www.kennykramer.com

Figure 16: “The Real Kramer” T-Shirt, digital photograph, www.kennykramer.com

Illustrations follow their citations in the text.
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Introduction

Kramer: (yelling up to Jerry's apartment from the driver's seat of a yellow school bus) Hey Jerry! I'm starting the Peterman Reality Bus tour!

Jerry: (To George) The last thing this guy is qualified to give a tour about is reality.

Jerry: (To Kramer, now in apartment) What were you doing with that bus?

Kramer: (Handing out brochures) The Real Peterman Reality Bus Tour. The Peterman book is big business! People want to know the stories behind the stories!

Jerry: No one wants to go on a three-hour bus tour of a totally unknown person's life!

Kramer: I'm charging $37.50, plus you get a pizza bagel and dessert.

Jerry: What's for dessert?

Kramer: Bite sized 3 Musketeers. Just like the real Peterman.

Jerry: He eats those?

Kramer: No, I eat those. I'm the real Peterman.

(“The Muffin Tops,” May 8, 1997)

In this clip from a *Seinfeld* episode entitled “The Muffin Tops” (May 8, 1997), the television show’s wacky character Kramer starts a bus tour of sites featured in the autobiography of famous travel-clothing catalogue mogul J. Peterman. The sites are actually not from Peterman’s life but from Kramer’s, because he had previously sold his life stories to Peterman, who had found his own life too boring for an autobiography. As Kramer explains, while Peterman is Peterman, Kramer is the real Peterman. If Peterman can make money off of Kramer’s life, why shouldn’t Kramer?

The scenario is complicated in itself but the plot thickens when one learns that this clip is actually a spoof on a real-life tour of New York called Kramer’s Reality Tour, which takes visitors to sites made famous on the very show that is spoofing it. Kramer’s Reality Tour is the brainchild of Kenny Kramer, the real-life inspiration for the infamous character Cosmo Kramer on the series, as well as the tour’s guide. Like his character on the show, Kenny Kramer recognized that fame and money have been made based on his life, while he remained unknown. Ironically, even his capitalizing on *Seinfeld* made it back onto the show.
Seinfeld’s self-reflexive style—of which “The Muffin Tops” is a shining example—and its cynical take on real-life events, places, and people in everyday situations made it one of the most successful shows of all time. On the air in first-runs for nine seasons, from 1990 until 1998, and currently shown in reruns multiple times a day in ninety countries, the series is still one of the most widely watched sitcoms in the world. It was one of the five top Nielsen-rated shows for six years in a row, the cornerstone of NBC’s “Must-See TV” line-up, and created $1 billion in profits in its last season (Ancoin 1998). The self-described “show about nothing” centers around the quotidian experiences of four selfish and somewhat disagreeable New Yorkers: stand-up comic Jerry Seinfeld (played by himself); his kooky neighbor Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards); anxiety-prone best friend George Costanza (Jason Alexander); and sassy ex-girlfriend Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus). The original premise of the sitcom was the everyday quirks of life that inspire Seinfeld’s stand-up routines. These routines bracketed the storyline each week, but over the years the stand-up footage was phased out as struggles with the mundane details of ordinary life filled the hilarious 22-minute episodes.

The spoof of the Kramer tour is just one of many elements on Seinfeld that are anchored in “reality.” Seinfeld utilized more street scenes and real places in New York City than almost any other network situation comedy, despite the fact that it was filmed on a set in Los Angeles. In each episode the characters walk on Manhattan streets, wait outside movie theaters, run errands, or sit in restaurants, the favorite being Monk’s (the façade of which is the real-life Tom’s Restaurant) on the Upper West Side. Although the characters and storylines are fictional, they are based on real people and events. The main characters are based on writer and co-creator Larry David and his friends. Additionally, they interact with such famous New Yorkers as George Steinbrenner and Rudolph Giuliani as well as less known locals such as a now infamous Midtown soup vendor.
Kramer’s Reality Tour pinpoints that which made Seinfeld so popular with its viewers—its unapologetic depiction of the everyday in New York City. The tour moves through the space of Seinfeld’s New York, mapping what was once only televisual with coordinates in real space. The tour reunites the fictional text with the real places and events to which the sitcom refers. It fills in the blanks by fleshing out the backstory and making Seinfeld even more “real” for its fans. Unlike other television tours, such as On Location Tours in New York, which takes visitors to mostly exterior locations and public sites featured in such shows as Sex and the City, Friends, Mad About You and The Sopranos, Kramer’s Reality Tour provides the viewer with extratextual details, including the histories and motives of the characters’ lives in relation to the real people who inspired them. As Kramer explains, “Those other tours just take you to locations used in the various shows. Only Kramer’s Tour tells the stories behind the stories and is hosted by a person directly connected to the show” (Reichman 2001).

Together, Seinfeld and Kramer’s Reality Tour offer a rich site for exploring issues in fan studies, tourist studies, and performance studies. I will draw upon and hope to add to the rich scholarship on fans and fan culture, including the work on television fans and Star Trek (Jenkins 1992) and TV fans more generally (Hills 2002). The work of Dean MacCannell on tourism and Erving Goffman on frame analysis and the performance of self in everyday life inspires my analysis of Kramer’s Reality Tour.

As a television fan and a Seinfeld fan, I am compelled by the way that Mr. Kramer and the tour participants have used the tour to give a show taped in a lot in Burbank a living three-dimensionality in the real space of New York City. Throughout the history of the medium, sitcoms such as Seinfeld have inspired a rich fan culture based on viewers’ willingness to relate to and believe in their characters and scenarios. Networks have encouraged and exploited such reality
effects to the delight of viewers. But Kramer's Reality Tour takes this reality play even farther by actually inserting the show back into real life.

Although Kramer's Reality Tour is unique in the particular way that it maps fiction onto reality in the space of a real city, the Seinfeld television show is not unique in exploiting the slippery line between fiction and reality. Seinfeld and Kramer's Reality Tour are part of a longer history of television's reality effects. Accordingly, I have divided the thesis into three parts. After discussing the early realistic roots of television, I trace the history of "reality-based" television sitcoms, culminating with the Seinfeld television show, followed by an account of Kramer's Reality Tour. My goal is to illuminate the nature of television "realness" and how it is produced.

The Seinfeld television show is part of a longer history of sitcoms that authenticate themselves through strategic connections to "reality," from The Goldbergs through Seinfeld's postmillennial progeny Curb Your Enthusiasm. In the first part of the thesis, I examine the ways that television's beginnings as a live and commercial medium have shaped its character as a realist medium. I build upon television studies that deal with the question of "liveness" from the very inception of the medium. Central to my contextualization of Seinfeld within the history of television is William Boddy's work on the critical discourse of television in the 1950s (Boddy 1990). To better understand the centrality of spatial and temporal intimacy of television as a visual medium that comes into our homes and is woven into our schedules and our lives, I will draw on the work of Lynn Spigel, who has written on television in relationship to women and consumerism (Spigel 1992). In the second part of the thesis, I analyze how sitcoms have employed reality effects and how Seinfeld takes to new extremes many devices that merged reality and fiction on previous television shows. In the third part of the thesis, I turn to the Kramer's Reality Tour, whose production and reception unite television and reality beyond the screen.
Kramer’s Reality Tour is indeed kooky. But its underlying achievement, the transformation of
televisual to real time and space, is significant. We invest so much time in the shows we watch. We
believe so deeply in characters that enter our homes week after week that many successful television
actors have trouble ever breaking into new roles. We stay tuned to the news after NBC’s “Must-See
TV,” while a news correspondent goes onto the set of Friends to “Find out if the Friends are really
friends.” There is a desire for television to depict reality, as is made evident by the recent Reality TV
craze, a desire that is as old as television itself.

The Roots of Reality

*To me the great difference between radio and television performance is that television demands
honesty. Radio is an escape from reality, whereas good television is reality.*

George Burns, 1955

Shows for Summer,” (Carter 2003) one of many articles about the impending saturation of so-called
“Reality TV” and the possible end of scripted programs such as sitcoms and dramas. The immense
popularity of shows like *Survivor, The Bachelor,* and the *Real World* seemed to suggest that audiences
preferred watching “real” everyday people in situations that were anything but real, rather than
actors playing characters in a narrative.

In actuality, “reality programming” is not as new as it seems. *This is Your Life* (1952-1961),
*The Dating Game* (1966-1970), and *Real People* (1979-1984), and are among earlier shows that
feature people supposedly being themselves. In the introduction to his 2002 anthology *Reality
Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real,* James Friedman argues that what has changed in recent
years is not the invention of Reality TV, but rather the “open and explicit sale of television
programming as a representation of reality” (Friedman 2002, 7). Thus, according to Friedman, Reality TV is a new package, but not a new concept.

For over two decades researchers have consistently found that audiences respond best to realistic programming. An interest in exploiting television realism has intensified over the course of the medium’s history. David Morley’s 1980 study of the audience of the British current affairs shows Nationwide (Morley 1980), and subsequent qualitative studies of television viewers, including families, women, children, and people of diverse occupational and cultural backgrounds, report that audiences respond better to shows that seem real or plausible rather than far-fetched. In her influential 1985 book Watching Dallas, Dutch sociologist Ien Ang asked Dallas watchers to write her letters explaining why they did or did not like the show (Ang 1985). They reported that Dallas was “emotionally realistic,” which Ang relates to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that popular pleasure is linked to realism based on believability or emotional identification. Similarly, Ron Lembo found in his 2000 study that the more plausible the show, the more committed and sustained was audience attention (Lembo 2000, 173). One of Lembo’s participants noted, “I want to live in a fantasy world when I am watching TV just like everybody else does. But I want to believe it’s a real world, not that it’s some cartoon” (Lembo 2000, 190).

The desire to believe in and even inhabit the worlds depicted on television is epitomized in the work of contemporary artist Mark Bennett. Since 1968 when he was eleven, Bennett has been drawing intricate floor plans of the homes represented on his favorite sitcoms. The blueprint pictured here of the Ricardo home from I Love Lucy (Figure 1) is one of over fifty fantasy layouts that he has produced. The artist explains why he was compelled to make these drawings as a child: “I was obsessed with television and I used to watch and take notes of every detail of the house during the commercials. I wanted to be one of those families, I wanted to be a Cleaver [from Leave it to Beaver] and live in the Cleaver home!” To this day he has avoided seeing any of the sets for these programs,
choosing instead to believe in them as real homes. His yearning to occupy these homes and live the
lives he watched day in and day out is reflected in his compulsive project.

Recent articles about the flood of reality shows predict, paradoxically, that the situation
comedy, itself a kind of reality television, is the format that will fall victim to the Reality TV craze.
Friedman’s anthology explores the way that “television as an institution is ideologically,
technologically, and programmatically linked to the presentation of reality” (Friedman 2002, 4). Of
the fourteen essays in the volume, which explore news, weather, court TV, talk shows, westerns, and
cop dramas, not one focuses on situation comedies. Indeed, these 30-minute weekly programs, largely
dependent on formula and stereotype, have often been brushed aside as the least “real” of all
program formats. But, as I will set out to demonstrate in this thesis, these beloved, albeit often silly, programs have become some of the most real to their viewers.

**Live=Real**

The idea that television presents reality has been cited by industry professionals as well as television critics since the medium’s inception. The ability to portray reality was touted as a direct result of live broadcasting, which separated much of television from cinema. Through his in-depth analysis of 1950s television criticism, William Boddy has shown that the characteristics most identified with the liveness of the new medium were “immediacy,” the ability to see an event as it happens, and “intimacy,” the close relationship between viewers and performers (Boddy 1990). Broadcast critic Gilbert Seldes wrote in 1952 that audiences “feel that what they see and hear is happening in the present and therefore more real than anything taken and cut and dried which has the feel of the past” (Seldes quoted in Boddy 1990, 81). Television’s technological immediacy, Seldes argued, gave viewers an “overwhelming feel of reality” (Seldes quoted in Boddy 1990, 84).

Debates regarding liveness and reality erupted in the television industry when television began to utilize film and to move production from New York, the center of live theater, to Hollywood. *New York Times* critic Jack Gould, in a 1956 essay, argued in defense of live television:

> In their blind pursuit of artificial perfectionism, the TV film producers compromise the one vital element that endows the home screen with its own intangible excitement: humanness. Their error is to try to tinker with reality, to improve it to the point where it is no longer real (Gould quoted in Boddy 1990, 81).

For Gould, live broadcast creates the perception of no mediation, no altering of reality.

By 1955, when telefilm and then video formats won out over live broadcast and the production center of television had moved to the west coast, the legacy of live television and all that it implied tagged along. In her essay “Acting Live,” Rhona Berenstein has shown that even when
television began utilizing filmed programming, the medium was still promoted as extending liveness, as maintaining the “impression of liveness,” even though the show was pre-recorded (Berenstein 2002, 28-9). In her work on 1980s morning shows, Jane Feure similarly argues that even though television has hardly any live programming anymore, it still insists upon an “ideology of live,” because its nature as a medium is to be always “there,” available when one tunes in—in essence, “alive” (Feure 1983, 15). In his work on television news, Robert Stam writes that, “although live transmissions form but a tiny proportion of programming, that tiny portion sets the tone for all television” (Stam 1983, 24-5).

The Legacy of Liveness

Thus, even when television is not live, attributes associated with liveness, such as immediacy and intimacy between viewer and performance, remain. In her feminist analysis of television and especially television sitcoms, Spigel argues that television produces intimacy by collapsing the distance between viewers and what they watch. Television does this by bringing the world into one’s living room, no matter where one lives. From the outset, “the unique power of the new medium was its ability to bind public with private space, and the appeal of the individual television program depended on the degree to which it capitalized on this (Spigel 1992, 139).

Television’s intimacy derived from its incorporation not only into lived space, but also into lived time. That sitcoms came into the home day after day, week after week, contributed to their sense of reality. Those characters on television, whom the audience came to believe in, would become lifelong companions in the lives of their audiences. While this phenomenon started in radio, the visual element added to a storyline’s credibility, and plot constructions, such as interactions with

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1 Feure also argues that “live” is never real, or unmediated, but the appearance of realness and the discourse surrounding television’s realness is what is of interest here.
2 For additional discussion concerning liveness and television, see (Auslander 1999).
neighbors, encouraged viewers to believe that those on television could actually be their real neighbors (Spigel 1992, 157). Even the earliest promoters of television were promising that the “person or persons in the program seem to step into your living room and converse with you” (Richard Hubbell quoted in Berenstein 2002, 30).

The site of television reception, the living room or den in one’s own home, makes a critical difference between it and film with respect to what Berenstein calls “intimate realism.” Berenstein cites sociologist Leo Bogart, who in 1956 described television viewing at home as “an intimate situation which contrasts with the more formal atmosphere of the theater or with the impersonal symbolism of the printed word” (Bogart quoted in Berenstein 2002, 33). According to Berenstein, “The site of reception (the home) and the mode of transmission (immediacy) creates a powerful means of engaging and, according to Bogart, manipulating audiences into believing what they see is real” (Berenstein 2002, 33).

Intimacy was further encouraged by the small size of the television screen, which demanded that the audience sit close and which encouraged directors to utilize the close-up shot. This spatial arrangement brought the relationship between viewer and performer/character close to one another, so that, according to TV critic Orrin Dunlap, Jr., the television actor “enters the home more as a friend or neighbor than as a performer” (Dunlap quoted in Berenstein 2002, 43). Or, as Jack Gould summed it up, “It is the difference between being with someone and looking at someone” (Gould quoted in Berenstein 2002, 42). Television’s intimacy also made the medium an effective selling tool. The everyday, neighborly friend who had gained the trust of the audience was in an ideal position to sell products.

Television’s intimacy is not only spatial but also temporal. Series’ are viewed on a daily or weekly basis over the course of several years, in contrast with film, which is viewed irregularly and occasionally. As early as 1948, Bernard Smith predicted in Harper’s that the television set “will form
a part of the living habits of the people” (Smith quoted in Berenstein 2002, 33). Film, at least before the days of video rental and movie channels, demanded a trip away from the home, away from the everyday, and into a dedicated film viewing space. Indeed, a big part of seeing films was seeing them in a movie palace. Not until HBO and the VCR did film culture become part of everyday life and, when it did, it was via the television set (Kellner 1999, 214). Made-for-television programs, in contrast, were broadcast directly to the viewer, right into the home, offering not so much an escape from the everyday as an extension of it, as television became part of one’s daily or weekly schedule. And before the days of multi-channel cable, television viewers were practically all on the same schedule.

Immediacy and intimacy, the legacy of television’s liveness, have imbued serial situation comedies with a sense of reality that has at times eclipsed their farcical, formulaic style. Such realism is tied to the purpose of sitcoms, which Paul Wells describes as “a genre dedicated to offering a place to empathize with a particular situation” (Wells quoted in Morreale 2003, xii, emphasis mine). I will now trace how this empathy was achieved in some of the most popular television sitcoms, from the days when they were live through to the “Must-See TV” era.

Real to Reel Sitcoms

Since the early days of television, producers, actors, and audiences have merged elements of reality with fictional, scripted programming. When live television gave way to filmed formats such as sitcoms, many critics stopped lauding television for its depiction of reality. Nevertheless, as I will argue, some of the most beloved shows retained a connection to reality in other ways.

As I will show, many of the earliest television shows featured actors who played either themselves or someone that resembled them in some way, and sold products while in character. In the sixties, sitcoms tended to be blander, offering characters that could be anyone, living in Anytown,
USA, that is, in locations that were at once unidentifiable and totally identifiable. From the seventies to the present, shows became situated in recognizable, “real-world” places, which served to ground them in a believable geographical reality. As I will illustrate, the merging of reality and fiction served the sponsor, the network, and ratings. Reality stunts created the kind of buzz around a program that fueled commercial exploitation of related merchandise and tourism.

**Fictional Characters Peddling Real Products**

In the earliest situation comedies, links to reality served, among other purposes, to sell products. In a practice that carried over from radio, each program had a singular sponsor, whose pitches were not quarantined from the fictional narrative the way that commercial spots are today. Rather, sponsors utilized announcers (who were often the show’s actors themselves) and the set to sell the sponsors’ wares. Directly addressing the audience, the announcer was the person in a production that got closest to the audience. Thus, it was as important to the advertiser as it was to the audience that a character in this role seemed real and trustworthy, because these characters were literally and figuratively the spokespersons for the product.

In the television series *The Goldbergs*, adapted from radio in 1949, every episode would open with actress Gertrude Berg, in character as Molly Goldberg, leaning out the window of her fictitious Bronx apartment and imploring the audience to drink Sanka like her and her family (Figure 2). Her words would always tie Sanka to something in the storyline of that day’s episode. In a late summer episode from the

![Figure 2: Molly Goldberg Greeting Viewers at Home and Advertising Sanka, c. 1949](image)
show’s first season, in which the Goldbergs just returned from a summer vacation at Pinchas’ Pines resort in the Catskill’s (August 29, 1949), Molly comes to the window with her whole family to announce that they “Just came back from the Catskill’s.” After Molly sends her family off to unpack, she begins her sales pitch which includes “Just as I tell you about Sanka, I told them at Pinchas’ Pines about Sanka…the caffeine is taken out, the sleep is left in…Everybody [at Pinchas] liked the service after the Sanka.” The camera then pulls back and she says yoo-hoo to her neighbors and launches into tales of her trip. “Have I stories for you from Pinchas’ Pines?” Her living room is visible behind her, and her kids can be seen unpacking.

Here the Sanka advertisement is woven into the narrative of the episode, and the product is even suggested to be have been used by the family on their (un-televised) vacation. In a single camera shot, Molly’s direct address to the audience is fused with her interaction with the characters in the program. The product she advertises, Sanka, is part of her audience’s “real life” world, which, through the seamless cut, is joined with the world of the characters. It is the product, which Molly not only advertises, but which also sits on the set’s kitchen shelf, that serves to connect audience with character, and it is the direct address of the actor to the audience that suggests that both audience and characters occupy the same world. This same type of direct address also closes the show. Just as the Sanka commercial was used to invite the viewer into the Goldberg house, it also bids the audience farewell. Molly sticks her head out the window again to wrap up the story and remind the viewer to buy Sanka, so that he or she may live like the Goldbergs, or perhaps sustain the reality of the characters in between episodes.

Theorists, among them Lynn Spigel, have argued that this direct address breaks the frame and alerts us to the fiction and artifice of the show (Spigel 1992, 169). I would also argue that the product actually forges a link between fictional character and real-life audience member.

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3 Spigel argues that direct address and self-reflexivity not only alerted viewers to the fiction of the show, but to the artifice of middle-class lives and gendered domesticity (Spigel 1992, 165-177).
Paradoxically, the show may be revealed as fictional but the character becomes more real. Long after single sponsorship gave way to the commercial spot system that exists today, television actors are still endorsing products related to the fictional characters they play. Thus, Carol Brady/Florence Henderson, trusted housewife, became the spokeswoman for Wesson Oil; Robert Young/Marcus Welby M.D. suggested the healthier decaffeinated Sanka; and General Hospital actors sold cough syrup. Mimi White explains what is at work here: “the star persona as the locus of intersection between ‘real people’ and the fictional characters they portray is underscored, as the actors initiate their pitch by explaining, “I’m not a real doctor but I play one on TV” (White 1986, 57).

The intimacy that helped television actors become trusted spokespeople also brought stars closer to the viewer almost as if they were part of the family. This emphasis on getting to really know characters as if they were real was compounded in sitcoms where actors played themselves or characters that were purposely similar to their public personae. The most famous sitcoms to exploit a connection between actor and character were The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show, I Love Lucy, and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet.

**Real Actors Playing Themselves?**

The vaudeville pair George Burns and Gracie Allen played themselves making a sitcom in the self-referential The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show (1950-1958), or “Burns and Allen,” as it was often called. Like The Goldbergs, sponsorship used reality gimmicks. Commercials for Carnation were woven into storylines and a Carnation box sat on the set’s fridge in every episode, an early example of product placement. A separate announcer was used for the commercials, but he was also a regular on the show who played a character who was an announcer on the “show within the show.” In addition, Gracie Allen herself often pitched the product—any fan could buy a Carnation cookbook personally autographed by her.
Unlike *The Goldbergs*, however, the entire premise of *Burns and Allen* exploited the intermediary space between real life and theater. The show was set in a theater, and behind the curtain lay a set of the home of the real-life couple. George Burns would alternately play himself and “be” himself (or rather play himself being himself) by every so often stepping outside of the curtain to talk directly to the audience about what was happening on the set (Figure 3). As emcee, Burns “treated the audience as if they were in on the real lives of George and Gracie, not watching characters on TV” (Blythe 1989, 112). He constantly reminded the audience in asides that the show was a television show, a device used in contemporary programs from the last two decades such as *Moonlighting* and *Bernie Mac*.

*Burns and Allen* collapsed the fourth wall of the fictive space both literally and figuratively. Episodes would often open with Burns standing outside of the curtain on the edge of the stage, introducing the plot and each character. Then the curtain would open and a camera would move to the set of the couple’s house, with its fourth wall missing, and Gracie inside. When George was needed in the plot, he would announce that he was needed, by saying something like “Oh, I’m supposed to open the door for Gracie. I’ll be right back,” and walk through the imaginary wall into the home, often to answer the door from the inside. This missing fourth wall was called to attention often, as in the pilot episode when the announcer tries to step out through it and George asks him to please use the door because, “We’ve got to keep this believable” (October 12, 1950). In the episode “June the Wardrobe Woman Wins a Trip to Hawaii” (October 9, 1952), Burns found what Gracie was
doing so humorous that he whipped out a pad and took notes, telling the audience that it “might be
good for one of our television shows.” At the end of the episode, however, he ripped them up,
exclaiming, “No one would ever believe this!”

Lynn Spigel has written about the self-reflexivity of Burns and Allen and the way that it drew
attention to the fictive nature of the program while simultaneously helping viewers to feel “in on the
joke” (Spigel 1992, 165). In this way the show encouraged audiences to believe in the two stars—to
believe that they were truly being themselves and that the audience could really get to know them.
As Spigel has commented, in Burns and Allen “The stage seems more real than the domestic space”
(Spigel 1992, 167). The breaking of the fourth wall both freed the actors from their roles and invited
the audience into the set. By addressing the audience directly, Burns seemed to let the viewers in on
the secret of television production so they could watch the domestic scenes through knowing eyes—
knowing, that is, that the scenario is fictitious, and a play—while buying into the real George and his
real-life wife Gracie, thanks to the feeling that his lines were spontaneous, rather than scripted. As
attention is called to the artifice of the set within a set, Burns and Allen seems all the more “real.”

In addition, Burns and Allen incorporated
metanarratives that, like the direct address in The
Goldbergs, distinguished reality from fiction while also
blurring the line between them. In some episodes George
would watch on stage what he called his “magic television
set,” a television that would reveal the very episode
viewers were watching at home—putting actor and viewer
in the same place (Figure 4). This served to further
collapse the distance between audience member and

Figure 4: George Burns and his Magic
Television c. 1957
starfor he was watching exactly what you at home are watching (Spigel 1992, 167). Other gimmicks were employed to suggest similarities between Burns and Allen and their on-screen personas. The Burns and Allen production crew and the couple’s real-life son became characters on the show. The couple parodied their own vaudeville acts within the narrative, and their well-publicized happy relationship was referenced and reiterated on the small screen. Burns even milked the audience’s desire for intimate knowledge of him and Gracie by promoting his autobiography, I Love Her. That’s Why, right on the show.

Like Burns and Allen, I Love Lucy (1951-1961) exploited audience desire for extratextual knowledge about the stars of the sitcom. Only with Lucy, reality and fiction were correlated in what was to be thought of as a more traditional sitcom format—there was no emcee or vaudeville acts unless they could be seamlessly inserted into the story. David Halberstam has written in his historical work The Fifties that “Nothing showed the power of this new medium to soften the edge between real life and fantasy better than the coming of Lucille Ball” (Halberstam 1993, 196). Public knowledge about the extratextual life of the star, who liked to portray herself as “just a housewife,” in combination with the show’s on-screen plots about everyday life in a domestic setting, worked to make I Love Lucy “a blend of reality and fiction, or ‘real life’ and ‘reel life’ as a 1953 Look article called it” (Landay 1999, 28).

Real-life couple Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz played fictional couple Lucy and Ricky Ricardo in a way that made expert use of their similarities. The icon of “Lucy” occupied a liminal space between the real-life Lucille Ball and the characters she created, and Ball herself encouraged this (Landay 1999, 31). Mrs. Ball insisted on casting Desi Arnaz in the role of husband because “viewers certainly knew that Desi was her real husband” (Halberstam 1993, 197). The couple insisted on making their characters everyday people doing everyday things, instead of glamorous stars, so that the public could relate to them. “Desi and I weren’t your ordinary Hollywood couple on TV. We lived in a
brownstone apartment somewhere in Manhattan, and paying the rent, getting a new dress...or buying a piece of furniture were all worth a story” (Ball quoted in Andrews 1985, 226). The writers also based the episodes loosely on actual events and activities in their lives, keeping their wedding date the same, and using real names of friends, high school, and hometown. Many contemporary stars such as Rock Hudson and Orson Welles played themselves on the show and interacted with the characters, which further suggested that the fictional characters on the show shared the same “real” world as the known stars. The real-life couple made constant “personal appearances” on such television shows as Ed Sullivan’s Toast of the Town, which encouraged audience fascination with their extratextual lives. As Spigel has written, “Intimacy and authenticity was suggested when shows made the stars seem similar to their extratextual selves” (Spigel 1992, 158). In essence, playing oneself on television was the most epitomic role.

In 1953, the diagetic and extradiagetic completely aligned as Ball gave birth off-camera to Desi Arnaz, Jr. and on-camera that same day to “little Ricky,” in what may well have been the biggest ratings stunt in television history. Preceding the birth(s), the Desilu production company launched a strategic publicity campaign and line of merchandise, which included a record, “There’s a Brand New Baby in Our House,” as well as Ricky, Jr. dolls, and I Love Lucy nursery furniture. Knowing she would be having a caesarean section on a certain Monday, the network planned to air the birth episode the same day. The entire season led up to the birth and centered on Lucy’s pregnancy (but without using the p-word). In the first episode to address the topic, where Lucy tells Ricky she is expecting, Ball and Arnaz spontaneously broke into tears. That take was used rather than the one written. Forty-four million people watched the birth episode, “Lucy Goes to the Hospital” (January 19, 1953), compared to twenty-nine million who watched Eisenhower’s inauguration. The birth was

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4 Guest stars playing themselves has continued to be standard practice in sitcoms and dramas up until the present day, each time serving to elevate the “reality” of the fictive characters. For further discussion on guest stars see (White 1986, 57-59).
worldwide news and was even announced in all Los Angeles school classrooms. The Associated Press commented, “We covered the birth on a wartime basis, with hourly bulletins” (AP quoted in Andrews 1985, 106).

The public often had difficulty maintaining aesthetic distance and realizing that *I Love Lucy* was just a fictional program. When Desi Arnaz, Jr. was growing up, people called him Little Ricky, although he was never on the show. “I can still remember watching the show when I was three and wondering who was the baby with Mommy and Daddy. When my parents said it was me, I was confused because I knew it wasn’t. I had this identity problem, and it wasn’t helped any by people calling me Little Ricky, a name I learned to despise” (Arnaz, Jr. quoted in Andrews 1985, 189). Similarly, Vivian Vance, who played Lucy’s best friend Ethel Mertz, was in psychoanalysis the entire run of the show in part because people on the street identified her as Ethel, older and frumpier than the actress was in real life. Even Lucy and Desi had to delay their divorce until the show about the zany but happy couple ended.

But perhaps the show that took actors playing themselves to the greatest extreme was *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966). It exemplified the realist suburban family sitcoms that would flourish in the late fifties and early sixties (Spigel 1992, 178). By the time this sitcom ran, the vaudeville acts of *Burns and Allen* and the slapstick humor of *I Love Lucy* were being supplanted by more staid and down-to-earth scenarios. As nationwide incentives encouraged postwar couples to move out of the cities and into suburbs, the settings for sitcoms also changed from the urban locals of New York (*I Love Lucy*, *The Goldbergs*) and Beverly Hills (*Burns and Allen*) to the nondescript suburbs of Anytown, USA. An emphasis on plausibility was favored over laughs and there was no breaking of the fourth wall or attention called to artifice. In praise of the reality inherent in this type of sitcom, *Newsweek* wrote in 1954, “Danny Thomas’s character [on *Make Room for Daddy*] resembles him more than Gracie Allen resembles herself” (Spigel 1992, 159).
The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet starred a real-life family who was accessible to viewers both onscreen and off. A tight PR machine made sure that all press on the “real-life” Nelson family did not conflict with their on-screen personas, who shared their exact same names, that is, they had to conform their real lives to their television personas. The show ran for seventeen years and during the entire time it was always stressed that the family “was just playing themselves.” In 1952, Newsweek swore that “Ricky kicks his shoes off during the filming, just as he does at home, and both boys work in front of the cameras in their regular clothes. In fact, says Harriet, they don’t even know the cameras are there!” (Spigel 1992, 158-9) The show’s hook was that viewers were watching a real family grow up before their eyes. Unlike film, where makeup or special effects may produce what appears to be an aging process of many years in the course of minutes or months, the actors on long-running television series can not help but change their appearance over time. In Ozzie and Harriet, the boys were always the stars of the show, and America was fascinated with watching them grow up. When each got married, even their “real-life” wives joined the show.

The setting for Ozzie and Harriet was supposed to appear as real as its stars. Each episode opened with an exterior shot of the Nelsons’ house, modeled after their real home. The commercials for the show’s sponsor, Hotpoint, were shot inside the house’s interior, in the kitchen, laundry room, and other spaces outfitted with Hotpoint appliances. Midway through each episode, announcer “John Holmes,” who appeared with his wife (“John’s wife”) on the set of the family’s kitchen, would address the camera and say, “Don’t you envy Harriet this beautiful Hotpoint automatic electric range? You needn’t because you could easily afford one!” Is the announcer referring to Harriet on the show or Harriet in real life? Does either or both of them really use a Hotpoint stove? The answer is understood as yes. With no clear separation between Harriet and her character, the viewer is asked to believe that she indeed does cook with Hotpoint. Just as with The Goldbergs, the
commercials and the story are part of the same reality, a reality shared with the viewer. But unlike
_The Goldbergs_, here there is no distinction between character and actor.

_Ozzie and Harriet_ gave rise to many clones, as the coaxial cable reached suburban viewers
across America and critics celebrated bland verisimilitude in programming. Other sitcoms were
praised for their adherence to reality, even when the characters weren’t playing themselves, but
were only acting as everyday people rather than as stars. In such cases, what made the show real
were not the individual elements, but rather the situation, which was so ordinary and potentially
sobering as to be real on the strength of that alone. Although none of these programs ever broke the
top 100 most popular sitcoms (Marsh 1999, 1263-4), they defined the fifties and early sixties in
television and fostered just what their sponsors intended—ideal images of a middle-class suburbia
that solved everyday problems through consumption. As Hal Himmelstein writes of this era of
sitcoms, “The ultimate moral imperative in the myth of the suburban middle landscape comedies of
the 1950s and 1960s is acquisitiveness” (Himmelstein 1984, 88). By the mid-1960s, however, the
assassination of John F. Kennedy and the unrest over the war in Vietnam were among the factors
that led to a change in genre as sober sitcoms gave way to escapist ones (Morreale 2003, 88). Far
from realistic, sitcoms like _My Favorite Martian_ (1963-66), _Bewitched_ (1964-72), and _Mr. Ed_ (1961-
66) were exemplary of this era.

**Real Geography**

In the 1970s, sitcoms came back down to earth by engaging with “relevant” issues such as
racism, feminism, and class disparity in a new genre of sitcoms often called “social comedies.” A new
interest in demographics which targeted younger upscale viewers rather than older rural audiences
encouraged networks to show sitcoms that re-located to real, recognizable urban locations, rather
than generic Anytown suburbs. Examples include _All in the Family, M*A*S*H, Good Times_, and _The
Jeffersons. Improved transportation, more sophisticated cameras, and on-location shooting facilitated the filming of scenes and establishing shots all over the country to be spliced into sitcoms filmed in a studio in Los Angeles. Whereas previous shows depended on characters and products to anchor them in the real world, now geography gave them their authenticity. References to sites, and even non-sites, like specific corners and parking lots, added a feeling of situatedness. Situation comedies had become situated comedies.

Situatedness endorsed a feeling of reality, and allowed the televisual world to enter into the real one. An establishing shot of the building where Mary supposedly works in The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-77) allowed anyone visiting or living in Minneapolis to walk by that building and think, if only for a second, “That is where Mary works.” Whereas the obvious artificiality of the set on earlier shows seemed to make the actors more real (Spigel 1992, 171), now it was the real settings that gave the world of the show its quality of realness. Identifiable places that could be visited, even if they were not visited, added plausibility to a program. As theorist Michael Tueth argues, “The credibility of this televised presentation of urban life is enhanced by the urban situation comedies’ frequent interactions with ‘the real world!’” (Tueth 2000, 105).

One of the longest running sitcoms of all time, Cheers (1982-1993) was based on a real bar, The Bull and Finch in Boston. The television version occupied the same address and the set had the same steps leading down from the street. Even though the show was filmed on a set in Los Angeles, and the real bar’s interior doesn’t look exactly like the set because the layout had to be changed to facilitate production,⁵ the Cheers bar is one of the most popular tourist sites in Boston (Keats 1996, 25). It is not the studio set that people want to see; it is the bar, because the bar is what grounds the show in real life. It is not where the actors work that matters to fans, but where the characters supposedly work. The name of the actual bar was changed from the original Bull and Finch to Cheers

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⁵ A wall bar was replaced with an island to allow for four cameras, reports www.cheersboston.com.
when the show became popular, “because it has always been confusing to visitors of Boston” (www.cheersboston.com)—again life is made to conform to television. Today there are replicas of the *Cheers* bar in airports across the country, with statues of the characters planted in their seats so that tourists and fans can sit with them as if in the show.

*Cheers* was an early precursor to the Thursday NBC “Must-See TV” Line up, a group of popular, “quality” shows, most of which are situated in a known urban geography. *Frasier* (1993-present), a Seattle-set spin-off of *Cheers*, is one of several recent sitcoms that came on the air in the nineties and are set in a recognizable city. The others, *Friends, Mad About You, Will & Grace,* and *Seinfeld* all take place in New York City and the city itself plays a starring role in all of these shows. *Friends* (1994-present) establishes the importance of Manhattan with shots of the skyline in the opening credits (Figure 5), which forms a backdrop in front of which the six friends dance around a fountain and a couch, which they have apparently brought outside, suggesting that the city is a place in which to be at home and let loose. Fun and safe, even at night. When they are inside their apartments, the characters are often gazing out a large window across to the window of another character who conveniently lives a couple blocks away.

In *Will & Grace* (1998-present), the four central characters spend a lot of time at New York City landmarks and have many New York celebrity sightings. For instance, Jack runs into Cher, whom he idolizes but whom he mistakes for a drag queen (“Gypsies, Tramps and Weed,” November 16, 2001), and Will and Grace sneak into an open-house showing of Sandra Bernhard’s apartment (“Swimming Pools...Movie Stars,” January 11, 2001). By playing themselves in the virtual world of the episode, these known celebrities of the “real world” help audiences to relate to and believe more
strongly in the characters, who have the same relationship to the glamorous stars as they do at home, a practice that has been part of television since the beginning. In a 2002 episode, the crew decides to have a picnic of tapas in Central Park, where Grace and her boyfriend run into Katie Couric (“Marry Me a Little,” November 21, 2002). For viewers across America, who tune in to watch Couric host The Today Show from Rockefeller Center, this prime-time run-in reifies the conflation of New York as a media center and place of celebrity. Indeed, for much of the country, shows set in New York offer the only images of New York that viewers know (Weber 1997). One sitcom watcher in Boise, Idaho, told The New York Times reporter Bruce Weber that he likes the main characters of these New York-based shows because they are like guides to an unknown city (Weber 1997).

In addition to the physical geography, actual city-related events add to the verisimilitude of the virtual settings and suggest that the characters inhabit the same world as their viewers. Although there was no spoken mention of the events of September 11th on Friends, in the weeks following the tragedy characters wore FDNY shirts and “I Love New York” was scribbled on a dry erase board on the set, suggesting that even they had been affected by the events. Again, life conforms to television to make the show seem even more real: New Yorkers dining at the very real restaurant Guastavino’s can order a cocktail called the Flirtini, which was invented and enjoyed by the fictive Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) on Sex and the City.

The suggestion that fictive characters really do occupy real space is again heightened by spin-off series’, a trend which began in the 1970s but is still prevalent today. Shows may reference the shows that spin off from them, or have characters from one show visit another show. The Jeffersons (1975-1986) would speak of the Bunkers from All in the Family (1971-1992) after they moved “uptown.” Even the Chicago housing projects in Good Times (1974-1979) could be traced back to New York.

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6 What is really being advertised here is Couric’s new NBC show, Katie at Night, for which there is a commercial at the next break.
7 As this is being written, bars around New York are selling the “Absolut Hunk” the most recent cocktail invented on this show.
York shows through *Maude* (1972-1978). The permeability of these shows was not always intended or welcoming. Lisa Kudrow’s occasional role as a waitress in *Mad About You* (1992-1999) worried network executives when the same actress landed a starring role on *Friends*, which aired on the same night. The solution was to write the seepage into the script so that the waitress on *Mad About You* became the estranged identical sister of Phoebe on *Friends*, since both shows were set in New York. Now *Mad About You* is off the air, but the show’s characters have an afterlife in the other series thanks to such gimmicks. To make this believable many storylines of *Friends* involve the “evil twin Ursula.”

A common sweeps week stunt is to have characters from one sitcom visit characters in another sitcom (White 1986, 54-6). For example, Tootie from *The Facts of Life* (1979-1988) could roller-skate into the Drummond penthouse of *Diff’rent Strokes* (1978-1986) when she was home for vacation from her boarding school in upstate New York. Networks would employ this gimmick to expose viewers to new shows that targeted the same demographic later in the night or on other evenings. Mimi White has written about “inter-program referentiality” that cross-promotes shows within a network through techniques that “cross-fertilize audiences” and create “an increasingly hermetic, self-encompassing world on television” as a byproduct (White 1986, 52-3). But this entire strategy hinges upon creating a “TV Land” that uses real-world anchors to define the fictive space in which all the shows are set. White explains that this changes viewers’ relationships with the world of television. As characters visit other shows or reference each other, the borders of the previously segmented narratives break down. As a result the viewer is bound to the reality not so much of one show, as to all of them, in what becomes an interconnected televisual universe, each show boosting the believability of the other shows into which it seeps (White 1986, 57). Even the timeless rural town of Mayberry, the setting of *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), was both timed and placed when Danny Thomas passed through it on *Make Room for Daddy* (1953-1971).
Real Characters

Not only specific locations, but also character development and serialization have infused reality into sitcoms since the 1970s. Until the 1960s, sitcoms were strictly episodic; that is, each episode featured its characters dealing with a problem that was wrapped up within that very episode. The next episode would rarely, if at all, make reference to what had happened the week before. This technique gradually gave way to serialization because it was determined that the new targeted demographic—young upscale viewers—had a higher literary standard and thus would appreciate character development along with culturally relevant topics (Feure 1992, 154). So, beginning with the work of Norman Lear and of MTM productions, sitcoms saw richer character development over the course of a season and the life of a series, which, in turn, demanded narrative arcs that carried over from one episode to the next. The popularization of daytime serials and the smash hit Dallas also encouraged serialization (Feure 1992, 154). Serialization, with its more complex characters, longer narrative arcs, and self-referentiality, culminated in the pre-“Reality TV”/“Must-See TV” era of the nineties, where even sitcoms ended each episode with a cliffhanger and networks ran nagging teasers for the following week’s episode, reminding viewers not to miss it. At the same time, serial storylines also lent more reality to the programs by giving characters a past, present and future, and by allowing viewers to learn as much about them as they know about their own friends.

In long-running serials, stars grow and age along with their characters in the presence of the viewer, a phenomenon unique to the medium of television. As early as 1945 critics distinguished television stars from movie stars because of their “natural” and “down to earth” quality (Feure 1983, 42-3). As previously discussed, television characters were trusted as salespeople and as intimate friends of the viewer. The extended time that these actors are viewed in their roles also helps audiences conflate the actors with their characters and cement them in specific beloved roles. In
addition, the practice of naming a television show after its star and giving his or her character the same name has always helped solidify the identification of actor and character, as discussed above in regards to Burns and Allen, I Love Lucy and Ozzie and Harriet, and as can also be seen in such later shows as The Bob Newhart Show, The Mary Tyler Moore Show and of course, Seinfeld.

The media encourages the idea that actors are their characters in a variety of ways. Magazine articles and television news stories about NBC's hit Friends focus on whether or not the cast members are actually really friends in real life. In May 2003, on the occasion of one of the cast members' wedding, Us Weekly magazine literally charted the guest list of the weddings of all the other cast members to show which cast members attended which weddings in real life. Mimi White has written about a Donahue episode whose topic was "strong women" that featured three actresses as guest stars. The actresses were selected because the characters they played were considered "strong" (White 1986, 60). At other times, the actors themselves have exploited such conflation, sometimes towards political ends. In the 2000 presidential and congressional elections, Martin Sheen, who plays a liberal democratic president on The West Wing, endorsed democratic candidates in television spots. And in 1997 comedian Ellen Degeneres came out of the closet as a lesbian at the same time that her character, Ellen Morgan, also did on the show. In each of these cases, the media or political machine has used an actor's trusted fictional persona to achieve results in the non-televisual world, not unlike the way that early television used fictional characters to sell products.

Seinfeld: Real-Life, Yada, Yada, Yada...

Seinfeld embraced and extended many of the "real to reel" trends of sitcoms. Jerry Seinfeld, a comedian, plays Jerry Seinfeld, a comedian. Like the sitcoms of Jack Benny and Bob Newhart, the show is based on a persona that a star-comedian developed as part of a stand-up routine (Hoberman and Shandler 2003, 250), but unlike these other shows the main character in Seinfeld retains his
identity as a comedian. In comparing himself to the character, the real-life Seinfeld told Barbara Walters, “I am the guy. First of all, I’d say we look a lot alike. It’s a strange thing to be that public. I mean, people really know me now. I can’t act. That’s it” (Seinfeld quoted in Gattuso 1998, 3) The “real” Jerry Seinfeld does indeed practice the same kind of comedy as the character, and at one time his comic routines were inserted into the show’s beginning, middle and end, much like the window greetings of Molly Goldberg on The Goldbergs. Like Molly’s addresses, the comic routine, which Seinfeld delivers to a “real” audience, draws the viewer into the story. The viewer, who could be in the live audience of the shows at New York clubs like Caroline’s or Improvisation, is thereby linked from live show to the narrative.

Additionally, although many other series’ are set in New York City, Seinfeld conveys and relies on the quirks of this location more than any other. In a 1997 New York Times article about the popularity of sitcoms set in New York, Caryn James singled out Seinfeld from other contemporary sitcoms for actually conveying the culture of a particular class of New Yorkers, “surviving, even flourishing, in a city loaded with problems.” While shows such as Friends feature a “franchised” version of New York, “set in any Starbucks in the country” where “anything uniquely New York gets left out,” Seinfeld’s version of New York, filmed on a sound stage in Los Angeles, “looks fake but feels real” (James 1997). There have been entire episodes revolving around the subway or a parking lot of a New Jersey mall. In a 1998 episode, Jerry and the crew are stuck in traffic because of the Puerto Rican Day Parade, an annual event which, like other parades, does in fact cause traffic congestion in midtown (“The Puerto Rican Day,” May 7, 1998). The character Kramer even affects the outcome of a mayoral election in an episode that featured Rudy Giuliani playing himself (“The Non-Fat Yogurt,” November 4, 1993). New York is indeed a main character in Seinfeld, and, in return, gives the show its distinctive character.
Seinfeld’s unsympathetic and egotistical characters also contribute to its sense of reality. Writer Larry Charles explains, “I think the key thing is a state of utter honesty or reality. It’s not something you see very often on other sitcoms. We force the characters to face themselves and explore the dark sides of their personalities” (Charles quoted in Gattuso 1998, 25). Like other shows of the nineties Seinfeld emphasizes style, references to other shows, and self-reflexivity in an attempt to woo young, sophisticated viewers, whose entertainment options have grown far beyond network television. For an audience weaned on TV and well aware of sitcom conventions, the show employs post-modern devices such as self-referentiality and intertextuality to parody and play with the sitcom form (Morreale 2000), which makes the show as much about its audience as about its narrative. Joan Morreale has written that the most important relationship on Seinfeld is between text and reader (Morreale 2003, 285). Its “trademark obfuscation of the boundary between the virtual and the actual” (Hoberman and Shandler 2003, 250), through the merging of real and fictional characters, constantly winks and nods to its audience, the way Burns and Allen did four decades earlier.

Perhaps more than any other show, Seinfeld has been woven into the lives of its viewers and society. It is often called a “water-cooler show,” suggesting that coworkers discuss it the next day at the office. Even this description makes it into the final episode, where George tells old network executives that the show within the show should be called a “coffee-maker show” because that is actually where coworkers gather (“The Finale” May 14, 1998). Phrases like “puffy shirt,” “Soup Nazi,” and “yada yada,” which were coined in their respective eponymous episodes, have entered the popular lexicon. Geoffrey O’Brien observed in the New York Review of Books, “Where it might once have been asked if Seinfeld was a commentary on society the question now should be asked whether society has not been reconfigured as a milieu for commenting on Seinfeld” (O’Brien 1997).
Seinfeld thus epitomizes and takes to new extremes many devices that merged reality and fiction on previous television shows. Its postscript, Curb Your Enthusiasm (2000-present), goes even further. In Curb, most of the central characters play themselves, the lead being Larry David, the Seinfeld creator. While David was fictionalized through the character of George in Seinfeld, David plays himself in Curb. In fact, the show is about Larry David in his daily life, post-Seinfeld. Many episodes are an outgrowth of Seinfeld in some way, often featuring people who want to get close to David because of the success of Seinfeld. In the second season, the narrative addressed the experience of Seinfeld actors who, after playing the same character for almost a decade, have had difficulty being cast in any other role. In the premiere episode of the second season, Larry David (played by Larry David) has a meeting with Jason Alexander (played by Jason Alexander), who complains that he is have trouble getting any acting work because everybody “wants [George] Costanza,” the pathetic character based on David himself.

Jason: I can’t shake this George thing! They all see me as George...the putz, the shmuck, the jackass!
Larry: What do you mean shmuck...I don’t see him that way.
Jason: What’s more putzy than going to a girl’s house and stealing a tape out of her answering machine?
Larry: I went to a girl’s house and stole a tape out of her answering machine!
Jason: Larry, he’s eating an éclair out of a garbage can?
Larry: Yeah, so what I ate an éclair out of a garbage can.
Jason: And a masturbating contest!
Larry: I was in a contest. You know I was in a masturbation contest!

(“The Car Salesman,” September 23, 2001)

Not only is Jason Alexander resentful of the character, Larry David is defensive about him. But the tension subsides when Larry thinks of a new show idea, one that references Curb, if not going beyond it:

You play a character based on what you are going through now. In other words, you play an actor who is having a tough time getting work because he was on this mega hit series, like a Seinfeld kind of series, and now, after the series goes off the air, he can’t get work anymore because he is so identified with this character
so they won’t let him do anything else. And he becomes embittered and grows to hate the character (“The Car Salesman”)

This pitch by David’s character parallels *Curb Your Enthusiasm* itself in being the pinnacle of self-reflexivity. But in the episode, the pitch never comes to fruition because first, David gets held up when a pro wrestler slashes his tires, and then, he and Alexander cannot agree on a meeting place equidistant from their respective offices to further discuss the matter. While the difficulty of Alexander finding work seems to be real (and journalists have loved to report that it is), the rest of the plot line seems outlandish. But is it? Such slippage between what is real and what isn’t has been common—and a source of delight—in sitcoms since the beginning. As already discussed, actors may have the same first name as their characters, but different last names, or different jobs. The *Curb* pilot, a “mock-umentary” mixing fact and fiction, invoked much of the lore behind the creation of *Seinfeld* and popular rumors about David himself. In the series, while most characters play themselves, others such as David’s wife are actors. So, is she or isn’t she like David’s real wife? So much seems real, but not everything, an ambiguity that adds to the show’s interest. .

In both *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David’s solution to television’s reality effects is to play even more with reality and self-reflexivity. *Curb* has so far avoided the formulaic pitfalls of the situation comedy and remained spontaneous because the episodes are ad-libbed, based on just a basic unscripted outline. Notably, *Curb* is one of the only television comedies that is a critical and popular success in the age of Reality TV. In light of the foregoing history of reality effects in sitcoms, one might argue that reality TV is the logical successor, rather than the antithesis, of the sitcom genre.
Realizing the Sitcom: Kramer’s Reality Tour

The signature Davidian real to reel slippage is expertly exploited in Kramer’s Reality Tour, during which Kenny Kramer combines lore about the roots and realities of *Seinfeld* with facts about its production. The tour exceeds even these two smart, realistic and hyper-reflexive shows—*Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—by stepping through the television screen into real space. Kramer capitalized on the fascination of *Seinfeld* fans with the reality of the show by drawing the truth out and, in some ways, even inventing it. Visitors who know the character Kramer intimately find themselves just getting to know the real-life version, a process that plays on their eagerness to find out what is real and what is not. Through the lens of this unique tour, I will now consider how reality-based diagetic texts like the ones discussed here can be transformed into an actual “reality” that is experienced in a three-dimensional life space.

Kramer’s Reality Tour is the brainchild of Kenny Kramer, the “real life” inspiration for the character “Kramer” on *Seinfeld*. The tour is predicated on the idea that *Seinfeld*, and the antics of its characters, was based on actual events in the real lives of Kenny Kramer and *Seinfeld*’s creator, Larry David. Kramer’s Reality Tour is comprised of a 90-minute stand-up comedy routine delivered by Kenny Kramer, followed by a bus tour (also led by Kramer) to sites on Manhattan’s Upper West Side that relate to the characters and events on *Seinfeld*. Kramer’s Reality Tour has been running since 1996 and although, since 1998, *Seinfeld* is no longer on the air except in reruns, Kramer’s tour is still wildly successful, with *Seinfeld* fans coming from around the world to experience it.

Honestly, the Reality Tour is unlike any other television tour that I have found. The guide has a long history with the writer of the show, and his life has been changed because of it. He is also a wacky comedian, in some ways even more wacky than the character he inspired. I took the tour twice, three weeks apart, in November 2001. I spoke to visitors about their experiences on the tour,
taped a two-hour interview with Kenny Kramer in his apartment, examined his website and press materials, and have kept in touch with him by phone and email. The interview, which covered a range of topics, from the history of the tour to Kramer’s future plans, will be cited “Reichman 2001,” while quotes directly from the tour will be cited “Kramer Tour 2001.” In this section I will first describe the tour in detail and then analyse the ways the reality tour exploits and epitomizes the kinds of reality effects outlined above.

**History of the Tour**

In 1995, after a gradual rise up the Nielsen ratings ladder, NBC’s half-hour comedy series *Seinfeld* had finally hit its stride. The self-proclaimed “show about nothing,” created by comedians Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, had hit a record-breaking year in the ratings and was syndicated worldwide. Its cast of four rather despicable and self-centered characters—Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer—had become household names virtually all over the world (Hirsch 2000, 118-9). While all of the characters were popular, Kramer was by far the favorite. The NBC studios store was selling posters of Kramer at a rate of 16 to 1 over the other characters. The wacky neighbor, who slid through doors and constantly invented crazy entrepreneurial schemes, had become “the most famous next door neighbor since Art Carney” (Reichman 2001).

Many storylines and references in the show came out of events that Larry David and his actual next-door neighbor Kenny Kramer had experienced in their lives as bachelors in New York City in the 1980s. Recognizing the attraction the character based on him held for fans around the world, Kenny Kramer concocted a not surprisingly “Kramer-like” idea to go into business for himself, about himself. He describes his epiphany this way: “Being an entrepreneur and realizing there is an international icon based on my life, I am the biggest *schmuck* in the world if I don’t cash in on this” (Reichman 2001).
Kramer's Reality Tour in its current form was not his original plan. His first idea was to create a CD-ROM called “Kramer's New York,” which would be an interactive guide to all the places in New York to find bargains and free stuff. But CD-ROM publishers demurred, thinking it not quite interesting enough. Kramer’s next idea was to make and sell a video called “Kramer's Reality Check,” which would show different locations where Seinfeld was filmed and distinguish between what was fact and fiction on the show. In the process of attempting to rent a bus for the video shoot, he was encouraged by Greyline Bus Tours to scrap the video and instead create an actual bus tour for tourists. Kramer’s Reality Tour was born six weeks later, on January 27, 1996.

A former stand-up comic, Kenny envisioned the first half of the tour as taking place in a theater, where he would tell the story of Larry David and the origins of Seinfeld. The second half would be on the bus, where he would take participants to the locations that served both as inspirations for storylines, and, in some cases, as establishing shots for actual scenes. But, before Kenny had even figured out exactly what he was going to do or say on the tour, New York Times writer Jon Tierney previewed this “mobile off-Broadway tribute” to “sacred” Seinfeld spots in an article that ran on the front page of The New York Times Metro section (Tierney 1996). Within 24 hours, Kenny was a guest on every major talk show in the country and covered in print media around the world, now boldly billing himself as “The Real Kramer” (Figure 6). His tours for the next ten weeks were booked solid within a few hours.

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8 He did eventually create a DVD/VHS of the tour in 2002, which is available for purchase through his website www.kennykramer.com.
The meeting spot for Kramer’s Reality Tour is easy to miss when walking down the street. The tour meets in the off-Broadway Pulse Theater, on West 42nd Street, which is currently under threat of being closed down by the city to make way for high-rise developments. Once inside the theater, which is actually a complex of many smaller theaters, the location of Kramer’s Reality Tour is still not very well marked, lending an overall amateur feel to the production, consistent with Kenny Kramer having personally answered the 1-800 line I had called to make reservations. The young man who took money at the door was not adequately stocked with change and had to scribble out IOU’s to several guests who paid their $37.50 admission fee in cash.

Both times I took the tour, the fifty-seat theater was filled with mostly white, middle-class tourists between the ages of 20 and 60, with a few children here and there—just the people who can afford $37.50 for a kooky bus tour. The demographic of Kramer’s Reality Tour audience is almost exactly that of the Seinfeld audience, which is no coincidence, given that the tour is marketed to Seinfeld aficionados. Virtually every advertisement and announcement for the tour, whether rack-

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9 The first time I attended the tour, the in-house theater troupe was holding a bake/rummage sale in an effort to raise money to move to another space.
10 The show was originally at an even smaller space, the twenty-nine seat John Housman Theater, located just around the corner from the Pulse.
card or sign—even the reservation line greeting—clearly states that Kramer’s Reality Tour is “for Seinfeld fans” (figure 7).

The stage is a basic black box on which the only props are an A/V cart bearing an old RCA television (reminiscent of junior high in the seventies), a small table, and a suspended set of window
panes, above which hangs a “Kramer for Mayor” banner, the entire set-up recalling performance art or stand-up comedy, rather than classical theater. The lights go down and the man who had been working the door delivers an opening joke (the audience learns that he is amateur comic Brian Richardson) and turns on the television to show Mayor Rudolph Giuliani delivering an endorsement:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome tourists and New Yorkers alike to Kramer’s Reality Tour. As you know, the Seinfeld show takes place right here in the greatest city in the world, and was created by two native New Yorkers, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David. I want to congratulate the real Kramer, Kenny Kramer, and Bobby Allen Brooks, also native New Yorkers, for starting this valuable cultural invention. Here in the City, we have countless tour operators who will take you to the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, but only on Kramer’s tour will you see the actual sights where the scenes took place. Like the actual location where that infamous Junior Mint flew through the air, or the place where the concert pianist lost her composure because of a PEZ dispenser. As you know, I have appeared on the Seinfeld show myself, and possibly owe my victory on election night to Kramer’s manipulation of the cholesterol levels in yogurt samples (Giuliani on video in Kramer Tour).

When the TV goes to static, Brian turns it off and announces, “And now...the man, the myth, the legend...Mr. Kenny Kramer!” The tour’s host appears, grinning from ear to ear to rousing applause, and immediately greets the audience (Figure 8).

![Stage Show (Kramer’s Reality Tour)](image)

**Figure 8: Stage Show (Kramer’s Reality Tour)**

Very personable, clad in sneakers and baseball hat, Kenny Kramer promises the audience “the most fun they have ever had in a single day in their life” (Kramer Tour 2001). He begins to enumerate some of the most oft-mentioned quirks of the character Kramer from *Seinfeld*. “People ask me if
I...have the Merv Griffin set in my living room...or if I ever had Japanese business men sleeping in my drawers.... The answer is no..." He also asks if anyone came expecting to see Michael Richards, the actor who plays Kramer in the show ("If so, you are a complete idiot"), but then compares himself with the Kramer character, saying “I have no work ethic” and emphasizing that many of his own personal adventures did make it into episodes (Kramer Tour).

He asks the audience where they are from and “flatters” them with the following tribute:

The audience of *Seinfeld* is the greatest demographic in the history of television. Most highest [sic] educated, most computer literate, most per capita income...most leisure activity.... Basically, smart rich people with a sense of humor.... My kind of people! I am thankful that these guys invented a show that appeals to such smart rich people; had they created let’s say, *Home Improvement*, I would not be here with you today but out visiting trailer parks (Kramer Tour).

After reminding the audience of their exclusivity based on money and class, he encourages people to say hello to each other. He is very informal with his audience and frequently interrupts his act to welcome latecomers, reassuring them with the words “You haven’t missed anything.” He announces birthdays and gives out gifts of pins and t-shirts. He creates such good rapport with the audience that many begin chatting with each other.

He then launches into a lengthy routine featuring bits about his life, his unsuccessful campaign for mayor, and, most importantly, his friendship with Larry David. A narrative unfolds about the Manhattan Plaza, where he and Larry were neighbors: the way they would leave their doors unlocked and visit back and forth, their many dinners together, Yankee games, and dozens of wacky adventures, many of which became storylines on the television series. Larry David emerges as a talented but neurotic writer and comedian and Kenny Kramer as a fun-loving loser whose comic range had, until then, never risen higher than “dick jokes” (Kramer Tour). Throughout the act he drops episode names and scenarios, from both shows he had nothing to do with and others that were
based on him. He lists them like a series of punch lines, and members of the audience “in the know” laugh right on cue again and again.

After he has established his centrality in Larry David’s life—and thereby his importance to *Seinfeld*—it is time for Kramer to let down his hair, literally. He lifts off his hat and out falls a foot of scraggly grayish curls. He explains to the audience that he needed to brand himself in order to be distinguished from the character Kramer, so, where Michael Richards’ hair stands up, Kenny’s hair would hang way down, usually from underneath a baseball cap, which is, he quips, “possibly the most obnoxious look for a grown man to walk around with. My mother is freaking out...now that I’m famous, I look like a complete mental case” (Kramer Tour). The image of a middle-aged loser who never held a job is crystallized. “I’ve always wanted to be famous—I practiced signing my autograph. But I only got famous through living across from a famous person. I’m milking it for all its worth—I’m practically a dairy farm” (Kramer Tour).

The routine continues with a history of the climate of comedy in the seventies and eighties and clips of Larry David’s pre-*Seinfeld* work. Then Kramer tells the story of how *Seinfeld*, and especially the character Kramer, came to be. “Before pen went to paper, Larry asked me for permission to base a character on me and use my name. ‘Of course,’ I said, ‘as long as I can play him.’ ‘You can’t be Kramer!’ said David. ‘But I am Kramer!’” (Kramer Tour). Comedic actor Michael Richards ended up playing the character on the show, but Kenny reminds the audience that the show eventually spoofed that conversation in an episode called “The Pilot,” a plot reflexive of the story of the show’s origins in which NBC approaches Jerry Seinfeld to write and star in a sitcom (Kramer Tour). In that episode the character Kramer insists on playing himself in the pilot but Jerry refuses:

Kramer: Why can’t I play Kramer?
Jerry: You’re not an actor.
Kramer: Neither are you
Jerry: Yeah, and we don’t need two people who can’t act in this show.

(“The Pilot,” May 20, 1993)
The last portion of the stage act is Kramer showcasing all of the merchandise available at his souvenir stand, “KraMart” (Figure 9).

He holds up each and every t-shirt and unabashedly plugs them, at once calling attention to the obsessive marketing of souvenirs at tourist attractions, mocking that phenomenon, and of course, selling the items. The audience loves the routine and lines up to buy mugs bearing both *Seinfeld* and Kramer’s Reality Tour logos, and bumper-stickers bearing *Seinfeldian* inside jokes such as the gibberish phrase “Yada Yada Yada,” coined in one episode (“The Yada Yada,” April 24, 1997). The Kramer’s Reality Tour logo is in the same font and on many of the same items as those bearing the *Seinfeld* logo, but the price of merchandise with the tour logo is cheaper than the exact same items with the show logo. Everything can be purchased downstairs in the lobby and Kenny is more than happy to sign anything that anyone buys. The audience is then ushered out of the building, onto the street, and into the bus.
Soon after boarding Kramer’s (illegally parked) luxury tour bus (Figure 10), visitors are in their seats and craning their heads up to watch an already rolling gag reel from the 1996 season of *Seinfeld*. A personal video monitor hangs over every seat, so each person is sure to have a good viewing angle, much like they would have in their own living room (Figure 11).

Among the clips is a scene in which the *Seinfeld* gang finds out the character Kramer’s ridiculous first name, Cosmo (“The Switch,” January 5, 1995). Before the bus pulls away Kenny points out the luxury apartment building across the street where he and Larry David lived, and where he himself still lives. He provides enormous detail about New York rent control and how he benefits from it, underscoring that had Larry David not been able to live there, there may not have been a *Seinfeld*. He continues providing details of the neighborhood, including trivia about Hell’s Kitchen, the Theater District, and the way Times Square looked before it was cleaned up.

The first *Seinfeld* “locations” visited on the bus tour include a parking lot, the back lot of a diner, and a storage unit, that is, “highlights” that are utterly generic, as there are many such locations all over the city, if not the world (Figure 12).
But what makes these otherwise ordinary locations special is their so-called appearance on the show. The “Ahhs” and “Oh yeahs” begin not when the tour bus passes in the visual range of the Manhattan-Mini-Storage, but as Kenny recalls that this is the place where the overweight and disgruntled mail carrier character Newman hid all of the mail he was supposed to deliver (“The Andrea Doria,” December 19, 1996). Around the corner, a nondescript entrance to Roosevelt Hospital provides an occasion for a Seinfeld trivia contest and prize—Junior Mints for everyone, in honor of the episode where George (or Kramer) accidentally coughed up a Junior Mint, which subsequently flew through the air and into the middle of an operating amphitheater (“The Junior Mint,” March 18, 1993). Pottery Barn is noteworthy because it sent so many catalogues to the TV Kramer that he decided to
tape his mailbox shut ("The Junk Mail," October 30, 1992). Even locations famous in their own right, such as the Metropolitan Opera House, are reduced to (and made all-the-more interesting because of) their relationship to the show, as Kramer announces, "You know the Met from an episode called 'The Beard' [February 9, 1995], where Elaine tries to get a gay man to 'switch sides,'" or later in the tour, "There's the Julliard Theater where Jerry placed a Tweety Bird Pez dispenser on Elaine's knee, causing her to laugh so hysterically that she had to leave the theater" (Kramer Tour). Kenny recites lines from scenes as the bus passes appropriate sites, and everyone laughs. But he also frequently reminds us that Seinfeld is filmed in Los Angeles, and that many of the locations he points out on the tour are just facades used for establishing shots or sites that inspired the stories.

The highlight of the tour is perhaps the show's most famous location—Tom's Restaurant on Broadway and 112th (referred to as "Monk's" on the show) (Figure 13). This is the place where the gang meets most often "to discuss nothing in particular" (Gattuso 1998, 174). People on the tour bus literally gasp when the sight comes into view because, unlike the other locations, which may have been in only one or two episodes, this is where "the plot thickens" week after week. Well aware of the centrality of this spot, Kramer announces it as a photo opportunity and instructs everyone to get off the bus and line up with their cameras advanced so that each can have their picture taken with Kramer in front of the Restaurant, shot by the person standing immediately behind them in line. This is followed by a group picture taken by Mario, the bus driver, which will be posted on Kramer's website for all to see. The photo-op choreography almost always draws a crowd of passers-by. They look at Kramer, whisper to each other, and in some cases...
approach him to say hello. Tourists that are not on the tour, but *Seinfeld* fans nonetheless, also take pictures at the restaurant.

After the crew reboards the bus, everyone cheers Mario as he attempts—and succeeds in—making a “U-turn on Broadway in the longest bus you can have street legal in New York” (Kramer Tour). As the tour heads back toward midtown, Kramer takes questions and plays additional video clips. One clip shows a friend of Kramer’s who parachuted into Yankee stadium. A second clip is from a videotape Kramer once made of Larry David’s bald head, an incident that was recreated in a *Seinfeld* episode in which the character Kramer videotapes George’s bald head to monitor the success of a Chinese hair treatment (“The Tape,” November 13, 1991). By far the most important clip he shows is the episode entitled “The Muffin Tops” (May 8, 1997), which imitates the Reality Tour itself. In this episode, part of which appears as the epigraph to this thesis, the TV Kramer starts a J. Peterman Reality Bus tour. As explained above, J. Peterman had just published a successful “autobiography,” the content of which was based on stories Kramer has told Peterman about his own life. Kramer’s reaction was to create a bus tour to show Peterman fans where the stories really came from. The episode was clearly based on (Kenny) Kramer’s Reality Tour and aired a year after he launched it. After the clip ends, Kenny announces, “There you have it folks. Art imitating life imitating life imitating art imitating life” (Kramer Tour). A visitor asks if that episode was the inspiration for this tour, and Kenny responds that it was just the opposite. The episode is a spoof on his tour. “They called me for info when they were writing the script.” This is the crowning moment of Kramer’s tour—the diactic text incorporating something that the fans are there experiencing.

The last stop on the tour is the Soup Kitchen on West 55th Street, home of the notorious “Soup Nazi,” made famous in a well-loved episode of the same name (“The Soup Nazi,” November 2, 1995). There are more gasps of excitement among the group, with people leaning over each other for pictures. The shop is, unfortunately, closed, so visitors are unable to see the feared chef or taste his
delicious (and expensive) bisque. But besides pointing out the sight as a place made famous on
Seinfeld, Kramer also shares stories of his own run-ins with the “Soup Nazi,” who once painted over
a sign Kramer had made instructing people on how to order soup properly, an event which earned
Kenny Kramer a story in the local news (Reichman 2001).

The rest of the tour consists of Kenny delivering restaurant tips, trivia, and welcoming an
“impromptu” bus visitor, Mickey Freeman, a comedy “dinosaur,” onto the bus to deliver a five-minute
act, if he happens to be at the right corner at the right time. Finally, the bus drops the group off back
at the Pulse Theater, and Kramer gives out flyers for visitors to bring back to their hotels, reminding
everyone that he subsists on good word of mouth.

The crowd seems generally thrilled. Those whom I interviewed afterward said that they had a
terrific time, citing Kramer’s energy and his ability to consistently entertain as the key to their fun.
Others were die-hard Seinfeld fans who had waited for this tour for a long time and come from as far
away as Sydney, Australia, for it, and they were not disappointed.

Tourism for Fans

Kramer’s Reality Tour, as advertised, is unequivocally for Seinfeld fans. While fans of sitcoms
and other shows often gather at conventions or more recently, over the Internet, Kramer’s tour
creates an enclosed and clubby mobile space for Seinfeld fans to have a particular kind of embodied
experience within a community of other fans. He encourages his audience to say hello to one another,
not only informing them of their membership in a celebrated demographic, but also telling them that
people have met and become friends on his tour and in some cases even married each other.
Significantly, near the end of the tour he has participants pose for a group picture that will be
accessible to other fans in cyberspace on Kenny Kramer’s website. The website also features tour
location photographs, media coverage, the Kramer Archives: An Ever-Evolving Collection of Kramer
Photos and Memorabilia, and sections entitled Ask Kramer and Kramer Cooks, which features recipes from friends and fans (www.kennykramer.com).

On Kramer’s tour, “geeks rule.” The die-hard fan, with the most knowledge of Seinfeldian minutiae, is rewarded a hundred times over. The more a fan knows about the show the more he or she will recognize points of connection between the show and the tour and the more s/he will enjoy the “inside jokes.” Knowledge gained on the tour can be shown-off to the fans “back home.” One visitor wrote in an email to Kramer, after participating in a 1996 tour, “Thanks again for providing such a great service for Seinfeld fans” (www.kennykramer.com).

Because this tour is ultimately about the fans, it offers a rich site for addressing the kinds of issues raised by Henry Jenkins in his study of Star Trek fans and by Matt Hills in his work on television fans across genres. In Textual Poachers, Jenkins challenges the audience reception theories of Lawrence Grossberg and John Ellis who, following Raymond William’s concept of broadcast flow, argued that the specifics of shows are less important than the act of “watching TV” in general. Where these critics see television viewing as primarily passive, Jenkins shows that fans make a “commitment” to a certain series, “organizing their schedule around viewing” (Jenkins 1992, 57). As Jenkins explains, fans are often criticized for embracing texts too closely, but they also transform the texts in creative ways:

Rejecting the aesthetic distance Bourdieu suggests is a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics, fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience.... Fans seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore (Jenkins 1992, 18).

Fans literally “inhabit and explore” Seinfeld on Kramer’s Reality Tour, which maps the fictional geography of the show onto real space through which fans actually travel. The tour brings
them to three-dimensional sites that until then were only images on a television screen. The tour participants and Kramer work together to make these images pop out, not unlike a pop-up book.

Jenkins also sees fans as “active producers and manipulators of meaning...who transform watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992, 23). They make the text an active resource through practices that extend the show extradiagnostically into culture (Jenkins 1992, 66). He sees media fandom as a viable and permanent culture, which appropriates, produces and sustains. Here he disagrees with Theodor Adorno, who believed that texts deteriorated as they became popular. Jenkins, in contrast, sees the texts as gaining significance as new audiences embrace and rework them and, in the case of *Seinfeld* and Kramer’s Reality Tour, add new layers of meaning to the city itself (Jenkins 1992, 51).

As a “huge *Seinfeld* fan” himself, Kramer knows his audience and what they want to know (Reichman 2001). The flyer advertising the tour promises “...A romp through what’s factual and fantasy in the world of *Seinfeld*...Kramer will share backstage information on how the show was created, and tell you how many story lines and characters’ names came right from real life” (Figure 14). Kramer promises to separate fact from fiction by bringing the back region forward, a move that actually serves to authenticate the reality of *Seinfeld*. As tourism theorist Dean MacCannell writes, utilizing Erving Goffman’s theories of front and back regions, “The quest for authenticity is marked off in stages in the passage from front to back. Movement from stage to stage corresponds to growing touristic understanding” (MacCannell 1999, 105). In the case of Kramer’s Reality Tour, the tourists, a group of self-selected fans, already bring a wealth of experience and knowledge of the *Seinfeld* universe. They want to get as close to the back region as possible. Kramer, who understands this, takes them into the back region through his performance. However, where other TV and movie tours take visitors only as far back stage as locations and sets, Kramer’s tour takes his guests behind back stage to a region even further back. He takes them to where the show originated in the minds,
conversations, and actual lives of its creators—to where the adventure began long before there was a Seinfeld. He also shows outtakes that were left on the cutting room floor and relates ideas that were censored or rewritten to the point of unrecognizability by the time they made it to the public. He is aware that the audience wants “to get in with the natives” and he becomes a Seinfeld native for them—that is, a native of the real world depicted in Seinfeld.

Kramer creates authenticity by taking the show from the hands of Los Angeles network executives and returning it to the fans. Jenkins suggests that, for fans, consumption of texts sparks their own production, blurring the distinction between producer and consumer (Jenkins 1992, 471). Fans on Kramer’s Reality Tour co-produce the tour with Kramer in the sense that their detailed knowledge and emotional investment are preconditions for Kramer’s performance. The more they know and care the deeper the play and more virtuosic the display. Thus, KraMart merchandise is emblazoned with obscure references that only the biggest fans would appreciate, and which allow Kramer and his audience to share a wink. With the fans, Kramer creates a Seinfeld “heritage” —borrowing Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of heritage as “a mode of cultural production invented in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998:150). As The Real Kramer, Kenny is actually a piece of this heritage—an invented and fictive identity who narrates his own past and the past of this beloved television show.

Part of creating heritage is putting “Jewish” back into the show. It is believed that the head of NBC Programming, Brandon Tartikoff, originally dismissed the show as “too New York, too Jewish” (Auster 1998, 28). As many critics note, Seinfeld is still a very Jewish show, but the characters are deliberately “not Jewish.” In other words, while many of the characters exhibit Jewish qualities and stereotypes they are explicitly written as Gentile, itself a Jewish concept insofar as it means “not Jewish.” As Todd Gitlin has written, it is not uncommon for television network executives and advertisers to “change Jew to Greek or Italian,” in order to please affiliates in the South and Midwest.
Elaine, who is played by the Jewish Julia Louis-Dreyfus, is even accessorized with crucifix earrings every once in a while so as not to appear Jewish. The character Kramer, based on our own Kenny Kramer (who is a Jew by birth and who grew up in the Bronx), is given no identifiable ethnicity. But the character that is most often read as Jewish is the Italian-American George Constanza, who is based on the “very Jewish” Larry David and played by the Jewish-born actor Jason Alexander (whose real name is Jay Scott Greenspan). George’s neurosis, accent, and habits are evidence of double-coding, a process of negotiation of otherness between producers and consumers of a performance who share the same cultural codes, in this case Jewish-American codes (Bial 2001, 83-5). In other words, while George is identified for the average viewer as Italian, he is encoded as Jewish for those who share his Jewish cultural experience and the particular ways it is coded in popular culture. George’s parents, played by two well-known Jewish actors, are loud, obnoxious, frugal, and live in Queens, consistent with the stereotype of Jews in Brooklyn of a generation earlier (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2000). When I asked Kenny on the tour about George’s ethnicity, he decoded the performance plain and simple, “Jason Alexander [the actor who plays George] says that George is Jewish—his parents must have changed their names to Costanza in the witness protection program. Of course he’s Jewish, Larry David writes what he knows. It’s his sensibility” (Kramer Tour). The characters of Seinfeld are like Marranos, Jews living undercover as Christians within the sitcom text only to be recognized when it is safe to do so.

Kramer’s tour, not surprisingly, has what could comfortably be described as a Jewish feel. The audience watches a not-unlike-the Catskills comedy stand-up routine, first in a theater, then in a bus that trolls the Upper West Side, one of several Jewish neighborhoods in New York. The early clips of Larry David that Kramer chooses to show include a comedy sketch called MatzoI—about secret agent ninja rabbis—and a stand-up routine featuring David’s mother (a “typical” Jewish mama who became the inspiration for Mrs. Costanza). Kramer also makes his own Jewish jokes, and the fact
that he lets the Jewish origins and subtext of *Seinfeld* come out of the closet means that fans, many of whom are Jewish, can enjoy the tour and the show on yet another level. One couple even chartered the tour for their son’s Bar Mitzvah weekend to entertain out-of-town guests.

These clips of the “pure” pre-*Seinfeld* Larry David authenticate the show, reveal what *Seinfeld* would have been in its “pure,” pre-network-TV form, and make the fans feel that they understand its roots. They ground it in the reality of the lives of its writers (like all tourists interested in the biography/childhood home of a favorite writer). It is not surprising that the first stop on Kramer’s tour is the apartment building where he lived across the hall from David, a living arrangement that became the inspiration for the show.

**A Tour of New York?**

Whether nondescript places (a parking lot, a mini-storage) or New York City icons (Metropolitan Opera House), the sites on Kramer’s Reality Tour become meaningful only in relation to the television show and only because the guide, the real Kramer, points them out and makes the connection. As Matt Hills discusses in *Fan Cultures*, scholars of tourism such as John Urry have been dismissive of media fan tourism because, unlike other tourist attractions, the meaning and value ascribed to specific places depend entirely upon their role within mediated phenomena (Hills 2002, 156). But, in a short tongue-in-cheek piece, Henry Jenkins proposes that it is our culture’s “conflicted feelings about television” that explains why teletourism is so disregarded while literary tourism, “sanctified” through print culture, is often celebrated. “Teletourists,” he writes, “are often portrayed as people who just can’t separate reality from fiction. Funny—they don’t say the same thing about the folks who sign up for walking tours of Dickens’ London or who go to watch Shakespeare’s classics performed at the re-created Globe Theatre” (Jenkins 2001). He argues that all tourism involves “mapping stories onto space,” whether they be literary, historical, or from the mass
media. “Many of us see travel as a way of escaping the ‘fake’ realms of contemporary media. I think we’re lying to ourselves—tourism is all about experiencing in the flesh things we first learned about through media” (Jenkins 2001).

Kramer’s Reality Tour depends almost entirely on markers that link sites in New York City to places in a pop cultural, highly mediated, *Seinfeld* world. This may be the reason that scholars such as Urry are inclined to dismiss them. But, as I will argue, fan tourism is based on some of the same principles as other kinds of tourism, such as back and front regions, discussed above, and what Dean MacCannell calls “marker involvement.” MacCannell defines a marker as any information about a site, be it a plaque, an entry in a guide-book, or a tour guide’s description that represents a site outside of the site itself (MacCannell 1999, 111). Few of the sites on Kramer’s tour are meaningful to the average participant unless they have been seen before in an episode of *Seinfeld*. The tour depends on “sight-marker-sight recognition” (MacCannell 1999, 123). A viewer will look at a site and see nothing, but after Kramer recalls the scene from the show that features the site, the visitor will recognize the site and be pleased. Whereas the mini-storage would never have value to a tourist, the fact that it is featured as the punch-line in a memorable episode of *Seinfeld* adds enough value to make the place at least worthy of a look and perhaps even a picture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 150-2). There is more however to this reality Mobius strip. Are the best seats on the bus the window seats, which are closer to Kramer himself?

Most participants on the tour are already aware that although *Seinfeld* is set in New York, it is shot in Los Angeles. The characters live in New York, but the actors and producers live in Los Angeles. Kramer’s Reality Tour, then, is about the reality of a fiction. The real New York authenticates the *Seinfeld* world. As Kramer relates in his tour spiel, the inspiration for the show (“the stories behind the stories”) took place in New York, predominantly in the Jewish Upper West Side through which the tour bus travels. The reality that the fan seeks and that the tour offers is the
“authentic,” raw inspiration for the fiction—the “real” fruit stand where Larry David was banished for squeezing the fruit, which later showed up in an episode of *Seinfeld* (on a Los Angeles set of course) (“The Mango,” September 16, 1993). These raw sites are ones that a fan would not notice on his or her own because they were never filmed for the show, but the inspirational status of such sites makes them more “authentic” and satisfying than a visit to the actual television set in Los Angeles. They are the real-life inspiration and proxy for the television fiction. They remind the viewer that what happened in the stories actually happened in real life to people very similar to the characters. The tour lets fans experience an otherwise inaccessible backstory in the very places in the real world where the actions occurred.

As already discussed, many other recent sitcoms are set in “identifiable urban areas” (Tueth 2000, 99) and, like them, *Seinfeld* is set in New York City, but not filmed there. New York therefore becomes a place that is learned about through television (Weber 1997). When Kramer announces on his tour, “You remember the Met from that episode, “The Beard,” he exemplifies the idea that “the ‘memory banks’ of our time are in some part built out of the materials supplied by the television and film industries” (Morley and Robbins quoted in Edensor 2001, 68). Knowledge of New York as it appears in *Seinfeld* precedes Kramer’s Reality Tour, which is finally a tour about the reality of *Seinfeld*, not New York.

There are TV tours throughout the country that bring fans to see sets and locations that were used for establishing shots in various shows. Kramer’s tour is unique and significant because it takes visitors to sites like Al’s Soup Kitchen International, which existed before *Seinfeld* and continues to exist after *Seinfeld*, but that the fans have only experienced through the show. Although these sites may owe their popularity to the show, they do not owe their existence to it. Their appeal lies precisely in their having been *found*, not made for the show. The more ordinary they are the more creative is the act of finding in them the comic potential for a *Seinfeld* world. Thus, Kramer’s
Reality Tour intensifies the feeling that *Seinfeld* was not born in 1990 and did not end in 1998, because the real-world basis for *Seinfeld* is prior and subsequent to the series and continues to be accessible to its fans as first-hand experiences as long as the people and places that inspired the fiction endure. The *Seinfeld* gang’s relationship to the Soup Nazi is inserted into the real-life site by Kenny Kramer, who put soup ordering directions on a sign outside the shop, only to have Mr. Al Yeganeh (the Soup Nazi’s real name) paint over them and ban Kenny Kramer from the establishment. Yeganah, whose family died in the Holocaust, finds no humor in the name Nazi (Hinckley 2002). Nevertheless, the shop enjoys long lines and tour guides inevitably tie him to *Seinfeld* and tourists to his soup.

Kramer’s Reality Tour, like other cult sites, “sustains cult fans’ fantasies of ‘entering’ into the cult text, as well as allowing the text to leak out into spatial and cultural practices” (Hills 2002, 151). The *Seinfeld* text leaked out as sayings such as “Yada Yada Yada” made it into common parlance and sites became significant in relation to the fictive *Seinfeld* world. Matt Hills writes that “cult or media geography offers a physical focus for the cult’s sacredness, [legitimating] the fan’s activities by drawing on the cultural notion of place as unmediated and authentic ‘reality’” (Hills 2002, 151). Where other kinds of tourists search for places that are authentic in their own right, fans use the places they visit to authenticate the media text, to anchor it in a reality that they can experience first-hand as life itself.

Kramer’s Reality Tour allows fans to engage both the show and New York at the same time—conceptually and literally—and in an embodied way that is different from watching television sitting alone at home. As the tour bus rolls through the actual Upper West Side, tourists match what they see through the window with what they see multiplied on the many TV monitors in the bus—namely, sets or establishing shots based on what is outside the window. Although they only drive by facades, Kramer helps them to be in the very places they imagine their favorite fictive
characters to have inhabited and the very places from which the writer of the show took inspiration. The passing out of Junior Mints as the tour passes Roosevelt Hospital allows visitors to participate in an episode—to incorporate it through all their senses, rather than only through watching a screen. Even sitting in the Pulse Theater becomes akin to attending a comedy club in the days when Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, and Kenny Kramer began their careers. Above all, visitors interact with the easy-going Real Kramer, asking questions or just shooting the shit, as if they too are part of the gang. Kenny even gives out his apartment address so that any visitor bold enough to seek him out could conceivably sail through his doorway the way that the TV Kramer so often sailed through Jerry’s door on the show.

On Kramer’s Reality Tour, visitors never cease to perform the role that brought them there in the first place, that of the TV viewer, for Kramer’s Reality Tour is finally still about watching. There is a TV on the stage when visitors enter the Pulse Theater, as well as one above every seat on the tour bus. Visitors watched the show before the tour; they watch the show while on the tour; and they will surely watch reruns after the tour is over. But, with a difference. As Kramer’s promotional flyer promises, “Watching *Seinfeld* will never be the same again.” No matter how many souvenirs a visitor may bring home, the most durable—and transformative—will be new eyes with which to watch the show. Kramer promises that visitors will pick up so many inside details on his tour that they will actually become a pain in the ass to watch *Seinfeld* with—in other words, the ultimate fan (Kramer Tour). Whereas on the tour, they saw New York through a *Seinfeld* prism, now they will watch *Seinfeld* through the prism of Kramer’s Reality Tour, which not only mapped *Seinfeld* locations but also its backstories and insider knowledge onto a real New York. The convergences—and perhaps even more important, the divergences—are what deepen the insider knowledge that fans take home. Now, as they watch *Seinfeld* reruns they can reverse the process and map their New York experiences back onto *Seinfeld*. 
Kramer as Site and Performer

I am waiting to be introduced for the first time as the real Kramer and I’m thinking to myself, ‘I’m not nervous, I’m just going to be me.’

-Kenny Kramer, recalling his debut tour (Reichman 2001)

Kramer’s Reality Tour is not a tour of New York. It is not even a tour of specific sites in New York. It is a tour whose star attraction is a man performing himself. A poster advertising the tour boasts: “Meet the Real Kramer.” However, the visitor does not spend the afternoon with Kenny Kramer, regular wacky guy living in New York City, but with The Real Kramer that he has become. In the very first Metro Section article about Kramer’s Reality Tour, Jon Tierney wrote, “The Real Kramer, as Mr. Kramer now calls himself...” (Tierney 1996). The distinction is complicated, even Seinfeldian, but real.

The Real Kramer is himself proof of the merging of fictional television and reality and of the way that fictional television can actually change reality. He exists outside of the text, but only because of the text. Before the advent of the character Kramer, Kenny Kramer was just Kenny—eccentric next-door neighbor to Larry David. This changed with the creation of Seinfeld. Although the television character Kramer was based on the pre-Seinfeld Kramer, the character eclipsed the pre-Seinfeld Kramer and became the one-and-only world-renowned “Kramer.” The pre-Seinfeld Kramer was gone, or at least forgotten, unless his connection to the character Kramer could be made. The only way for Kenny Kramer to capitalize on his strange identity progeny was to become “The Real Kramer,” suggesting someone more authentic than the character or even the pre-Seinfeld Kramer on which the character was based. This authenticity claim is a ruse—no one understands this more than Kramer himself—because The Real Kramer can no longer be the “authentic,” in the sense
of the pre-*Seinfeld*, Kramer, untouched by the wild popularity of the confabulated Kramer character. The Real Kramer is a decidedly post-*Seinfeld* phenomenon.

The character Kramer may be based on Kenny Kramer, but it is also the product of the creative talents of Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, and Michael Richards, and it benefits from the tidy narrative writing supporting it. The character Kramer is *more* than the pre-*Seinfeld* Kramer. Similarly, The Real Kramer is *more*—rather than *more authentic*—than the character Kramer. The Real Kramer is a performed negotiation between what Kenny Kramer was and what the creation and rise to popularity of the character Kramer has necessitated he become. From the moment he walks out on stage, with his hair up to simulate the actor Michael Richards, to the time the bus returns to the Pulse Theater at the end of the tour, Kenny Kramer negotiates three identities: the pre-*Seinfeld* Kramer, the Kramer character on *Seinfeld*, and The Real Kramer (Figure 14).

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**Figure 14: The Kramers Three**

- **Kenny Kramer**
  - Wacky next-door neighbor to Larry David

- **Cosmo Kramer, aka “Kramer”**
  - Wackier TV character

- **“The Real Kramer”**
  - The Wackiest
Billing himself as The Real Kramer, he introduces the audience to his former self, but can only do so by comparing and contrasting his former self to the character they all know and love—and, willy-nilly, to the post-Kramer phenomenon he has become and that stands before them.

The Real Kramer must both identify with and distinguish himself from the character Kramer. The logo for Kramer’s Reality Tour, painted on the side of the bus and on the few posters around town, features a photo of Kenny, hair hanging out from under a baseball hat, with a dialogue bubble exclaiming, “Of course I’m the real Kramer! Who else could have thought up a scheme like this?” (Figure 15).

The logo clearly bases itself on public knowledge of the Kramer character and suggests that The Real Kramer is just as kooky and eccentric. In other words, if you like TV Kramer, you’ll love “The Real Kramer.” But nowhere is this
negotiation of identity more brilliantly illustrated than in a shirt he sells through his KraMart shtick (Figure 16). The shirt bears a painted likeness of himself (The Real Kramer) wearing a t-shirt with a painted likeness of the TV character Kramer, as performed by Michael Richards. The painting of Michael Richards as Kramer is an artistic representation, but the likeness of The Real Kramer, wearing the “Kramer” shirt is also painted, suggesting that The Real Kramer is also just a representation. Of course, on the tour he himself wears this shirt, eloquently reminding his audience that he is simply wearing the identity of The Real Kramer. Life imitates art imitates life.

The Real Kramer depends on the character Kramer, whose success is what makes Kenny Kramer an attraction. Interestingly, when Kenny first came up with the idea for Kramer’s Reality Tour, Jon Tierney interviewed Larry David about it, quoting David as saying, “This new idea, the Reality Tour, is something that the television Kramer would do.” Was David acknowledging that The Real Kramer had now become even more “Krameresque” than the character? Or, the reverse, that the character had become the most Krameresque of all and that all other Kramers, including The Real Kramer, were pale imitations?

What Erving Goffman calls the performance of self in everyday life points to the theatrical nature of all social life and the roles we play as a matter of course (Goffman 1959). This principle is taken to an extreme when Kenny Kramer has to act more like “himself” because the character Kramer has irrevocably changed his sense of self by making it more certain, while casting it into doubt. It is when fiction overtook life that Kenny Kramer felt the need—and found the opportunity—to produce himself as the “real” or “authentic” Kramer, as distinguished from the fictive character Kramer. He did so by becoming “more Kramer than Kramer,” even though, ironically, he was never “Kramer enough” to actually play “himself” on TV! The fan comes to see the real “Kramer,” but what s/he experiences is “The Real Kramer,” for whatever real Kramer ever existed, he is now gone forever. This Kramer (The Real Kramer) is the only Kramer that s/he can recognize.
Joanne Morrealle has written that what made *Seinfeld* so popular with its young, urban, well-educated demographic was the quality of self-referentiality, that is, the show’s calling attention to its mode of addressing viewers (Morreale 2000, 110). This is a hallmark of The Real Kramer’s performance of self. He calls attention to the way he has to “brand” himself. He makes fun of the irony that he was not allowed to play himself. He shows a key clip from the episode where the character Kramer creates a tour which is obviously based on Kramer’s Reality Tour, the very one the fans are experiencing. The result is not an image of an authentic pre-*Seinfeld* Kramer but of the slippage between all the Kramers—the pre-*Seinfeld* Kramer, the *Seinfeld* Kramer, The Real Kramer—that is elusive enough to keep the *Seinfeld* fan riveted. Kramer too enjoys the play on selves. His “real life” apartment has a sign on the front door, which reads, “Historical Landmark,” and hanging on the wall inside his apartment are three huge paintings of images like the one he sells on his KraMart shirts. In each of the three paintings he stands in a different pose, with a different expression, but the representation of the Kramer character on the t-shirt is fixed.

**Conclusion**

*Seinfeld*, and its successor *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, exploited reality effects and maximized self-reflexivity to critical and popular acclaim. NBC has still not found a sitcom to fill in the ratings-rich void that *Seinfeld* left in 1998, and, like other networks, has turned to “reality programming.” While critics lament (or applaud) the end of the sitcom and the rise of its antithesis, the so-called reality show, I would argue they are not opposites but both part of a long trajectory that began with the invention of television itself.

As a review of sitcoms throughout American television indicates, these oft-dismissed 30-minute shows are more intricately linked to the real world than is usually assumed. No matter how silly, the characters and plots are in our minds and woven into our schedules, and when we see the
world we are reminded of them. Whether suspension of disbelief or some other principle is at work in making these fictions seem real, since the earliest days of television viewers have been encouraged to believe what they saw. And reality effects such as live broadcasting, realistic storylines, and on-location shooting continue to drive ratings and attract sponsorship. In the nineties, which witnessed the pinnacle of real geography in television serials, the envelope was pushed even further as shows intermingled fictive and real space.

The advent of television tours is a natural outgrowth of this interest in reality, but while other television tours focus on the production of fiction on sets and back lots, Kramer’s Reality Tour matches the *Seinfeld* world to a real space, in the spirit of the reality of *Seinfeld* itself. *Seinfeld* never actually “happened” in New York until Kramer recreated it there by anchoring a fictional world in a real one. Kramer’s Reality Tour leads visitors through an actual and virtual landscape at one and the same time by linking the worlds inside and outside of the television show.

For fans, and possibly for anyone who ever enjoyed *Seinfeld*, the idea that there is some shred of truth to this treasured show about nothing, that the characters really *might* have existed, is enough reason to sign up for the tour. While the characters are fictitious and the actors are inaccessible, tour participants can actually hang out with an authentic part of *Seinfeld*—The Real Kramer. As for Kenny, his real life has been irrevocably changed by a fictional show, and he is its last and everlasting episode, still appearing live weekly. He can finally play himself.

**Works Cited**


