Laughing in Friendship:

The Intimate Ensemble Comedy of Friends

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Friends (1994-2004) combines the disconnected arrangement of series with the connected structure of serials. It joints the immediacy of situation comedy and, simultaneously, develops the intimacy between a group of six friends. In this television show, comic effects are often a collective result, as shared as the protagonists’ lives and stories.

This paper will explore the intimate ensemble comedy this programme develops and it aims to make a significant contribution to the detailed study of sitcoms. Sitcoms are sometimes described as simple and formulaic, but close examination can reveal subtle differences between instances of situation comedies. This analysis will focus on two major topics: performance and its surroundings under the heading of performance motifs. Motifs refer to the distinctive features or dominant ideas that we find in series — for example, the stand-up comedy moments in an episode of Seinfeld (1990-98).

In Acknowledgement

In Critiquing the Sitcom, Joanne Morreale states that “[n]ineties sitcoms based on a ‘family’ of friends, such as Ellen (1994-98), Friends (1994-), and Seinfeld (1990-98), emphasize the characters’ anxiety and neurosis rather than camaraderie; the characters serve as much as signs of cultural dysfunction as points of identification”. This accurately describes Seinfeld — and indeed this sentence is part of the introduction and its precise aim is to introduce the last essay of the book, which is about Seinfeld. However, Morreale’s sentence is not accurate about Friends — the homogeneity of group that she presents is, in fact, debatable.

In the opening scene of “The One with the Dozen Lasagnas” (1.12), the band of friends sings together in Central Perk, the coffee shop where they usually gather.

This is a scene hard to imagine in *Seinfeld*. Performance here is not just an individual rendering of a comedic role. This is an instance of the many private moments of communion that we find throughout the series, in which the characters use humour to emphasise their ties and to convey their attentiveness to each other. Ross (David Schwimmer) begins humming the song and then, little by little, they come to sing together. Simultaneously, they make eye and physical contact, intuitively acknowledging the presence of the others and their place within the group. They also share a cultural memory, in this case specifically televisual: this is the theme song from *The Odd Couple* (1970–75), a popular sitcom broadcast on ABC in the 1970s, based on the play by Neil Simon. The song that Ross then tries to get them to sing without success is from *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), another sitcom, this time broadcast on NBC, and with a fantasy twist in which an astronaut falls in love with a female genie — perhaps a reference too nerdy for the rest of them. Ross’s second attempt is livelier; his voice is clear, loud, and assertive. It is also abrupt. He suddenly raises his eyes from the newspaper and starts singing. When his friends, via Chandler (Matthew Perry), declare “We’re done.” — note the plural — he does not contest this reaction and instead immediately returns to his crossword puzzle. It is this kind of understanding and acceptance that demonstrates the interest of the series in performance as an ensemble endeavour.

It would be too easy to identify the more recognisable aspects of the individual comic performances in *Friends* — for instance, catch phrases that became comic routines, like Joey’s (Matt LeBlanc) self-assured “How you doin’?” or Ross’s timid “hi”. Obviously, each of them has its own personality and their humour matches this irreducible difference, but an enumeration of these features that are immediately spotted disregards how the series approaches performance as a joint enterprise. This is after all explicit even in the theme song “I’ll Be There for You”. It is easy to imagine how much would have been lost if this bond was not at the heart of the show, illuminating its moments, giving resonance to its past. It is easy, because all we have to do is watch *Joey*
(2004-6), the spin-off of *Friends*, which moves Joey to LA and tries to create a new group of friends by erasing, or simply omitting, the memory of the previous friends with Joey at the centre — a contradictory idea.

**Ensemble Comedy**

The achievement of rapport is analysed and appreciated by Andrew Klevan — for instance, in relation to Laurel and Hardy in *The Music Box* (1932). He argues that

This achievement [of rapport] may be found in many films other than those from the “Golden Age” of Hollywood, and the method of analysis should be useful beyond this particular context. [...] One quality, at least, connects the performances discussed here: the awareness and responsiveness to the aspects that surround them, and the thoroughness of their interaction.³

“The One Where No One’s Ready” (3.02) is exemplary in many aspects, but primarily because it distils the essence of the sitcom. The comedy arises from a very simple situation set in a single place, Monica’s apartment, that we follow in real time: Ross arrives at the flat to take his friends to an important function and they are not yet dressed. This is an opportunity to explore how they are dependant on each other and how their behaviour influences the whole group. Klevan calls attention to the fact that the performances that explore rapport are usually part of a stylistic system that is not eager to move the narrative so that the performers can devote themselves to the diegetic world. This episode is precisely structured around the delaying of narrative development and therefore is particularly suitable for the analysis of the interactions between performers and their surroundings.

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³ Andrew Klevan, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 104.
Two examples of performance motifs in this episode that can be confirmed in other episodes suffice. First, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) resorts to her understated impertinence whenever it suits her. After Ross yells at her because she is still trying to find the perfect shoes to match her dress, she rises from her bedroom wearing a sweater and pyjama trousers. She tells him that she has decided not to go and then proceeds to put her correspondence in order. She neatly aligns the address-book and then a box containing envelopes. These are subtly calculated moves intended for someone who can interpret them to react to these downplayed signs. In other words, they are meant to get a response from Ross and only because of this are they performed. His response is, of course, somehow similar as if he is pretending not to understand her actions.

Second, Chandler and Joey demonstrate the interior dynamics within the group. While recognised by the others, the complicity that links them is often ignored in its playfulness, specifically by Ross in this particular scene. At the same time, these are two characters that frequently look for an audience for their humour — Chandler comments that there is no one in the room to listen to his retort to Joey and Joey announces his entrance as he shows the multiple layers of clothes that he is wearing. Chandler needs an audience to mask his shyness whereas Joey wants it to communicate his confidence. Be that as it may, the excessiveness of Chandler’s facial expressions and the expressiveness of Joey’s bodily postures and movements are similar in the way they aim to amuse each other with their games.

**Conclusion: Places of Intimacy**

There is a common philosophical account of the nature of friendship that has brought about a line of thought based on the work of philosophers like Aristotle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Stanley Cavell, among others. According to it, friendship essentially involves three conditions: (1) *mutual caring*, which has to do with valuing moments like
the first one under analysis; (2) shared activities, like the playing between Chandler and Joey in the second example; (3) and intimacy.

The nearness of the characters is revealed in the main contexts of the series and of its performances: the two apartments, (Rachel and) Monica’s and Joey and Chandler’s, and the Central Perk’s couch, two homes and a homely object in a semi-public space. These places and this object are imaginatively used and reinvented to spark laughter with as many variations as the intricacies of their relationships. As Karen Lury writes, “Perhaps the most common set for the television sitcom is the domestic living room, a wide variety of sitcoms rely on a ‘main room’, usually a sitting room, with a couch, chairs and television where the characters can congregate.”

She goes on to mention the useful, enumerative work of Jeremy G. Butler: conventionally, the sofa is directly or almost facing the audience, in a way that is “reminiscent of a theatrical staging”. Lury then notes that the outside world is almost never shown and that therefore the sitcom has “characteristically, a closed set”. What is peculiar about Friends is how this mirrors the closeness of the characters. The limits of the set are displayed to reinforce the idea that they are a family with its own places.

In “The One with the Evil Orthodontist” (1.20), they once again notice the Ugly Naked Guy across the street — this time he has gravity boots — but before that they spot someone who is looking at them and they feel invaded. This is an instance of how the concealed off-screen space, the space beyond the limits of the frame, is recurrently and expressively utilised to delimit their areas, underlining frontiers, and therefore affirming their connection and unity. Maybe this is why the ending of the series was so fitting. They just leave the main set, Monica’s apartment, together and the camera stays to record the emptiness that the group’s absence leaves behind.

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