I’ll be there for you – the meanings and consequences of 9/11 in

*Friends*

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Abstract

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks have had incredible consequences for people throughout the world. The meanings and consequences of these attacks have been explored from a variety of multidisciplinary perspectives. With this paper I aim to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand ‘9/11’ and terrorism from alternative and irregular perspectives and angles. As such I offer here an exploration of the meaning and consequences of 9/11 as depicted in post-9/11 episodes of the popular television program, *Friends*. I argue that whilst the program’s creators and producers find no explicit role for 9/11 in the lives of Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Joey and Phoebe – these six so-called typical New Yorkers – there are a number of clumsy gestures that acknowledge the obvious importance of 9/11 in everyday life in New York and the USA. I present a narrative exploration of 9/11 as it is reproduced in post-9/11 episodes of *Friends*. I argue that time and space are routinely antagonised and problematised in post-9/11 episodes as the narrative and chronology in the world of *Friends* is revealed to be absurdly incongruent with real world narrative and chronology. Whilst it may not be problematic for a fictional program to be incongruent in this way, I argue that the creators make several appeals to *reality* that seek to acknowledge what it means to be in Manhattan in the post-9/11 world.

**Key words:** 9/11, terrorism, *Friends*, Manhattan, New York, narrative
Introduction

The popular television program *Friends* introduced the world to six ‘coffee house crowd’ New Yorkers – Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe and Joey (Stevens in Crane & Kauffman, 1994). These six characters soon became pop-cultural icons. Women – and men – during the 1990s would visit hair salons and request ‘The Rachel’, funny-man Chandler introduced the world to the comedic prefix ‘Could I be anymore [insert noun/adjective]?’, and womaniser Joey’s well known pick-up line – ‘how you doin’’ – became a running joke in some cultural discourses of Western youth. The creators of *Friends* wanted to capture what it means to be 20-something in Manhattan’s sexually promiscuous café culture. The situation-comedy became one of the world’s most watched television programs (Zurawik, 2004). Shortly before the commencement of series eight of *Friends*, 19 hijackers seized control of four passenger airplanes and slammed one into each of the Twin Towers in New York City, one into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and a fourth crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It is difficult to overstate the impact of these attacks in New York, the US and throughout the world. Surely, what it means to be a New Yorker had changed forever. However, little changed in the Manhattan of the eccentric and promiscuous characters in *Friends*. In this paper I explore post-9/11 episodes of *Friends* for 9/11 references, narratives and discourses. I argue that there are awkward gestures towards 9/11 encoded in series eight of *Friends* but, more than anything, 9/11 is absent. It is this uncanny absence that manifests in a variety of cultural icons and images. I suggest that time and space is routinely problematised in pop cultural discourses but that this phenomenon is acutely revealed in post-9/11 episodes of *Friends*. I have ordered this paper in the following
way: first, I examine the missing 9/11 discourses in *Friends* and explore the trauma and ignorance of living in Manhattan. Then, I outline the narrative methodology that I employ for analysing post-9/11 episodes of *Friends*. Finally, I present the fragmented and awkward gestures towards 9/11 contained in series eight of *Friends*. I conclude by arguing that the post-9/11 episodes of *Friends* represent an American paranoiac fantasy that resists understanding Manhattan as not only a cultural hub but as a military target.

**The Missing 9/11 Discourse in Friends**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania have had alarming consequences. Thousands of people were killed on 9/11 and thousands more have been killed in foreign wars fought in its name. Americans became television and news media junkies following the attacks. According to Hirst (2003: 10), CNN’s 24-hour news channel regularly attracted between 600000 and 800000 viewers during peak viewing periods prior to 9/11. Following the attacks, CNN regularly attracted 3 million viewers during peak hours. Hirst (2003: 10-11) argues:

> If ratings are any indication, though, most Americans are about as interested in their devolving international conflict as they’ve traditionally been in the ballot box, remaining resolutely glued to sitcoms like *Friends* (which regularly pulls in over 30 million viewers).

Interest in *Friends* had waned in the series' that had aired just prior to 9/11. Series eight – which began airing shortly after 9/11 – saw the sitcom experience a renewed popularity. As Szymanek (2004) argues, ‘It was right around 9/11 that it [*Friends*] entered its 8th season and it was once again cool to be a fan, but also comforting and even healing in the face of tragedy to know they’ve been here all the time’. It was through
*Friends* – this Manhattan-based sitcom – that the trauma in Manhattan on 9/11 could be managed and perhaps one day forgotten. Or, if this proved to be too ambitious, *Friends* could be a place for the healing to begin.

For Žižek (2001: 32), trauma always evades clear recollection or remembering. More precisely, trauma cannot be incorporated into symbolic narratives of everyday life. “trauma” designates a shocking encounter which, precisely, DISTURBS this immersion into one’s life-world, a violent intrusion of something which doesn’t fit in… Man (sic) is not simply overwhelmed by the impact of the traumatic encounter… but is able… to counteract its destabilizing impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs (Žižek, 2001: 47).

Perhaps this is why the writers and producers of *Friends* could find no place for the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in their continuing narratives of the lives of six supposedly typical people living in Manhattan. It would seem that perhaps the most significant event in the history of New York’s most televisually hyperknown borough has no role in the idealic lives of Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe and Joey in the traumascape of Manhattan (see Tumarkin, 2005: 23-53). Ignorance is bliss.

Indeed, Toby Miller (2002; 2007) suggests that ‘Being Ignorant’ is an important part of life in Manhattan. Cosmopolitan New Yorkers could not be further removed from the global violence raging throughout the world nor the terrible vengeance exacted by the United States military following the attacks. In a way, 9/11 was a reality check for those living in Manhattan. The World Trade Center attacks were definitively a ‘First-World disaster’ (Miller, 2002). According to Miller (2002), 9/11 was so significant because of the ‘high premium immediately set on the lives of Manhattan residents and the rarefied
discussion of how to commemorate the high-altitude towers’. But Manhattan is no longer merely the financial, fashion and sexual nerve-centre of the planet: it is also a military target. It is a site for violent blowback. Native-American academic Ward Churchill (2003) takes this a step further. Churchill (2003) argues that the workers in the Twin Towers were natural and legitimate targets of international terrorism.

True enough, they were civilians of a sort. But innocent? Gimme a break. They formed a technocratic corps at the heart of America’s global financial empire… the “mighty engine of profit” to which the military dimensions of U.S. policy has always been enslaved – and they did so both willingly and knowingly (Churchill, 2003).

This opens an alarming Pandora’s Box. Could it be that these six friends are the legitimate targets of international terrorism? If they are, then perhaps so are Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte and all the crew from the Manhattan depicted in Sex and the City (Star, 1998). Much like their fellow New Yorkers – those six friends spending their days drinking coffee at Central Perk – the Manhattan of the promiscuous women of Sex and the City was not subject to the trauma of 9/11. It seems that Carrie and co. were not only immune to New York’s high crime, gang violence and – for the most part – a host of sexually transmitted diseases, but also from ‘the other star of the show’, post-9/11 Manhattan (Whittington, n.d.).

Some Perspective

Perhaps I need to regain some perspective. Perhaps I have ignored a more simple explanation for 9/11’s absence from the post-9/11 storyline of Friends. After all, Friends is not performed or filmed in New York. It is filmed in Studio City, California. The set is a fictitious and mythic simulation of a café and an apartment in Manhattan. Perhaps
this is why the writers and producers could not envision a post-9/11 Manhattan café

culture. But they do manage a few clumsy gestures that fumble around the obvious

significance of 9/11 for the people of Manhattan. It nonetheless remains that the New

York of *Friends* is an ‘Imaginary New York’ (Zurawik, 2004).

The New York City within which Friends was set is an imaginary place in the

American psyche where some of our most powerful mythologies intersect. One

of the most resonant myths features New York as a place where young people

who might not feel comfortable in their home towns can find community and

blossom, just like these sitcom characters (Zurawik, 2004).

*Friends* is deeply absent and alienated from Manhattan. Right down to the fictitious

coffee house constructed out of images from coffee houses in New York’s Greenwich

Village. *Friends* is an idealic simulation of Manhattan in the most Baudrillardian sense

(see Baudrillard, 1994). I argue that this absence mirrors the absence of the Twin Towers

– their disappearance casts a large shadow over the streets of New York. The gaping

hole in the ground at Ground Zero is a scar of sorts – albeit one embodied by an absence

– on the New York skyline. In many respects the Twin Towers continue to exist as what


**Methodology**

I am tempted to describe the analysis of *Friends* that I undertake in this paper as a

narrative analysis. A narrative analysis is, in some conceptions, always to do with words.

The analysis that I undertake here, however, is not about words. Rather, it is about

images, symbols and absences of words. According to Lee et al. (2004: 39), ‘Narrative is

a universal genre of both oral language and written texts’. In such a view the analysis in

this paper could not really be said to constitute ‘narrative’ analysis. Yet, Riessman
(1993: 1) expanded this narrow definition and argued that narrative analysis ‘takes as its object’ the ‘story’. Indeed, I suggest that words do not structure narrative as much as human life is already ‘narratively structured’ (Freeman, 2004: 63).

As such, I argue that the analysis in this paper is a form of narrative analysis albeit one based on the absence of words. It relates closely to the study of the narratives of social architecture as outlined by Grosz (2001: 57).

A text, whether book, paper, film, painting, or building, can be thought of as a kind of thief in the night. Furtive, clandestine, and always complex, it steals ideas from all around, from its own milieu and history, and better still from its outside, and disseminates them elsewhere. It is not only a conduit for the circulation of ideas, as knowledges or truths, but a passage or point of transition from one (social) stratum or space to another (Grosz, 2001: 57).

I argue that Friends – the sitcom that is filmed in Los Angeles, symbolically set in New York, and incorporates a 9/11 narrative without words – embodies such a ‘thief in the night’. In this way, Friends is not a ‘repository of knowledges or truths’ or a space where information is stored, but rather a ‘process of scattering thoughts; scrambling terms, concepts, and practices; forging linkages; becoming a form of action’ (Grosz, 2001: 57-58). The study the narrative of Friends I watched the full ten seasons from beginning to end over several weeks in early 2008. I observed the differences in how images were used in series’ eight, nine and ten – the post-9/11 episodes – when compared to series one through seven. As I watched I took detailed notes and watched the particularly insightful bonus features that accompany each series’ DVD. I paid particular attention to the sets and the stock footage of New York City in the opening and closing credits and in
transitions between scenes. I set out to document how the narrative of 9/11 was incorporated into post-9/11 episodes of Friends.

**Fragments of 9/11 in Friends**

9/11 is not entirely absent from the narrative of Friends. There are many explicit and abstract references to these attacks. The first thing that the audiences of Friends witnessed with the commencement of series eight was the changes to the images of New York used to join scenes throughout the show. In series one through seven, these linking images routinely featured the Twin Towers from a variety of angles ranging from a broad and distant view of the New York skyline to an up-close, almost street level view. Occasionally throughout seasons one to seven the Twin Towers can be seen in the background of images of the apartment block where Rachel, Monica, Chandler and Joey (but not Ross and Phoebe – they live elsewhere in Manhattan) lived. In series’ eight, nine and ten there are no images of the Twin Towers in any of the skyline images of New York. This may not seem remarkable at first glance, but when one considers that the images of New York used in Friends were likely drawn from generic reels of stock footage, finding images of the Manhattan skyline that do not feature the Twin Towers would have been difficult. Certainly the number of available images would have been significantly reduced. The producers of Sex and the City similarly expunged all images and references to the Twin Towers from the show. In the early episodes of series eight of Friends there are a number of broad and abstract references to 9/11, cultural Americana and New Yorker identity. Importantly, the creators of Friends signal a new signpost in post-9/11 America by dedicating the first episode of series eight – ‘The One After “I
Do”’ – ‘to the people of New York City’ (Crane & Kauffman, 2001). This is quickly followed by a changed storyline in episode three – ‘The One Where Rachel Tells’. As Monica and Chandler leave for their honeymoon the script originally called for Chandler to make an inappropriate remark about a bomb in the airport (TV.com, 2008). Not funny in post-9/11 Manhattan!

There are two key spaces in the set of Friends that were used to pay tribute to the people of New York and the United States in the early episodes of season eight – the first post-9/11 series of the program. The first space is located on the wall behind the famous couch where the Friends crew sat in their favourite coffee house – Central Perk. The artwork on this wall is changed every two or three episodes (Crane & Kauffman, 1994). This artwork sometimes depicts American flags, ‘Uncle Sam’ images, and caricatures of the Statue of Liberty. The second space is the etch-a-sketch that hangs on the door in Joey and Chandler’s apartment. The etch-a-sketch is used throughout the Friends series for notes, images, and messages. The following table depicts how these spaces were used in the post-9/11 Friends episodes. Also depicted in this table are miscellaneous references to 9/11.

| Insert Table 1 about here – Table 1 can be found after the bibliography at the end of this document |

When it Hasn’t Been Your Day, Week, Month or Even Your Year

Many of the references to 9/11 are sporadic, occasional and more likely the result of idiosyncratic wardrobe and set design decisions rather than narrative planning. But they are there for all viewers to see. At times the changing artwork in the background of
scenes filmed in *Central Perk* depicts images of Americana – Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty, and American flags. The etch-a-sketch at one point contains the doodled words ‘One New York. 1 People’. At another point the etch-a-sketch contained the letters ‘FDNY’ (Fire Department, New York) (Crane and Kauffman, 2001). On three separate occasions in series eight characters can be seen wearing FDNY t-shirts. Another post-9/11 change can be seen in a poster behind the fridge in Joey and Chandler’s apartment. For several seasons the space behind the fridge was filled by a cartoonish map of Manhattan. Eight episodes into series eight this image was replaced by an American flag. What this has to do with Manhattan is unclear. But Hirst (2003: 10) writes of LA following 9/11:

> The US flag is everywhere, sold in its thousands by those guys at intersections who clean your windscreens whether you like it or not. It hangs from private verandahs and office windows, and it’s stuck to the bonnets and boots of countless Chevvies, Hondas and Beemers.

Hirst (2003: 10) argues that some of this flag-waving is part of the grieving process but for others, it represents a dark hostility towards the world embodied in bumper-stickers and t-shirts linked to images of the US flag – ‘IT’S BUTT-KICKING TIME’; ‘DON’T FUCK WITH US. WE FUCK BACK’. It is not clear which wielding of the flag is present in post-9/11 episodes of *Friends*.

Series eight began airing on September 27, 2001. The Halloween episode aired to correspond with the ‘real world’ Halloween. The Thanksgiving episode corresponded with Thanksgiving and the Christmas episode aired shortly before the show went off air over Christmas before returning in January. In February the Valentines Day episode was
aired. As much as possible, the show’s creators tried to tie the chronological narrative of *Friends* with a real world chronology. Interestingly this narrative is constantly broken by the beginning and end of the US ratings seasons. So whilst the audience can imagine that when the season starts the temporality of the in-world narrative corresponds roughly with the temporal conditions outside of the world of *Friends*. At some point during the between-season breaks this chronology becomes incongruent. How is the viewer to understand the day before the series begins? The last episode of series seven features Chandler’s and Monica’s wedding. The first episode of series eight is the next day – according to the *Friends* temporal narrative – despite series seven ending in May and series eight beginning in September.

Why is this even important? I suggest that this is a crucial antagonism that is a produced in a television program depicting routine and everyday life. It is an antagonism of time and space. Is not 9/11 as an event of the same order? This massive terrorist attack occurred in New York City on September 11, 2001 but it was – and is – viewed across multiple configurations of time and space even as it was occurring. Where did 9/11 go in the fictional narrative of *Friends*? It was not, after all, totally absent. There were t-shirts, paintings and etch-a-sketch doodles – all are testament to perhaps the most significant event in the lives of these six New Yorkers. The building where Monica, Rachel, Chandler and Joey live is a building in Manhattan located on the corner of Bedford and Grove – or at least that is the building where the producers would have the audience believe that they live. The Bedford-Grove intersection is a real intersection in Manhattan. This is how it appears on Google Earth.
This image depicts both the fictional location of the apartment block where Monica, Rachel, Chandler and Joey live located at the corner of Bedford and Grove in Greenwich Village (middle-top) and Ground Zero (the vacant area, bottom left corner). As this map demonstrates, 9/11 would have caused more than a slight interruption to the everyday lives of these six friends. Perhaps if the show was to reach for a deeper reality, one of the characters could have died. Chandler would have been a likely candidate as he works in a tall office building for a major international firm. Perhaps Ross – a Professor of Paleontology at New York University – was near Toby Miller – at that time an NYU academic – when the planes struck, and perhaps these colleagues watched the events
unfold on television together. Of course I can easily shake myself out of this fantasy – *Friends* was, *in reality*, filmed in Studio City, California.

**A Tribute to Captain Billy Burke**

But here is my dilemma. Every time I snap back to reality and remember that *Friends* is fiction no matter how real it seems something else shunts me out of this reality and absorbs me back into the fictitious world of these everyday New Yorkers. It is filmed in a studio in California no matter how well the show’s creators simulate Manhattan. So why acknowledge 9/11 at all? Should viewers interpret the 9/11 references in post-9/11 episodes of *Friends* as a wholly Californian tribute? Perhaps the links to a post-9/11 time and space are not really there. Images of American flags, Uncle Sam, and the Statue of Liberty are routine features of life in America. Yet, there is one clumsy gesture toward 9/11 that cannot be denied when Joey wears a t-shirt with ‘Capt. Billy Burke’ on the chest.

Captain Billy Burke has become a mythical figure of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Burke was a firefighter who perished in the Twin Towers when they collapsed. When tower two collapsed, Captain Burke was on the 27th floor of tower one. Captain Burke ordered his colleagues out of the tower but remained in the burning building with Ed Beya, a quadriplegic man, and his *friend* Abe Zelmanowitz. These three people remained together, refusing to leave each others side, as tower one fell to the Manhattan streets below the World Trade Center (Burke in Sumner, 2007; CNN, 2002).
Conclusion: An American Paranoiac Fantasy

In many respects the creators of *Friends* did not incorporate 9/11 into the narrative, but they did acknowledge the events. These acknowledgements embodied in American flags, images of the Statue of Liberty and Uncle Sam, and in FDNY t-shirts represent problematic points in the time and space narratives of a fictional Manhattan as depicted in *Friends*. Certainly as a fictional television program it does not have to be real, so perhaps there is no dilemma. Then why choose a ‘real’ apartment block for the friends to live? Why employ various cultural icons representing New York and Manhattan? Why pay tribute to Captain Billy Burke? These questions are not easily explained away by an appeal to an unproblematic reality. Has Zurawik (2004) argues: ‘As much as the series has been criticized for its lack of social reality in terms of diversity, cost of living, crime and gridlock, it was that very lack of reality…that gave it a second life after 9/11. This was a New York where people loved each other and made babies, not a New York where hate-filled zealots crashed planes into towers’.

Can we not, therefore, view *Friends* as another in a series of American paranoiac fantasies (see Žižek, 2006)? New York may be an idealic and glamorous setting for popular culture, but in a post-9/11 world it is a military target. In this way, I argue that the post-9/11 episodes of *Friends* can be viewed as a vain attempt at normalising what was a catastrophic event that has induced deep anxieties in the affluent city-dwelling classes. The Manhattan of Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe and Joey is a paranoid one. They feign business as usual as the world collapses around them – and we watch. Is *Friends* not a symbolic location where the ills of the world are suspended – if
only for half-an-hour per week – and living in Manhattan can once again be viewed as ignorance in its most blissful apparition? Perhaps, but grim reality – a type of desert of the real (Žižek, 2002) – haunts the Friends set in Studio City, California. No longer is the Manhattan of Friends a place where the promiscuous café-culture come to play. It is a military target. But hey, ‘Your mother warned you there’d be days like these’ (Rembrandts, ‘I’ll Be There For You’ – theme music to Friends).
Bibliography


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Table 1: Americana and 9/11 iconography in series eight of *Friends*