Set Piece: Daniel McKewen's *Zarathustra's Cave*
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The room is instantly recognisable to fans, and vaguely familiar to everyone else. Open plan, it features a sofa setting, a kitchenette and just enough ornament and organised clutter — or rather, just enough alphabetised cereal boxes, as the tenant is a neat-freak — to establish personality without creating distraction.

Even those who have not watched an episode of *Seinfeld* (1989–98) can recognise the layout of a typical 1990s' sitcom apartment. As screen-based experience absorbs more and more of our time, such places increasingly feature in collective cultural memory. Still, it feels uncanny to witness a background forced into the foreground. And in *Zarathustra's Cave*, Daniel McKewen has rendered Jerry Seinfeld's familiar apartment strange by capturing it without characters, action or dialogue, retaining only a laugh track and some faint traffic sounds.

The result is disorientating. Televisual spaces are usually visible only when supporting a narrative, a rule fractured by McKewen's focus on the periphery rather than the centre, and on the moment of aftermath (or preparation) rather than the moment of action. Given this accentuation of absence, it is tempting to read the abandoned living room as a crime scene, or perhaps a surveillance feed. Seeing the apartment unpeopled and out of context adds a certain covertness — as though the audience is trespassing on the set during off-air time.

This sort of virtual 'breaking and entering' is habitual for McKewen, whose practice explores the dynamics between the fan and the object of his or her fixation — in his own case, film and television culture — through rituals of production and consumption, editing and framing, use and misuse. As a postproduction artist, McKewen uses existing cultural commodities as material, subjecting the fixed, controlled images and sounds preferred by celebrities, advertisers and producers to digital processes that render them mutated and unstable. He aligns himself with his subjects by adopting their techniques, which he then obsessively over-applies to reveal the formulae and repetitions that underpin culture. In *Zarathustra's Cave*, McKewen's personal identification with *Seinfeld* manifests as a possessive reworking of its spaces, signature laughs, postmodern methodologies and unconventional structures. This is enacted firstly through appropriating audiovisual elements and then reiterating the show's dry humour, non-linear tactics and crossover between televisual and 'real' world experiences.

McKewen asserts his status as a fan and information junkie through his specialist selection and treatment of what appears to be 'generic' content from the series: the clip of Jerry's vacant apartment and the laugh track. Throughout the entire run of *Seinfeld*, only once is the entire apartment shown empty of cast members, and then only for a few seconds. Locating this segment of footage therefore relies on the fan's authoritative knowledge of the material. Similarly, McKewen has carefully curated the work's laugh track, using extracts from *Seinfeld* audio tracks harvested during a dedicated re-watching of the entire series. This artificial reconstruction of a seemingly 'natural' element echoes established industry practice; even shows recorded with live audiences have their laugh tracks 'sweetened' with canned laughter to optimise tone and clarity, a craft practised by only a handful of sound engineers.

The title of McKewen's work, *Zarathustra's Cave*, is an in-joke for *Seinfeld* fans: Zarathustra = Nietzsche's *Übermensch* = superhuman = Superman, one of Jerry's favourite topics and the cause of a dubious internet conspiracy theory that claims a reference to the superhero can be found in every episode. *Seinfeld*'s self-referential comedy and wordplay saw numerous 'Seinlanguage' expressions coined on the show spill over into common usage through fan propagation. This fluidity between on-screen and off-screen culture reinforced critics' claims that the show's rejection of 'meaningful' experience in favour of minutiae — everyday anxieties, brand references, absurd diversions, hyperbolism — was evidence of a broader nihilist trend in American society: *Seinfeld* as both symptom and symbol of postmodernism's alleged emptiness.

At first, *Zarathustra's Cave* appears to literalise this emptiness. But the friction between the static, grainy image and the sporadic laughter, which begins to sound more awkward and mechanical the longer one listens, gradually generates a heightened attention to detail. Laugh tracks are ideologically controversial because they encourage uncritical acceptance that certain acts require certain responses. But laughter unhinged from cause — reaction without action — is non-prescriptive, and can be subversive. McKewen employs this surplus 'ready-made audience' to disrupt the stability of the video image and foreground awareness of the theatricality of spectatorship and composition, and the passing of time.

This is a core means by which *Zarathustra's Cave* distils and intensifies *Seinfeld*'s denial of linearity and progress. While the original 'show about nothing' (as *Seinfeld* was infamously described) used unconventional plot structures, distraction tactics and unresolved endings to subvert traditional narrative forms, *Zarathustra's Cave* constructs a space of endless deferral, in which 'nothing' *can* happen. The sitcom set is a visual manifestation of the zero point from which all narratives begin. By separating characters from environment, McKewen destroys the situation itself, pushing the genre's axiom of arrested development to the extreme by repurposing the signifier of stability and return as the medium of suspense. Cleansed of any particular moment, the image lingers on as a relic: a shrine to the gods of 1990s' comedy, preserved as it was in their lifetime and haunted by an excess of audience energy with nowhere to go after the cancellation of the series.