From *Friends* to “The Girl Friend”: the Early Evolution of Jennifer Aniston’s Star Image

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Introduction

1 On September 15, 2021, Jennifer Aniston appeared on late night television’s Jimmy Kimmel Live to promote her most recent creative production: the second season of The Morning Show (Apple TV, 2019-). Sitting front row in the live studio audience were two young women in their twenties who, as Kimmel explained on-air, had just met yet were united by a singular commonality: both had tattooed their bodies with a tribute to the 52-year-old actress: her birthday was permanently etched into their skin. A flabbergasted Aniston said that she was “flattered” before jesting that “they have laser removal” in case the young women should eventually regret their tattoos. “Never” the women immediately insisted to which Aniston responded, “I love you, thank you” as the audience clapped approvingly.

2 Why would a twenty-year old permanently alter her body with a tattoo celebrating a stranger more than twice her age? More to the point, how is it that this particular woman at this point in her life continue to resonate with such intensity in Western popular culture? In addition to Jimmy Kimmel’s show, in the fall of 2021 alone Aniston appeared on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, Ellen, Good Morning America and The Drew Barrymore Show to promote her latest work. Over the past year, Aniston has graced the covers of In Style, People, Australia’s Marie Claire, Germany’s Petra, Spain’s Mujerhoy and France’s Madame Figaro. Yet in a year when the entire cast of Friends was finally reunited to great fanfare in an HBO Max reunion special which spawned countless nostalgic retrospectives from around the world about the impact of the iconic sitcom1, Aniston’s intense mediatization and the publicity surrounding her solo work stood out as a stark reminder that she alone among the six actors of Friends continues to
command such media attention. Indeed, the actress, nearly three decades after her arrival on the small screen, appears to be as popular and as bankable as ever on both cinema and television screens consistently earning seven or eight figure salaries for her movie roles and, most recently, being paid $2 million per episode for her role as TV personality Alex Levy in *The Morning Show*.

This article will examine the early stage of Jennifer Aniston’s evolution from television sitcom actress to cultural icon with a multiplatform, multi-decade career. It seeks to understand how the actress successfully negotiated the often-perilous transition from the small to big screen as well as how her nascent star persona was shaped by those early roles. Recent research on Aniston has concentrated on the star’s image from her mid and later career. Victoria E. Johnson has examined, for example, the first decade of the 2000s, the late and post-*Friends* period during which Aniston starred in a flurry of movies including *Rock Star* (2001), *The Good Girl* (2002), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *Along Game Polly* (2004), *Rumor Has It* (2005), *The Break-Up* (2006) and *Marley & Me* (2008) among others. Focusing on Aniston (as well as actress Tina Fey) as celebrities in a system of “synthetic media stardom (62),” Johnson discusses two Aniston films from this period, *The Break-Up* and *The Good Girl*, in order to analyze how the actress, so closely identified with her *Friends* character Rachel Green, successfully navigated between roles playing to- or against-type. Susan Berridge, on the other hand, has concentrated on discourses surrounding aging and female celebrity, focusing on Aniston as the object of intense media attention and speculation for failing to correspond to what are conventionally understood as normative life phases for women: marriage and childbearing. As such, Berridge describes Aniston’s image as configured in the mold of “the tragic aging spinster” in the wake of the actress’ much mediatized divorce from actor Brad Pitt as well as her continued childlessness. Like Berridge, Alice Leppert also alludes to Aniston’s “high-profile celebrity marriage” in her discussion of Aniston’s own celebrity, citing it as one element which “helped Aniston smoothly transition from sitcom star to movie star (752).”

While I do not suggest that Aniston’s relationship with Hollywood A-lister Pitt (as well as, following their split, the attendant media frenzy pitting Aniston against the glamorous persona of big screen star Angelina Jolie) had no effect on the actress’s eventual rise to mega-stardom, my interest here lies in a slightly earlier period of Aniston’s career (roughly 1994-1998) as she toggles between roles on the small and big screens. Furthermore, I do not seek to establish whether Aniston plays to or against type in the roles I analyze. Rather, I will be investigating how her ultimately successful star persona was informed and constructed by her early television and film roles and surrounding media coverage.

Aniston, like her *Friends* castmates rose to fame thanks to her role in a sitcom in which the overwhelming ethos of the show centered on the collective integrity and cohesiveness of a group of six young adults who, in replacing each other’s biological families as primary support systems, offered viewers a vision of an alternative, mutually supportive kinship system during “that time in your life when your friends are your family.” *Friends*’ very narrative structure – typically three distinct story lines interwoven throughout an episode, a relatively unique framework for storytelling within the sitcom genre of the period – was inspired by a very conscious desire to maintain storytelling and screen time equilibrium for the ensemble cast of its six characters. Indeed, during the early period of the sitcom’s original broadcast, the six
actors systematically appeared in promotional events as well as advertisements as a unit and the rising television stars famously banded together over the years to negotiate their contracts collectively, displaying a commitment to each other that was virtually unheard of in the industry. This is to say that if any television show could have offered a perfectly level playing field from which all cast members had an equal shot at achieving enduring stardom, *Friends* was undoubtedly that show.

More than twenty-five years later, however, Aniston is the only member of that group to be described as “a national treasure beloved by zillions.” While all six former *Friends* cast members are multi-millionaires thanks to the sitcom’s enduring success and popularity and while the five others (Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matthew Perry, Matt Le Blanc and David Schwimmer) continue to work in show business, the post-*Friends* careers and star-power of Aniston’s former co-stars have not generated the same popular interest and cultural salience as that of Aniston herself.

Before the era of prestige television allowed for today’s more fluid transitions between the big and small screens, the culturally determined position of television as a medium subordinate to cinema established a mostly one-directional flow of incrementally increasing star power as actors and actresses moved from television series into movie roles. Additionally, within the ecosystem of network television itself, different genres assumed differing levels of cultural legitimacy and half-hour comedy series were often considered to be less creative, less worthy of critical and serious attention than more prestigious hour-long dramas. Despite this discrepancy in prestige, a number of notable actors and actresses have been able to transition from their various roles on television sitcom into successful careers as film stars. Examples from the later part of the network era include Robin Williams (*Mork and Mindy*, ABC, 1978-1982), Tom Hanks (*Bosom Buddies*, ABC, 1980-1982), Woody Harrelson (*Cheers*, NBC, 1982-1993), Michael J. Fox (*Family Ties*, NBC, 1982-1989) and Will Smith (*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, NBC, 1990-1996). While the movement from small to big screen appears to be more accessible to sitcom’s actors than its actresses, Jada Pinkett Smith (*A Different World*, NBC, 1987-1993), Sandra Bullock (*Working Girl*, NBC, 1990) and Helen Hunt (*Mad About You*, NBC, 1992-1999) also began their careers as performers in sitcoms.

Given the phenomenal popularity of *Friends* and its stars, it is unsurprising that the program had the potential to serve its performers as a springboard to more lucrative careers in the film industry. However, contrary to what may seem today to have been an inevitable rise to stardom, and in spite of having starred in the 1993 horror film *Leprechaun* (Mark Jones), in the early 1990s, Aniston’s was not necessarily preordained to become the breakout career of the six young stars. Courteney Cox, who played Monica Geller was more widely recognizable than Aniston as *Friends* went to air on NBC in 1994, thanks notably to her recurring role as Alex Keaton’s girlfriend on NBC’s *Family Ties* (1982-1989) as well as a turn in Bruce Springsteen’s 1984 “Dancing in the Dark” music video. And while all six actors eventually went on to star in movies, it was David Schwimmer’s role as the goofy, pathetic Ross Geller which initially appeared to situate him as the series’ breakout star.

The analysis below begins with a discussion of Aniston’s initial portrayal of iconic character Rachel Green, suggesting that already the complexity of that role primed Aniston for a relatively smooth transition to film. The discussion will then narrow in on a series of media texts (film and television performances, magazine covers, movie
reviews) dating from 1996 to 1998, a period which I argue is formative in the initial stretching of Aniston’s image outward from comic television actress.

1. Rachel Green: From (Post)feminist Ingénue to Television Romantic Comedy Heroine

Within the first three minutes of the pilot episode of the iconic *Friends*, a despondent Ross Geller, recently rejected by his newly out lesbian wife, moans to his surrounding friends, “I just want to be married again.” On cue, the door to the Central Perk coffee house opens and in walks a flustered young woman dressed in full, richly embroidered, neckline-plunging, off-the-shoulder bridal regalia complete with an elaborate tiara, an expansive veil, and a three-stranded pearl necklace. Rachel Green settles in to explain that she has, in the final few moments before her marriage to the orthodontist Barry, succumbed to cold feet. Unwilling to commit to matrimony and wondering aloud “why am I doing this and who am I doing it for,” Aniston as Rachel makes the case to the surrounding group of young adults as well as to the studio audience and the millions of Americans watching on September 22, 1994, that this character, despite her immensely privileged background as a doctor’s daughter as well as the assurance of a privileged future as a doctor’s wife, would be seeking to live her life on her own terms. Furthermore, in admitting openly that she was more “turned on” by one of the wedding gifts (a gravy boat) than by her fiancé and by identifying this misdirected desire as a justification for her wedding day flight, the character was immediately positioned not only as a sexually desiring young women but as one for whom sexual fulfillment was of primordial importance. With this runaway bride narrative *Friends* thus explicitly opened its diegetic sphere with a storyline of nascent female desire and self-empowerment, seemingly seeking to throw off the chains of traditionalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity in search of an alternative life script for its young protagonist.

Rachel’s surprise arrival in the coffee house added a sixth and final member to *Friends*’ pre-existing group of young urban adults. Spoilt, coddled and on the run from what would have been a comfortable existence ensconced in patriarchal institutions, Rachel erupted as the exotic newcomer to these already world-weary, downtrodden, and cynical Gen Xers for whom “your job’s a joke, you’re broke, your love life’s DOA.” Introduced to each of the characters by turn, Rachel serves as the audience proxy in this pilot episode and viewers are thus ushered into this fictional space through the perspective of this perplexing character, outsiders being initiated into a new world. Rachel, like the viewers watching her, would have to learn the codes of this late 20th century urban environment, where work, romance and family all become sources of disappointment and embarrassment. In this respect, Rachel may best be understood through the archetype of the ingénue encountering a topos of “worldliness.” Julia Douthwaite argues that the “ingénue symbolizes the mutable character par excellence, the blank slate in search of an identity […] she has no formal name of her own, only those she inherits from others – her father, guardian or husband.” The early episodes of *Friends* indeed establish Rachel as in need of protection and guidance. “Welcome to the real world,” Monica announces at the end of the pilot episode as the group helps Rachel cut up her father’s credit cards, “it sucks. You’re gonna love it!” As Rachel is slowly nurtured and helped towards independence, the blank slate is gradually filled...
and she outgrows the need for help, eventually becoming fully independent and autonomous. Notably, Douthwaite suggests that what “makes this moment in a girl's life so interesting is that it marks her entrance into womanhood, formally announcing her sexually availability and circulation in the public sphere.” Indeed, sexual availability becomes one of Rachel's trademarks. In this Gen X tale, Rachel is constructed as a sex positive young woman unashamed of her sexual desires and fully capable of seeking erotic pleasure without attaching too much emotional import to intimacy: Rachel sleeps with her ex-fiancé then breaks up with him once again; Rachel's satisfaction with her increasingly prestigious career serves as the basis for her breakup from boyfriend Ross; and later, Rachel becomes pregnant and decides to keep the baby but refuses to marry the father. Rachel is an ideal fictional ingénue for a cultural moment contesting the meanings and pertinence of feminism. If the character is never overtly identified as a feminist, Rachel's utterance of lines such as 1995’s sarcastic “Ooooh, I’m a man. Ooooh, I have a penis. Ooooh, I have to win money to exert my power over women” during a competitive battle of the sexes poker game, as well as 2002’s “No uterus, no opinion” during her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, certainly signify the sitcom’s willingness at various instances to align her with strands of feminist (even radical feminist) thought.  

At the same time, throughout the narrative ups and downs endured by the character, Rachel Green is inevitably fashionably and alluringly dressed, always immaculately styled and coiffed. Her obsession with shopping and fashion, her professional rise and arrival at a high-status position in the fashion industry inevitably position the character as a fashion icon as well as a producer and consumer of expensive luxury goods and services (with jobs at Saks Fifth Avenue and Ralph Lauren and treatments in exclusive spas). Alice Leppert observes that “More than any other character, Friends defines Rachel primarily through her appearance” and she argues that Aniston's own star persona is augmented by her portrayal of Rachel: “Thanks to the emphasis on Rachel's appearance as opposed to the quirky traits of most of the other characters, Aniston becomes a fashion icon and star through the image of Rachel.”  

The ingénue character of Rachel Green thus presents viewers early on with multiple and often contradictory component parts each competing to fill up the blank slate introduced in the pilot episode: a desire for empowerment and autonomy, sex positivism and sexual desire, careerism, consumerism, and later, a complex relationship to motherhood. In its portrayal of Rachel's story as a series of “life choices,” the sitcom and Rachel's place in it tend at times to echo neatly with Negra's (2009) assessment of a postfeminist popular cultural landscape in which various texts operate “as a means of registering and superficially resolving the persistence of “choice” dilemmas for American women.” Negra suggests too that “postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique,” adding that it “presents itself as pleasingly moderated in contrast to a 'shrill' feminism.” In a landscape dominated by texts and discourses which tend to conform to this postfeminist framework as described by Negra, it is easy to interpret, even dismiss, Rachel's character and her story as just another example of “pleasing” postfeminist discourses at work. Indeed, Rockler (2006) suggests that Friends, for generic and ideological reasons, depoliticizes feminism, ultimately making a mockery of women’s economic problems and reducing female empowerment to “excessive individualism.” Rockler accuses Friends of “contribut[ing] to the postfeminist mythology that women's economic conditions are
fair" and specifically singles out Aniston’s character, suggesting that “Friends portrays individual empowerment as desirable, especially through the glamorous transformation of Rachel [...].”

Negra’s critique of the ways in which women’s stories are conceived of and told in popular cultural texts is compelling and Rockler’s critique of Friends is certainly justified at some level. However, Rockler’s reading tends to flatten or even overlook the multiplicity of interpretations made possible by the generic characteristics of the sitcom, as well as to underestimate the capacity of viewers to read (and reread) through and against any overarching ideological tendencies that may indeed be present. For every viewer disappointed that Rachel “got off the plane” (i.e., left her dream job in Paris to go back to Ross in the series’ concluding episode), there may be one thrilled by the fact that the series makes no final mention of an eventual marriage for the character. For every viewer appalled by the ease with which this white upper-middle class character reaches the heights of the fashion industry, there may be one who appreciates her stalwart defense of the young and lower-class Deena’s choice to raise a child on her own. For every viewer disappointed that Rachel never seemed to even consider an abortion to end her unplanned pregnancy there is certainly one who found liberation in the knowledge that, as a new mother, she had unapologetically never changed a single one of her daughter’s dirty diapers. The point here is that whatever the aspirations of viewers, Rachel Green, thanks to all her contradictions and complexities, offered multiple entry points for viewer empathy and identification. As the show’s ingénue and “blank slate,” Rachel is available to absorb opposing discourses and mediate ideological incongruities. Her densely woven and sometimes inconsistent ten-year trajectory, simultaneously in constant motion and forever frozen on screens thanks to reruns and streaming platforms, remains available to new generations of viewers for continued identification, discussion and meaning making. Indeed, Rachel’s story from dependent spoilt brat to powerful career woman and single mother, continues to resonate throughout popular culture as a “strong” female character, one to be admired and with whom women may easily identify.

Critically, Aniston was also able to create space for the profound emotional resonances needed for some of the emphatically un-funny narrative arcs supplied by the show’s writers over the ten years of production. As will be seen, these brief sojourns into performative pathos pushed the Rachel character into dramatic territory relatively uncharacteristic for the situation comedy genre adding additional layers of potential interpretation to the character as well as to Aniston’s own persona. This in turn, allowed for audiences and the film industry to conceive of and receive Aniston as a plausible performer in roles beyond the sitcom genre. Clearly, the character’s on-again off-again relationship with Ross was instrumental in blurring generic understandings of Friends as a straightforward sitcom. Kutulas (2018) notes that “a different structure, new plots, and enhanced character development” contributed to Friends’ specificity within the situation comedy genre and the program has been described as “a soapcom, a soap opera masquerading as a situation comedy.” However, with its boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back story arc stretching from its first episode to its final 236th, Friends may best be understood, thanks to its will-they-or-won’t-they Ross and Rachel dynamic, as a long-running, serialized romantic comedy for television.

If this dynamic was already introduced on the small screen through characters such as Sam and Diane in the sitcom Cheers (NBC, 1982-1993), Friends takes the formula to a new
dimension on network television, establishing its characters as veritable romantic comedy heroes complete with the tropes common to the popular film genre. In her work on the romantic comedy genre, Tamar Jeffers McDonald suggests that a romantic comedy is characterized as a film “which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.” With its emphasis on dating and coupledom, Friends conforms to these basic tenets, particularly regarding its Ross and Rachel storyline. Specifically, within its diegetic sphere, the television show introduces several tropes which align it with cinematic romantic comedies. Most tellingly, Ross and Rachel’s first encounter in the Central Perk coffee shop (he, lamenting the end of his marriage, she, bursting through the doors in full wedding dress at the very same moment) may be understood as an example of the ‘meet cute’ trope in which “the lovers-to-be first encounter each other in a way which forecasts their eventual union.” Likewise, Rachel’s reaching in to shake Ross’ hand as his umbrella prematurely opens serves to suggest that the two young adults will eventually become intimate, but that Ross’ sexual awkwardness and lack of confidence will be one of the complicating factors that the couple will have to overcome in their quest to be together. Finally, the pilot episode ends when Ross shyly asks Rachel if she would accept to go on a date with him. This conversation occurs as they both reach for the last Oreo cookie on plate in front of them, then agree to split it and twist the cookie, each taking one side. The sharing of the cookie foreshadows their eventual coming together to form a united couple.

From the start then, Friends establishes Rachel as the object of Ross’s pining desires and Leppert notes that “by putting Rachel on this veritable pedestal, the series already marks her as superior to her fellow cast members.” The sitcom also makes much of Rachel’s femininity, highlighting her physical attributes by consistently drawing attention to the actress’/character’s body (see figure 1). Dressed in form-hugging costumes, her body is revealed to a much fuller extent and with greater regularity than her fellow female co-stars, Courteney Cox and Lisa Kudrow. With plunging necklines and short skirts Jennifer/Rachel is often presented to the television viewer as an idealized erotic fantasy, a hybrid of fully formed, sexually mature womanhood and lithe, youthful, and innocent girlhood. In comparison, fellow female character Monica, while chic and sophisticated, is rarely sexualized to the same extent, while Phoebe is at times downright dowdy. As will be seen, Aniston’s corporeal exposure on the small screen transposes itself onto other popular cultural texts becoming one of the signature elements of the actress’ nascent persona.

As stated above, Rachel is a fully desiring female character, yearning for heterosexual pleasure and erotic satisfaction. Her early relationship with the hunky Italian Paolo, who all three female characters initially lust for, is constructed entirely on the premise of the sexual awakening and satisfaction that this European (and thus implicitly sexually sophisticated and uninhibited) man provides to the newly single Rachel. That the couple’s relationship is based entirely on sex is underscored by their inability to understand each other’s mother tongue; carnal interaction thus becomes their sole source of communication. Later in the series, when Rachel, now united with Ross, fears that he has prematurely ejaculated on their first night together as a couple, her reaction on learning that this is not the case is a lustful, “Thank God!” Rachel’s sexual playfulness distinguishes her from the two other female leads as when she decides to “go commando” (ie: not wear underwear, see figure 2) to one of Ross’s professional academic functions or when she adorns her high-school cheerleader’s outfit to seduce...
would-be boyfriend Joshua (see figure 3). Indeed, in its girly mischievousness, Rachel’s sexuality is distinguished from Phoebe’s, who’s rough upbringing associates the character with alternatively, a dangerous/diseased sexuality and a ludicrously outrageous one. Meanwhile, while Monica, like Rachel, is not averse to dressing in skimpy negligé, this often occurs within contexts of competition that serve to underscore that character’s hypercompetitive and perfectionist nature. Rachel’s is a cleanly sweet eroticism which teasingly hints at the pornographic (even pedophilic in the early seasons of *Friends*, see figure 4) – it is a sexuality that Aniston incarnates as well at this early stage in her career.

Figures 1 and 2. Rachel’s iconic body-hugging green dress in which she “goes commando,” rendering Ross helpless.
Part of Rachel’s multidimensional appeal then lies in her ability to unite fans attracted to both the character’s playful sexuality and eroticism combined with her desire for autonomy and independence. Aniston, straddling a fine performative line, managed to keep Rachel both appealing and spoilt, funny and sexy, confident and vulnerable. The actress imbued her with an overall light-hearted joyfulness and sincerity that also allowed the character an occasional tart-tongued or off-color comment as well as a consistent undercurrent of sexual desire and flirtatious eroticism without appearing threatening or disagreeable. In his description of Aniston’s work as Rachel, The Guardian film critic Ryan Gilbey writes,

> There was also a frailty to her or, at least, to her character. As the ever-hopeful Rachel, she wasn’t insulated by self-regard, like Monica, or swaddled in gormlessness, like Phoebe. Aniston was the sparkiest member of the ensemble and the one least reliant on goofball caricature. Playing the only character with whom a sane viewer might reasonably identify also meant that she got the lion’s share of attention\(^9\).
This appeal and attention, a result her image as friendly and accessible, fashionable and independent, erotic and desiring, paved the way for Jennifer Aniston’s transition from small screen sitcom actress to object of curiosity and desire as well as to big screen roles several years before her much-mediatised relationship to Brad Pitt began and became public. This suggests that, while her star persona was certainly profoundly influenced, and forever changed, by her proximity to big screen star Pitt (as well as, adjacent to, to glamorous big screen actresses Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie), Aniston was already crafting an image which would continue to be the basis for her celebrity status on her own terms. Evidence for this lies in the various popular culture texts with which she engaged during this early period of her career and is the focus of the rest of this analysis.

2. Picture Perfect, Rolling Stone and Aniston’s Transition to Erotic Icon

1997’s Picture Perfect was Aniston’s fourth role in a romantic comedy released on the big screen within a two-year period, it was her first role as the lead female. Aniston plays Kate Mosely, an ambitious, yet casually dressed, advertising employee who is told that she needs to better “dress for the job.” Reviews for Picture Perfect emphasize Aniston’s association with Friends and the sitcom genre more widely. Many of these reviews also paid considerable attention to the actress’s physical qualities and attractiveness on display in the movie cementing the actress’s image as one rooted largely in her corporeal attributes. Janet Maslin in The New York Times, wrote for example that Aniston was “professionally adorable,” adding that the actress, “looking wonderful with her television pertness very much intact, should charm her “Friends” fans with this performance in much the same vein. Tricks of the sitcom trade [...] suite this light, undemanding comedy just fine.” Significantly, Maslin went on to point out that the film “also finds frequent excuses to pour Ms. Aniston into teensy costumes and gaze down the front of her dress.” The emphasis on Aniston’s sex appeal was even more clear for critic Roger Ebert. In a review for the Chicago Sun Times, he went further than Maslin, describing Aniston’s “neckline” as “a huge distraction” and adding, “she appears in a series of plunging frocks that seem designed to advertise the powers of the Wonderbra. Aniston is pretty, and she has a swell body, but these dresses get to be a joke after a while.” “It was W.C. Fields,” Ebert went on “who hated to appear in the same scene with a child, a dog, or a plunging neckline – because nobody in the audience would be looking at him. Jennifer Aniston has the same problem in this movie even when she’s in scenes all by herself.”

These reviews reveal an early fixation on Aniston’s physical characteristics: her breasts and more generally her “swell” body now visible up on the big screen. As such, these discourses begin to erect one of the foundational pillars in the critical interpretation of the actress’ image. Indeed, Picture Perfect does put Aniston’s body on display in a manner which confounds any understanding of the actress as purely and simply comedic, confirming the already complexified small screen persona established by Aniston in Friends. Miniskirts, low cut tops, and body-hugging dresses consistently expose Aniston’s toned, trim and tanned body which becomes larger than life on the big screen, thereby distancing the character and the actress from her small-screen
The fascination with Aniston’s body in *Picture Perfect*, both within the movie itself and in its critical reviews, points to Aniston’s incipient “to-be-looked-at-ness” and suggests, in turn, a nascent evolution from small screen sitcom actress to veritable big screen icon. As these reviews suggest, in *Picture Perfect* Aniston’s body does (pre)occupy the screen (and its critics) in ways that it hadn’t in her earlier big screen performances. No longer one of six young adults tripping through a half hour of comedy on Thursday night on television screens in living rooms across the country, no longer a secondary character relegated to side intrigues or part of larger ensembles in mid-budget movies, in *Picture Perfect* Jennifer Aniston fills the big screen on her own, becoming for the first time a fully eroticized object of desire and interest, larger than life, “simultaneously looked at and displayed.”

As was the case in *Friends*, *Picture Perfect* also attempts to configure Aniston’s character as somehow loosely associated with feminism. Kate is young and ambitious, a rising, talented creative force in the cutthroat world of New York advertising. Sexually active yet frustrated with dating, Kate is introduced as a young female character renouncing her search for Mr. Right in order to focus on her career which she loves. Kate’s professional advancement, however, is threatened when she is told that because she remains unattached (single, without a mortgage and a car loan to repay) she is viewed as a liability, too immature and unstable for Mercer Advertising to promote to an executive position. The narrative, thus places Kate in a bind, forcing her to choose between a career she loves and a personal life she does not want or cannot have. The double standard is acknowledged but not contested in any meaningful way. Kate is ready to quit, but in a misguided effort to help, her friend and colleague Darcy takes it upon herself to invent a fiancé for Kate thereby lending her friend what she hopes is some professional gravitas. Nick, a photographer she recently met at a wedding is positioned as the unwitting fiancé and Kate is immediately promoted as an advertising executive. This metaphorical transition to adulthood is signified by the change in wardrobe highlighted in the film’s reviews cited above (see figures). Kate’s transition is also signified by her newfound status as the object of Sam’s erotic desire – once Sam learns Kate is ‘engaged’ she suddenly becomes irresistible to the colleague who had formerly told her she was too much of a “good girl” for him to find sexually desirable.

The same may be said for Aniston as an actress. Freed from the constraints of her own “good girl” status on broadcast network television (with its limits on nudity, profanity, and explicit sexuality) as well as from underwhelming secondary roles, Aniston’s role in *Picture Perfect* gives her the opportunity to fully expand herself into leading-lady status. In *Picture Perfect*, she begins the process of “growing up” and into her role as female celebrity icon, positioning herself and being positioned as a worthy object of gaze and a worthy object of desire not just for the movie audience but also in the wider popular culture (see figures 5 and 6).
Figures 5 and 6. Aniston is positioned as object of erotic desire in *Picture Perfect*.

Tellingly, one of *Picture Perfect*'s most significant scenes foreshadowing the romantic interest that Nick will later show for her features the photographer filming Kate. The film's camera work reproduces that of a video camera (complete with white frame and red recording signal) thus positioning the spectator in the place of young and handsome Nick, literally aligning the male character's gaze with that of the spectator. The shot frames Aniston/Kate and fixes her face in a tight close up squarely in the center of the screen. The camera lingers on the actress'/character's face beyond the female character's comfort, imposing itself on her and imposing her face on the spectator while she repeats “cut it” with increasing firmness. The scene from *Picture Perfect* thus instantiates Laura Mulvey's affirmation that “cinematic codes create a gaze, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.” Indeed, in *Picture Perfect* Aniston/Kate becomes the object of multiple gazes: the two male characters who both desire the attractive young female in tight dresses who sunbathes on her roof in her bra and high heels to Donna Summer's “Bad Girls”, the multiple cameras that focus on her both within and outside of the diegetic sphere, those spectators identifying with the two desiring male characters as well as those identifying with the Aniston/Kate persona herself in her quest to “have it all.”
Significantly echoing her performance of Rachel Green, Aniston plays Kate Mosely as a fully sexual and desiring female character for if she becomes the film’s (and audience’s, and critics’) object of desire as the movie proceeds, she begins the film as its desiring subject. The film opens to a black screen and a sound over of two people being intimate, as the scene is revealed, Kate is on the verge of having sex with her date on her couch but kicks him out for refusing to wear a condom. Later, the film shows Kate gazing longingly at Sam, the camera moving from her to him in a series of shots which configures the Kevin Bacon character as an object of female desire. The two have sex several times throughout the movie’s diegesis before Kate realizes she is truly in love with Nick. McDonald has described “a de-emphasis of sex” as one of the most striking characteristics what the author terms the neo-traditional romantic comedy (prevalent on big screens roughly since the late 1980s). Compared to the radical romantic comedies of the 1970s which prominently figure sex and frank discussions of the subject, neo-traditional romcoms, according to the author, propose a considerable downplaying of the topic. Observes McDonald, “This sense of sexuality being vital to the individual’s maturity and growth has definitely vanished from the newer form of the romantic comedy: instead of sexual experience being a route to self-discovery, now sexual abstinence is posited as more responsible, until the ‘right one’ comes along.” Indeed, in a number of contemporary popular romantic comedies such as Sleepless in Seattle, You’ve Got Mail, My Best Friend’s Wedding, and Runaway Bride, leading ladies such as Meg Ryan and Julia Roberts barely even kiss their prospective love interests. In contrast, in Picture Perfect Aniston offers a romantic comedy heroine whose sexual desires, while misplaced, are nonetheless acknowledged and embodied onscreen.

If 1997 marks the year that Jennifer Aniston’s body became fully objectifiable on the big screen, in 1996 she had already famously posed nude for the cover of Rolling Stone magazine (figure 7). On the cover Aniston lies naked on her stomach upon a mattress propped up on her forearms; her body fills the page; her bare buttocks and legs stretch out behind her as the camera focusses on her face and arms. On her buttocks is a triangle of whiter skin left by a thong bikini bottom showing off her tanned skin and inviting readers to imagine her splayed on a beach nearly nude. Her hair frames her face in such a manner as to cover most of the right side like a curtain. The actress fixes the camera, staring directly into it, holding the viewer’s gaze. The cover title, “Jennifer Aniston: The Girl Friend,” plays most obviously on her role in the hit sitcom but also distinguishes her from her two female co-stars (in fact, the use of the definite article veritably erases the Cox and Kudrow) while also laying the groundwork for popular discourses of Aniston as “the girl next door” and “America’s sweetheart.”

Yet the Rolling Stone cover is also an opportunity for Aniston to speak back to, to dialogue with the public and her growing fanbase. If Aniston’s nudity clearly evokes pornographic codes of female objectification and vulnerability, her body’s upright, nearly confrontational position refuses to recline passively. Resting on her forearms, she is ready to retreat or lunge forward as necessary. Her’s is not a body to be simply taken and consumed for erotic gratification. Instead, the actress’s own piercing gaze meets the gazer’s head on, frankly and openly. In returning the gaze so forthrightly, Aniston comes to her icon status on her own terms and the magazine cover becomes an invitation to engage in a reappraisal of the status of the female celebrity icon. In her insightful history of the pin-up, Maria Elena Buszek, explores the contradictory messages at the heart of this type of imagery as well as their significance for women.
and various feminisms. Buszek notes that this type of image has a “history of depicting and marking as desirable a contradictory and willful sexual identity.” Here, Aniston’s own contradictory yet willful sexual identity (that of desiring subject and erotic object) is not only on full display and ready for mass production, circulation and scrutiny but it conflates the actress with the sexual identity of her small screen character, collapsing the space between Jennifer Aniston and Rachel Green and further bolstering her fledgling star persona as a sex positive role model for young women.

Furthermore, this image of Aniston naked on an unmade bed resonates with Ellis’ assertion that “the star is at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and unattainable” and this in spite of her status as sitcom actress. For Aniston’s naked body is at once universally ordinary – a reminder that under all the tastefully curated outfits and high-end sartorial choices her body is ultimately just as unclothed and vulnerable as ours – and extraordinary – the majority of our bodies, with their infinite variations of sex, gender, age, ethnicity, disability and economic status, can never resemble Aniston’s smooth, taught, and tanned figure. Likewise, she is “available for desire,” present and accessibly naked on an unmade bed seemingly nearby, but also more widely available on screens both big and small. However, she is also eminently unattainable, persistently out of reach, mediated through screens and photographs, perpetually reduced to two-dimensions for the vast majority. The Rolling Stone cover photograph, while drawing on codes of intimacy, paradoxically distances Aniston from the rest of us, elevating her to the realm of extraordinary through ordinary. If Aniston is certainly a “television personality” made repeatedly available to spectators week after week (“famous for being famous” in Ellis’ words), in the Rolling Stone cover photograph, she very much incarnates a “particular sense of present-absence,” characteristic, for Ellis, of cinematic stardom.

Overall, Picture Perfect and the Rolling Stone cover thus participate in a (re)positioning of Aniston as a veritable American sex-symbol, latter day pin-up girl, and object of erotic desire, extending her image beyond the attractive, familiar, and funny Rachel Green towards a more fully fledged star persona. Complexifying the image further is her role in 1998’s The Object of My Affection opposite Paul Rudd.
3. *The Object of My Affection*: A Further Complexification of the Aniston Image

Directed by Nicholas Hytner, *The Object of My Affection*, was marketed as a mainstream romantic comedy about a young woman who falls in love with her gay best friend and asks him to help raise the child she has conceived with another man. Released six months after Julia Roberts lost the man of her dreams and ended up dancing and consoled by her closest gay friend in *My Best Friends’ Wedding*, *The Object of My Affection* resists in significant ways McDonald’s neo-traditional romcom model “emphasizing the couple will be heterosexual” and “will form a lasting relationship.” The movie received mixed reviews from critics, and Joshua Klein, writing for the *AV Club* suggests that the film was poorly marketed or mis-genred: “it’s neither romantic nor funny.” Instead, he writes the film “is a sad tale of Aniston’s unrequited love for gay friend Paul Rudd,” adding “Rudd and Aniston are sad and believable as star-crossed lovers who know they can never be together for reasons beyond their control.” Composed of broad comedic strokes (Alan Alda and Alison Janney are caricatures of the New York upper crust), heavily inflected by prestige British and American theatre, and asking fundamental questions concerning the normative American family, *Object* refuses clear generic categorization; this is a romantic comedy in which the two leads would both enjoy a happy end, just not as a couple. The mix of drama and comedy appears to have left some critics cold. Roger Ebert objected that the film was “the worst kind of sitcom – a serious one (seriocom?)”

In contrast, other critics were won over, particularly by Aniston’s performance. In earlier films (*Picture Perfect*), writes James Berardinelli, the actress “showed hints of the
charisma that has earned her a legion of loyal fans, but not until The Object of My Affection has she truly sparkled. As Nina, Aniston not only displays a surprising capacity for both comedy and drama, but she shines with the kind of star quality that only a handful of current performers exhibit. The San Francisco Chronicle’s Ruthe Stein notes that Aniston “is a revelation, as perky as ever but with vulnerability and depth.” In Rolling Stone magazine, Peter Travers noted that Aniston was “beguiling” and that she “keeps showing promise of growing beyond her TV roots.”

Nina Borowski as played by Aniston is in many ways in opposition to her interpretation of fellow New Yorker Kate Mosely in Picture Perfect, released less than a year before. Where Kate ambitiously climbs the corporate ladder of advertising, has casual sex with colleagues and is willing to pay a man to pose as her fiancé in an attempt to advance her career, Nina is a caring social worker accompanying underprivileged minority youth. She lives in a plain apartment which she generously shares with George when he is booted out of his own partners’ home. She falls in love with the out-of-bounds George and is pained when she finally understands that he will never return her love (see figure 8). More striking still, is the change in Aniston’s costumes. The insistence on displaying the actress’ body, so prevalent in Picture Perfect, is quite nearly repudiated in Object as Nina is dressed in loose sweaters, denim overalls and sensible dresses. Her hair, blown dry for Picture Perfect and thus resembling Rachel Green’s, is longer in Object, allowed to relax into Aniston’s natural wave (see figure 9) and only swept up elegantly when Nina must attend a swanky social function.

Figures 8 and 9. Aniston’s role in Object showcases the actress’ emotional depth while downplaying her glamour.
More to the point, Nina herself is the object of no man’s gaze. On the contrary, in *The Object of My Affection*, the objectified is George, the target of Nina’s own erotic and unrequited desire. Turning the passive = female/active = male dichotomy on its head, in *Object* it is Nina’s agency and George’s submissive status which drives the narrative. When George finds himself homeless after having been kicked out by his previous lover, it is Nina who comes to the rescue offering him a room in her apartment. It is Nina who enrolls the two in ballroom dancing lessons and hosts Thanksgiving dinner for their friends. When Nina unintentionally becomes pregnant, she decides to keep the baby, rejects the biological father as an unworthy companion and invites George to fill the paternal role instead, an invitation he accepts, fulfilling his long-standing desire to become a father. Throughout the film, Nina pursues George until the film’s denouement when Nina finally understands that George will never love her romantically. Once again, Aniston plays a woman inhabited by sexual desire, willing to push the boundaries of friendship as well as sexual orientation in order to satisfy her wishes (see figures 10 and 11). George on the other hand, becomes the passive object of her dual quest: sexual satisfaction and a proper paternal figure for her unborn child. Indeed, the title of the film could not more clearly delineate the film’s position; a year after playing the object of Nick’s photographer focus in *Picture Perfect*, Aniston is placed in the role of sexual aggressor.

Figures 10 and 11. In *The Object of My Affection*, Aniston is the sexual aggressor to Paul Rudd’s passive gay best friend role.
The Object of My Affection offers Aniston the possibility of playing a fully agential character, albeit one whose own actions bring with them the possibility of unavoidable suffering and pathos. This is paralleled in some of Aniston’s most strikingly emotional work on Friends which uncoincidentally occurs during this same period. In February 1997 “The One with the Morning After” aired on NBC and dealt with the fallout of Ross’ infidelity to Rachel. In this episode characterized by deep pain and anguish on the part of all the characters, Aniston, as Rachel, agonizes over Ross’s infidelity. The grueling episode, characterized by long silences, dark lighting, and tearful discussions, breaks almost completely with the codes of the sitcom genre. Rachel struggles throughout as Aniston pushes deeper through cycles of anger and sadness to reach a conclusion which leaves all six characters in tears. The episode, broadcast roughly during the same period as Object’s filming, demonstrates character development rarely seen in the sitcom genre and it is this capacity, to convey bleak emotion so effectively within a comedic framework, which Aniston once again demonstrates in The Object of My Affection. TV Guide.com cites “The One with the Morning After” as one of “25 Episodes that Made Us Ugly Cry” writing, “the hurt that Rachel went through [...] was almost unbearable to watch.” This sentiment is echoed by some of the thousands of comments left on episode extracts posted to YouTube – “Jennifer Aniston is an amazing actor, this scene looks so real”; “This is the finest acting Jennifer Aniston has ever done;” “She did an amazing and very authentic job;” and “Can we take a moment to appreciate how good Aniston’s acting is in here?” are representative of the audience appreciation of Aniston as an actor capable of portraying emotional depth and gravitas (see figures below).
Figures 12-15. Aniston's performance in, “The One with the Morning After,” also expands the range of the sitcom actress.
The versatility required of/offered to Aniston in her role as Rachel Green primes audiences to accept more and different performances from the actress on the big screen. This much is suggested by Joshua Klein in his review of *The Object of My Affection*. Aniston, he writes,

is probably that show’s most versatile actor, and in turn the most likely to escape typecasting. Her *Friends* character doesn’t have a gimmick that limits our perception, a quandary many of her co-stars face. She’s the only Friend who’s not a sitcom cartoon, and her occasional film work benefits from her apparent lack of definable grounding.

In their capacity to emotionally resonate with fans, Aniston’s non-comedic performances from this period of her acting career enrich and enhance her star image, thereby widening the scope of plausible characters and potential projects, setting the stage for career longevity.

**Conclusion**

By 1998, just four years after her debut on *Friends*, Aniston, more than any her co-stars had already amassed a growing body of relatively diverse work as well as a position in popular culture that would lay the groundwork for the following decades. Early on, she was able to produce a relatively wide range of comedic and dramatic performances thanks no doubt in part to the versatility with which the actress played Rachel Green. This in turn opened up multiple performance pathways which would have her playing more or less to type (*Bruce Almighty, Along Came Polly, The Break-Up, The Switch*), and more or less against type (*Office Space, The Good Girl, Friends With Money, Derailed, Cake*). Likewise, through the early years of *Friends*’ popularity, Aniston was able to capitalize on her television visibility to achieve an ordinary-extraordinary status that seemed to progressively elude her co-stars. Positioned as both an object of erotic desire and fetishistic fascination and as an engaged and desiring authentic subject (capable of speaking back to overly intrusive media speculation on her maternal status, for example), Aniston has consistently maintained her popular appeal throughout the years. With her return to a televised serial format (*The Morning Show*) in a televisual and media landscape fundamentally altered from the one in which she first gained fame, Aniston’s career seems to have come full circle. For the moment, it appears that this
return to “television” and its accompanying mediatization will only continue to engage critics and fans alike, offering further opportunities to perform and produce. Crucially, and while it remains to be attended to by future scholarship, it may be that Aniston’s current trajectory and continued iconic status as “national treasure” put her on a path to transcend “the punishing ways in which gender intersects with critical discourses of ageing”. Both frozen in time and forever in circulation as Rachel Green, Aniston is free to continue her relationship with the sitcom character that made her famous, maintaining her association with Rachel’s youthful sexual playfulness and sophisticated womanliness, while simultaneously moving on, distancing herself further from Rachel as the passage of time and the acceptance of new roles (in various media, gossip magazines and business ventures) do their work to both consolidate and expand upon her image.

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   Season 3, Episode 16, “The One with the Morning After,” 1997
   Season 8, Episode 10, “The One with Monica’s Boots,” 2001
   Season 8, Episode 14, “The One With the Secret Closet,” 2002
   Season 10, Episode 18, “The Last One, Part 2,” 2004

NOTES

1. Friends: The Reunion was first broadcast on May 27, 2021, to inaugurate the arrival of Friends on the HBO Max streaming service. The reunion show marked the first time all six actors had appeared together on television since the final taping of the sitcom in 2004. The unscripted program hosted by James Corden was nominated for four Emmy awards for best variety program.
2. Christelle Laffin, « Jennifer Aniston: ’Personne ne m’imposera une date d’expiration’ », Madame Figaro, n°32, Octobre 2021, p. 90-94. Aniston is also credited as executive producer of this streaming series.
3. Famously, Friends’ original pitch line.
4. Friends’ co-creators David Crane and Marta Kauffman have explained the origin of this insistence on the collective nature of the iconic sitcom as being rooted in their prior experience writing and producing HBO’s original sitcom Dream On. Focused on the interior life of a single character, Dream On was described by Kaufman and Crane as being a challenge to write for and act in and the pair resolved that “our next show has to be an ensemble.” See interview with
Marta Kauffman and David Crane: https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/marta-kauffman.

5. Business Insider notes that the six cast members began negotiating their contracts collectively as early as the third season resulting in significant salary increases for all members and eventually leading the record-breaking figure of $1 million per actor per episode during the sitcom's final two seasons. See, Nededog, “How the ‘Friends’ cast nabbed their insane salaries of $1 million per episode.” https://www.businessinsider.com/how-friends-cast-got-1-million-per-episode-salary-2016-10?IR=T.

6. As Jimmy Kimmel did when introducing Aniston on his talk show.

7. CelebrityNetWorth.com estimates Aniston's 2021 net worth at $300 million dollars. In comparison the net worth of fellow Friends costars has been estimated at the following: Courteney Cox, about $150 million; Matthew Perry, about $120 million; David Schwimmer, about $100 million; Lisa Kudrow, about $90 million; Matt Le Blanc, about $80 million.


9. It is worth noting here that there seems to be no straightforward or easily discernable correlation between later success in the film industry and the specific role played on television sitcom nor the initial or enduring popularity of the sitcom. While it may seem intuitive to assume that a starring role on a popular sitcom would offer the ideal opportunity to pursue a successful career on the big screen, the example of Sandra Bullock’s small-screen role in Working Girl, canceled after just a few episodes, suggests that this is not necessarily the case.

10. Schwimmer states: “For whatever reason, I was “the breakout.” I was the guy who had the movie offers – everyone since then has had their time, their moment, but I was the first when the show started.” In Warren Littlefield, Top of the Rock: Inside the Rise and Fall of Must See TV, New York/London, Doubleday, 2012, p. 181.

11. Ross’ own inverted narrative of being left by his wife for another woman, and eventually being given the choice to father his son but only from the outside of a parental arrangement privileging lesbian motherhood, offers a parallel story arc to Rachel’s and represents a doubling down of this sitcom’s desire to closely examine and problematize the model of the traditional nuclear family.

12. Lyrics from “I’ll Be There for You” by the Rembrandts which became a hit as the sitcom’s theme song.


15. “The Rachel” as the character’s signature hair cut came to be known debuted in the sixth episode of the first season, “The One with the Butt.” The layered cut become extraordinarily popular among women and was such a widespread phenomenon that Friends self-reflexively commented on it within the diegetic space of the show in the eleventh episode of the second season, “The One with the Lesbian Wedding.” Rachel gets upset that her mother seemingly wants to copy her life, divorcing Rachel’s father to become single like her daughter. When Monica suggests that Rachel interpret this as a flattering move, Rachel comments, “Couldn’t she have just copied my hair cut?” While Aniston has reportedly claimed that she never liked the look, the haircut is classified in women’s magazines as amongst the most popular and influential; see for example Good Housekeeping’s “14 Most Popular Celebrity Hairstyles of All Time,” https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/beauty/hair/tips/g185/most-popular-hairstyles/?slide=11; The Cut’s “50 Most Iconic Hairstyles of All Time,” https://www.thecut.com/2013/09/50-most-iconic-

18. Ibid.
22. These episodes are, respectively: Season 10, Episode 18, “The Last One, Part 2,” originally broadcast on May, 6, 2004; Season 8, Episode 10, “The One with Monica’s Boots,” originally broadcast on December 6, 2001; and Season 9, Episode 11, “The One Where Rachel Goes Back to Work,” originally broadcast on January 9, 2003.
27. McDonald, p. 12.
28. Leppert, 753.
29. Leppert also notes the difference in treatment of pregnant bodies of Phoebe and Rachel. She writes that in Season 4, “Friends responded to Kudrow’s pregnancy by having Phoebe carry her brother’s triplets, suggesting that Kudrow’s pregnant body was abnormally large for a single fetus (748),” while in Season Eight, Rachel’s pregnant belly is not only fully exposed and eroticized but becomes the object of Ross’ disapproval, a reaction which Rachel resoundingly rejects.
31. These films include She’s The One (Edward Burns, 1996); Dream for an Insomniac (Tiffanie DeBartolo,1996) and ‘Til There Was You (Scott Winant, 1997).
34. Mulvey, p. 837.
35. Mulvey, p. 843.
36. McDonald, p. 98, emphasis in the original.
39. Ellis, p. 304.
40. McDonald, p. 86. In fact McDonald includes a discussion of My Best Friends’ Wedding, with its lack of adherence to the traditional romcom structure, as the possible rightful inheritor of the radical romantic comedies of the 1970s.
43. See James Berardinelli, https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/object-of-my-affection-the.
46. See Amanda Bell https://www.tvguide.com/galleries/all-the-times-friends-made-us-cry/12/.
47. For example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHmMTZR30E4.
49. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wizgxRFvV7Y&t=4s.
51. Berridge, p. 113.

ABSTRACTS

In the more than twenty-five years since the spectacular success of the iconic television sitcom/cultural phenomenon Friends (NBC, 1994-2004), the ensemble program’s six actors have parlayed that visibility into careers of varying success on network and cable television, streaming platforms, and the film industry. One of them, Jennifer Aniston, has managed to maintain a consistently visible star image which continues to resonate with fans and critics alike. In her nearly thirty-year career Aniston has successfully transitioned from her role on the small screen to starring roles in feature films, and most recently gaining critical and popular attention (as well as a Screen Actor’s Guild award) for her role in The Morning Show on the Apple + streaming service. While scholars have already considered work from her late and post-Friends career, this article examines her breakout role as the appealing and attractive Rachel Green as an effective vehicle for the transition into her early film roles (1997-1998). Through an analysis of various texts and paratexts, the article traces the roots of the actress’ early star image and argues that
understanding Aniston as capable of playing both erotically charged objects of desire as well as fully agential desiring subjects is key to explaining her early star image.

Suite au succès fulgurant de *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), sitcom iconique devenue phénomène culturel, les six interprètes principaux ont tenté, avec plus ou moins de succès, d’exploiter leur visibilité pour poursuivre leur carrière à la télévision et au cinéma. L’une d’entre eux, Jennifer Aniston, a réussi à conserver une popularité constante basée une image qui continue de rencontrer un écho auprès des fans et des critiques. Pendant ses trente ans de carrière, Aniston a réussi sa transition d’actrice comique du petit écran à des rôles dans des films hollywoodiens, et a récemment attiré l’attention de la critique et du public pour son rôle dans *The Morning Show*, qui lui a valu un prix de la Screen Actors Guild. Si certains travaux se sont déjà penchés sur sa carrière post-*Friends*, cet article examine le rôle du personnage de l’attirante et séduisante Rachel Green dans sa transition vers le grand écran autour de 1997-1998. À travers l’analyse de divers textes et paratextes, l’article dégage les contours de la *persona* naissante d’Aniston, en insistant notamment sur la capacité de l’actrice à incarner à la fois un objet de désir et un sujet désirant.

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