

and interesting women (Fay Weldon, for one). The only disagreement I have with Kinder is over her contention that 'The primary distinction between *Scenes from a Marriage* and soap opera is the way it affects us emotionally. . . . Instead of leading us to forget about our own lives and to get caught up vicariously in the intrigues of others, it throws us back on our own experience' (p. 53). But soap opera viewers constantly claim that their favourite shows lead them to reflect upon their own problems and relationships. Psychologists, recognizing the tendency of viewers to make comparisons between screen life and real life, have begun to use soap operas in therapy sessions (see Dan Wakefield, *All Her Children* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 140–3). We may not like what soap operas have to teach us about our lives, but that they *do* teach and encourage self-reflection appears indisputable.

24 Porter, 'Soap Time', 788.

25 Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976), esp. pp. 78–84.

26 Carol Lopate, 'Daytime Television: You'll Never Want to Leave Home', *Radical America* (Jan.-Feb. 1977), 51.

27 Barbara Easton, 'Feminism and the Contemporary Family', *Socialist Review* (May–June 1978), 30.

28 Ibid. 34.

29 A point Hans Magnus Enzensberger makes about mass consumption in general. See *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Continuum Books, 1974), 110.

2

Sex and the City and Consumer Culture Remediating postfeminist drama

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Introduction

A new approach to the representation of women's sexuality in television drama has emerged in the form of Home Box Office's (HBO) hit comedy series *Sex and the City* (1998–). The aim of this article is to show how the success of *Sex and the City* is symptomatic of the forces shaping programmes in the digital, multichannel era of television that allow for innovation in its sexualised mode of address. I also want to suggest how this development might be understood in the light of debates about the politics of postfeminist culture. I will explore how the creation of a successful brand in this crowded market depends on the ability to innovate within a pattern of predictable pleasures to create a recognisable identity for a product that appeals to a commercially attractive audience (John Ellis 2000: 165–9). The novelty of *Sex and the City*, I argue, lies in the migration of a woman-centred and explicit sexual discourse into television drama. Its distinctive appeal arises from its ability to "re-mediate" the familiar forms of the television sitcom and the glossy women's magazine. Re-mediation is used by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin as a term to describe the forms in which new media arise, as each medium "responds to, re-deploys, competes with and reforms other media" (1999: 35).

Sex and the City can be compared to previous examples of postfeminist, woman-centred drama produced for prime-time network television in the US. These are dramas that in the wake of second-wave feminism selectively deploy feminist discourses as a response to cultural changes in the lives of their potential audience, an audience that is addressed as white, heterosexual, and relatively youthful and affluent. They emerged out of a hybridisation of genres driven by a desire to maximise audiences by creating drama that appealed to both men and women. The feminisation of crime genres such as cop shows (*Cagney and Lacey*) and legal dramas (*LA Law*, *Ally McBeal*) allowed for an exploitation of the generic pleasures associated with the masculine, public world of work and the feminised, private world of personal relationships (Julie D'Acci 1987; Bonnie J. Dow 1996; Amanda D. Lotz 2001; Judith Mayne [1988]

1997; Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read 2002). Their responsiveness to changes in the socio-political context had also allowed for an engagement with liberal feminist issues arising from women's relation to the law and to work. A focus on women as protagonists, whose actions drive the narrative, replaced the marginal and narrow range of roles available previously to women characters in these genres. Although it shares their incorporation of feminist themes and their focus on the liberal, heterosexual, white, metropolitan, career woman, *Sex and the City* is very different from these networked dramas. These differences arise, I would argue, from the institutional conditions of its production and distribution. It was made not as prime-time network TV but as subscription cable television. This has a number of consequences for the form that it takes.

One of the consequences of the multiplication of channels has been a diversification in television's address to audiences. Specialist channels catering to particular social groups or taste cultures have proliferated. It moves the television industry much closer to the magazine industry, which addresses niche markets and where there is very little overlap between men's and women's titles. This has a number of consequences. One is that it draws the audience into a different economic relation to the product, where the tastes of the audience-as-market, as direct purchasers of the channel, are not as obscured by the normalising processes of the mass market. This segmentation allows for a pluralism that recognises previously marginalised cultures, albeit limited by their ability to pay. It also encourages polarisation, especially between male and female audiences (Benjamin Compaine and Douglas Gomery 2000: 524). *Sex and the City* is addressed to affluent, white women as a segment of the market, in which it re-mediate the address developed in the established women's media, namely glossy women's magazines. This reverses the trend towards the hybridisation of masculine and feminine genres that has characterised prime-time drama on network television.

The argument introduced here is developed in the following sections where I look at how the programme remediates the content and address of women's magazines for television and the Internet; how its brand identity is established across the interlocking circuits of the media, celebrity, and fashion to construct an address to the "bourgeois bohemians"; the resultant instability in its aestheticised mode of address as it oscillates between complicity and critique of a consumer lifestyle; and, finally, the consequences this has for its construction of women's sexuality.

Having it all

In the hybrid, women-centred, work-based drama characteristic of postfeminist television in the 1980s and 1990s, one of the main issues has been the division between the world of work and the private world of the domestic sphere that prevents women "having it all." In *Sex and the City*, the world of work largely disappears from view as a distinct space and set of hierarchical relations, although the women's autonomy from men is underwritten by their economic independence. For three of the four women who make up the main characters in the series, work is collapsed into the private sphere and becomes another form of self-expression, alongside consumption, thereby side-stepping the postfeminist problematic. Carrie's sex life and those of her friends

act as research for her weekly newspaper column, which she writes from home. Samantha works in public relations, a job where her physical attractions and personal charm are intrinsic to her success. Charlotte manages an art gallery in a manner that suggests it is more of a hobby. This might be regarded either as a magical resolution of a continuing contradiction in women's lives or a realistic reflection of the opportunities for educated urban women in the contemporary labour market. Only Miranda feels the contradiction between her private life and her career success as a lawyer.¹ Even so, when Miranda accidentally becomes pregnant (in Season 4) and has the baby without getting married, she gets by with the help of her friends, including the child's father.

There is a generic expectation that postfeminist drama will be about single women wanting to get married. *Sex and the City* was initially marketed as such to feed into those expectations. The video blurb for the first season states "Sexy, hip, smart and sassy, *Sex and the City* charts the lives and loves of four women and their quest to find the one thing that eludes them all – a real, satisfying and lasting relationship. Is such a thing possible in New York?" (*Sex and the City* 1999–2001). But unlike other postfeminist narratives, in *Sex and the City* the responsibility for single women's unhappiness isn't laid at the door of feminist women choosing a career over a man. Of the four women only Charlotte is unequivocal in her desire to get married but is quickly disillusioned when she does. The traditional romance narrative is still there but as a residual sensibility, a slightly old-fashioned version of femininity that doesn't work in practice. Charlotte's belief in romance and saving yourself for your husband is undercut by his impotence on their wedding night and her discovery that he can be aroused only by a porn magazine in the bathroom, thereby completely puncturing the romantic myth (Episode 45 "Hot Child in the City").² When Carrie and friends visit a former New Yorker for her baby shower (Episode 10 "The Baby Shower") they aren't shown envying the woman her home in the country, her husband, and her coming baby – rather it accentuates the gulf which separates them from her – and they return to their single lives in New York with a huge sigh of relief.

The women's single state is rather a necessary precondition for their central preoccupation – sexual relationships and how to achieve sexual satisfaction – not previously considered a suitable topic for television drama. The series publicly repudiates the shame of being single and sexually active in defiance of the bourgeois codes that used to be demanded of respectable women. It self-reflexively interrogates media representations of the single woman although the emotional power of these residual stereotypes is acknowledged. For example, when Carrie appears looking haggard and smoking a cigarette on the front of a magazine under the strapline "Single and Fabulous?" it sparks a discussion amongst the four women about why the media want to persuade women to get married (Episode 16 "They Shoot Single People Don't They?"). Despite their intellectual critique, the rest of the episode explores the emotional vulnerabilities of their situation before concluding that it's better to be alone than faking happiness with a man. There is no shame attached to being alone. It ends with Carrie eating by herself in a restaurant, with no book to read as armour, to assert her belief that she really is "Single and Fabulous"! (with no question mark).

This exploration of women's sexuality is enabled by changes in the regulatory regime of television as a consequence of digital convergence. It has moved closer to

the freedoms enjoyed by the print media and the Internet as compared to the sensitivity to religious Puritanism historically shown by the television networks.³ In a context freed from the moral constraints of network television, *Sex and the City* is able to exploit fully the glossy women's magazines' consumerist approach to sexuality, in which women's sexual pleasure and agency are frankly encouraged as part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude. In this respect, *Sex and the City* has moved a long way from the kind of family-centred or wholesome peer-group sitcoms that have previously dominated the network schedules, in which embodied desire provided the repressed subtext rather the primary focus of the dialogue and action. Hybridisation of the discourse of women's magazines with the codes of the television sitcom has provided the "licensed space" for an exploration of sexual taboos and decorum (Jane Arthurs 1999; Steve Neale and Frank Krutnick 1990).

This hybridisation has also allowed for the consumer attitude to be lightly satirised, a response that is argued to be characteristic of an aestheticised relation to the self. It is this sensibility that allows for the adoption of ironic ways of consuming and a self-reflexive attitude to one's own identity, appearance, and self-presentation. Michael Featherstone (1991) characterises the aestheticised relation to the self as one in which consumers enjoy the swings between the extremes of aesthetic involvement and distancing, a sensibility he argues is characteristic of the new middle classes of postmodern culture. It is a form of controlled hedonism that oscillates between complicity with the values of consumer culture, and critique. This allows a certain section of the "baby-boomer" generation the simultaneous satisfaction of the sensual pleasures allowed by material success along with the placating of their guilty, liberal conscience. It emerged in the "Yuppie TV" of the work-obsessed 1980s, where both envy and guilt were deliberately evoked in response to the affluent lifestyles of its protagonists. In *LA Law* for example, the guilt was differentiated by gender. For men it was guilt at their material success whereas for women it was guilt at their lost opportunity for marriage and children (Jane Feuer 1995).

The almost exclusive focus on sexual relationships and consumption in *Sex and the City* speaks instead to the wider cultural influence in the 1990s of the "bourgeois bohemians." This class fraction has, David Brooks (2000) argues, replaced the Yuppies as the new dominant class in the US (and other Western economies). The key feature of this new class fraction is their ability to reconcile the contradictions between bourgeois and bohemian values and lifestyles. Sexual permissiveness, that in the bohemian movements of the 1960s was articulated with radical anti-capitalist political values, has been re-articulated to conform, not only with the materialist priorities of consumer culture, but also with the emancipatory politics of the 1970s and 1980s. One effect has been to free white, middle-class women from the sexual constraints required by bourgeois respectability.⁴

A scene from the first season of *Sex and the City* (Episode 6 "Secret Sex") encapsulates this brand identity, that is to say the emotions, attitudes, and lifestyle with which it is associated and the specificity of its address. In an episode that explores the shame that some sexual experiences can provoke, Carrie, the series' central character, gathers a group of her friends together for the launch of a new publicity campaign promoting her weekly column called "Sex and the City." They wait on the sidewalk for a bus to pass by carrying the poster for her brand on its side. They are in

a mood of excited anticipation, marred only by the regret that Mr Big, the new man in her life, has failed to show up to share this proud moment. The revealing dress she is wearing in the poster is the dress that she had worn on their first date, when, despite her best judgement, they had sex. As the bus approaches, the excitement turns to dismay, and Carrie hides her face in shame. There is the poster with Carrie's body stretched in languorous pose along the full length of the bus, under the strapline "Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex." But as we pan across her body, next to her seductively made-up lips a crudely drawn outline of a large penis is revealed.

This short scene exemplifies the series' dramatic terrain, namely the exploration of women's sexuality in a postmodern consumer culture. It is a culture produced by capital's restless search for new and expanded markets, and characterised by the commodification of the individual's relation to the body, self, and identity, just as we see here in the relation of Carrie to her billboard image. The scene also exemplifies the programme's tone and style which mixes the display of celebrity lifestyles for our emulation, as in women's magazines, with a comic puncturing of these aestheticised images. The idealised image of bourgeois perfection in the image of Carrie on her billboard is momentarily satirised by the obscene graffiti. It is an eruption of the repressed "other" to bourgeois femininity in a deliberate disruption of its codes of sexual decorum. This, plus Big's absence, are both reminders of women's vulnerability to loss of self-esteem when it relies too exclusively on body image and its sexual appeal to men. The presence of Carrie's friends is important though in providing the support and reassurance she needs to regain her composure. Their shared culture of femininity offers an alternative to heterosexual dependence.

Feminist evaluations of *Sex and the City* have conflated it with other examples of postfeminist culture in which comedy and satire have replaced any serious, ethical commitment to challenging the power relations of patriarchy, a challenge that they argue is undermined by complicit critique. The postfeminist irony in texts such as *Bridget Jones* or *Ally McBeal* allows for a constant emphasis on women's appearance and sexual desirability as a source of worth whilst simultaneously subjecting this attitude to ridicule (Germaine Geer 1999; Imelda Whelehan 2000). In this view, the ironic oscillations in our relation to the bourgeois women who people the fictional world of *Sex and the City* are complicit with the aestheticised values of consumer culture and its unequal structuring of the "look." It assumes women in the audience are invited to share this male gaze to the extent that it is internalised in women's narcissistic relation to their own bodies. This objectifies women's bodies and renders them powerless. In a counter-argument, feminine cultures of consumerism and fashion have been considered as a source of pleasure and power that is potentially resistant to male control. Indeed they can offer women an alternative route to self-esteem and autonomy that overcomes the damaging division that second-wave feminism constructs between feminism and femininity (see Joanne Hollows 2000; Celia Lury 1996; Angela McRobbie 1997 for an overview of these debates).

These contradictory evaluations need not be presented as alternatives. Part of the problem for academic feminism is to develop arguments that capture the complex contradictions of postfeminism in popular culture. In her discussion of the emphasis on the spectacle of women's bodies in women's magazines, Hilary Radner (1995) draws attention to the way this is counteracted by a textual commentary that variously

endorses or asks us to question the extent to which women's worth resides in her looks. In arguing the limitations to metacritical feminist discourse in capturing women's reading practices in everyday life, Radner highlights the potential of feminine culture to "displace the political onto the minute decisions of a contingent day to day practice in which absolute categories cannot be maintained from moment to moment" (1995: 178). Consumption is thereby redefined as an active process that has unpredictable ideological consequences. In Scott Lash's (1990) view, the ubiquity of images in postmodern consumer culture in itself produces contradictory juxtapositions that undermine any secure position from which to interpret the world. This, he argues, has the potential to produce self-reflexive, nomadic identities in which gender, for instance, is open to re-definition (Lash 1990: 185-98). *Sex and the City* self-consciously explores the instability of feminine identity in a postfeminist, postmodern consumer culture.

Its commodity form precludes a straightforward celebration of the feminist potential of consumer culture, however. This promotes, according to Susan Willis (1991), an alienated and fetishised relationship between people defined by the exchange of commodities. Moreover, the codification of class, race, and gender differences in the stylistic details of commodities normalises and perpetuates notions of inequality and subordination (Willis 1991: 162-3). The professional middle classes have, in her view, been duped by the signs of privilege into confusing the individualised freedom to consume with real political power. Argues Willis, "The production of resistant meanings by individuals will always be assimilated by capitalism for the production of fresh commodities" (1991: 175).

Sex and the City exemplifies these features of the commodity. Its stylistic features contribute to the cultural hegemony of the incorporated resistance of the bourgeois bohemians. Its culture of femininity provides an alternative to heterosexual dependence but its recurring promise of a shameless utopia of fulfilled desire always ends in disappointment for the cycle of consumption to begin again next week.

Remediation

New technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones, while earlier technologies are struggling to maintain their legitimacy by remediating newer ones.

(Bolter and Grusin 1999: 61)

Sex and the City is the product of an emerging form of globally dominant television. It is a quality comedy drama series with high production values produced for the subscription cable channel, Home Box Office (HBO). America Online/Time Warner, who merged in 2000, owns HBO. They also bought IPC (International Publishing Corporation), the magazine publisher, in 2001. This economic convergence has produced an international media conglomerate covering the Internet and print media, as well as television. HBO has to sell itself first to its subscribers in the US, on the basis of its appeal to a sufficiently affluent segment of the potential market, before syndicating to other distributors in a global market. Arguably, its relative freedom from government regulation and from the restraints imposed by advertisers in comparison to the

networks makes it more responsive to the tastes and values of new social groups (Lury 1993: 40-51).

The high production costs of "quality" drama have provoked fears of its demise when the amounts for production are more thinly spread across a multiplicity of channels. Instead, as the case of HBO demonstrates, it may well migrate to subscription-based services (Ellis 2000: 174). For HBO "quality" drama has been used successfully to enhance both its visibility and its reputation in a context where cable television has had to struggle to gain any cultural status at all. In 2001 *Sex and the City* won the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy series, the first time a cable television show has ever taken top honours for best series in any category (http://www.hbo.com/city/insiders_guide/news). News items and features relating to *Sex and the City* appear regularly in the print media and work to maintain its visibility and status as "must see TV." Its success has been achieved by generic innovation to address a niche market. Rather than offering a mixed schedule or hybridised genres for family viewing, as the networks do, HBO's brand name acts as an umbrella for multiple channels that separate out programmes designed for specific audiences. A whole channel is addressed to women: HBO Signature, "Smart, sophisticated entertainment for women." In a week during July 2001 it was offering a Friday night with "back to back" *Sex and the City*, plus movies themed as "Romance Feature" or "Leading Ladies Feature - a different leading lady every Friday night" (<http://hbo.com/schedule>).

Print media influence the form of *Sex and the City*. Adapted from a book written by Candace Bushnell ([1996] 1997), a New York journalist, it is structured around the fictionalised writing of a weekly newspaper column. It retains the first-person mode of direct address, using Carrie's voice-over to comment on the action in which a question is posed, journalistic research is undertaken and some conclusions proposed in a personalised, witty and aphoristic style. The questions range from the frivolous to the taboo. They can be serious but not too serious. They don't deal with rape or sexual harassment as in *LA Law* or *Ally McBeal*.

Can women have sex like a man? . . . Are men commitment phobes? . . . In New York has monogamy become too much to expect? . . . Is motherhood a cult? . . . Can sex toys enhance your sex life? . . . Does size matter?

Each of the ensemble cast provides a different perspective on the week's question. Their stories are told as alternatives for viewers to weigh up, just as articles in women's magazines offer a variety of personal anecdotes to their readers to exemplify a particular issue and how different people have responded in practice. These are loosely tied together by Carrie's final voice over in a provisional conclusion that is often tentative in tone. "Maybe . . ." The bulletin board on the *Sex and the City* website then invites viewers' comments on the episode, asking questions like "What do you think of the new men in Carrie's life? . . . Talk about it with other fans on the Bulletin Board . . . Do you identify with Carrie? . . . Talk about it with fellow fans" (<http://www.hbo.com/city/community>). Thus multiple perspectives are actively encouraged within a tightly structured, repetitive format in which the characters are bound into a relatively unchanging situation in order to guarantee continuation of the pleasures offered by the brand (Lury 1993: 86-7).

Sex and the City's treatment of sexuality can be understood as a re-mediation of the content and address of women's magazines for television. These women are updated versions of the "Cosmo" woman who is dedicated to self-improvement and economic independence (Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer, and Sandra Hebron 1991).⁵ The function of sexual imagery and talk in *Sex and the City* is quite different from pornographic magazines and cable channels where sexual arousal is assumed as the purpose for consumption. *Sex and the City* dramatises the kind of consumer and sexual advice offered by women's magazines. This is a sphere of feminine expertise in which it has been argued that women are empowered to look – not only at consumer goods but also at their own bodies as sexual subjects (Radner 1995). Sexuality is presented in this context as a source of potential pleasure for which women should make themselves ready, whether through internalising the beauty and fashion advice that will attract the right men, or through following advice on sexual technique. Carrie's billboard slogan draws attention to this pedagogic function; "Carrie Bradshaw *knows* good sex" (emphasis mine). It is an expertise rooted in everyday life and experience. When called upon to give a lecture to a roomful of women on how to get a date, Carrie fails miserably. But she succeeds brilliantly the following week when she takes the women to a bar, where she guides them in how to work the room by reading the sexual signals, giving them the confidence and expertise to act on their desires (Episode 46 "Frenemies").

The series is able to go beyond the catalogue function of magazine fashion spreads, or the list of ten tips on how to improve foreplay. A consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated. The clothes and shoes become expressions of the different moods and personalities of embodied, empathetic characters in an authentic setting. This function is in fact most explicit on the programme's website, which differs in tone and emphasis from the television series and more closely matches the look and address of a woman's magazine. It relies on the relationship fans already have with the programme, guiding viewers in how to convert their knowledge about the series into knowledge they can use in their own lives, as discerning consumers of fashion, as creators of "a look" and a lifestyle. This is represented as a set of active choices that are an expression of individual character and mood. We are invited to conceive of emotional states as a trigger for particular types of consumption and clothing choices, such as the photograph of Carrie that is captioned. "The dress that shows she is finally going to split from Mr. Big" (http://www.hbo.com/city_style). The site anticipates, encourages, and attempts to shape fan behaviour that will convert into consumerism (Miriam Rivett 2000).

Bourgeois bohemians

As a successful brand *Sex and the City* influences the continuing transformations in fashion that characterise consumer culture. News stories about fashion regard it as an important influence. Sarah Jessica Parker (who plays Carrie) is a fashion icon in women's magazines and in newspaper columns; celebrity exposure is being touted as a replacement for the era of catwalk shows and supermodels.⁶ The British fashion journalist who tracked down and bought Parker's horse head handbag and then wrote

about it in a British national newspaper provided publicity for the TV show, the makers of the bag, and Parker as a celebrity (Victoria Lambert 2001). It also contributed to New York's reputation as city "brand" in the global system of capitalism as a source of new fashion ideas. A report on the New York fashion shows in the *Guardian* was headed "Fashion in the city; cult show underpins style" (Charlie Porter 2001). It comments on the "power of the cult drama" to create a fashion trend, whether for Jimmy Choo stiletto heels, corsages, or purses in the shape of a horse's head. The report is focused on the House of Field who act as stylists for *Sex and the City*. Theirs is a bohemian look, made newly respectable as mainstream fashion, but retaining in the thrift-store elements reference to the anti-materialist values that characterised the hippie bohemianism of the 1960s. It incorporates the psychedelic patterns of that era and an individual eclecticism achieved by mixing retro and new clothing, the avant-garde and the mass-produced.

The horse's head handbag works within this kitsch aesthetic, in which objects are redefined as "cool" through a process of irony. It reminds the *Daily Telegraph* journalist of My Little Pony and her 9-year-old self, and it is cheap to buy in comparison to most designer handbags (\$165). The HBO website offers *Sex and the City* merchandise for sale, but they have no pretensions to be designer goods. They are cheap items: T-shirts, mugs, and glasses printed with the *Sex and the City* logo and New York skyline (doubly ironic now). The trash aesthetic of *Sex and the City* anticipates the ironic response that, in the 1980s for example, was developed as a sub-cultural, camp response to *Dynasty* (Feuer 1995: 142). In the decade or so that separates *Dynasty* from the incorporated irony of *Sex and the City's* trash aesthetics, camp irony has moved from the margins to the centre. It exemplifies the way in which an attitude to mass culture originating in a gay response to their cultural marginalisation, has been appropriated by the mainstream media in order to address niche markets in the affluent middle classes. It is the culmination of a trend that accelerated in the 1960s, and is associated with the rise of the consumer society and the generation that grew up with it (Andrew Ross 1989). *Sex and the City* is simply part of a wider cultural trend, one that at its most broad can be described as postmodernism, a commodified aesthetic in which irony is a central component (Naomi Klein 2000).

The style also expresses a bohemian attitude to women's sexuality. But the clothes do not simply replicate the rather demure look for women of the hippie era, when sexual liberation, enabled by the separation between sex and reproduction that the pill made possible, still meant women responding to men's sexual initiatives. The *Sex and the City* version of bohemian fashion is post punk, post Madonna; it incorporates an assertive sexualised imagery for women that consciously plays with the transgressive sexual connotations of leather, bondage, and underwear as outerwear. One garment, "open to below the navel before swooping under the crotch, had an immaculate cut, even if the look was purposefully wanton . . . [Y]ou could easily see Carrie giving the look a try, maybe out at the Hamptons" (Porter 2001). "Wantonness" combined with "a perfect cut" epitomises the reconciliation of bourgeois with bohemian values in the aesthetics and lifestyle that *Sex and the City* expresses and promotes.

The specificity of this taste culture is made clear in the series itself through the way the four main characters' style and codes of sexual behaviour are defined against

other social groupings. There are the restrained (and boring) bourgeois women, untainted by bohemian values, in whom sexual expression is kept under strict control. These are exemplified by the women who look increasingly scandalised as Charlotte, the most “preppy” one of the four, at a reunion dinner with her university Fraternity friends, reveals the fact of her husband’s impotence and her own frustration. “Don’t you ever feel like you want to be fucked really hard?” she enquires as they recoil in disgust (Episode 46 “Frenemies”). Or by Natasha, Big’s wife. His boredom with her is defined by her taste in interior design, “Everything’s beige.” Then there are the people who live outside the city, and whose adherence to traditional gender roles is an indicator of their being either low class or simply old-fashioned. On a trip to Staten Island (the ferry marking the boundary) “real men” offer a tantalising sexual fantasy for Samantha, but when faced with the reality in the cold light of a working day, her liaison with a fireman doesn’t seem such a good idea (Episode 31 “Where There’s Smoke . . .”).

In traditional bourgeois cultures unbridled sexual appetites or loose speech are a mark not only of the lower classes but of the unruly woman, who inverts the power relations of gender and has sex like a man (Arthurs 1999; Mary Russo 1995). Samantha’s guilt-free promiscuity is exemplary here, although even she has her limits. She is shocked by a new acquaintance who dives under the restaurant table to “give head” to a man they have just met (Episode 36 “Are We Sluts”). Indecorum is a sign of lack of respectability, which for women has been a sexual as well as class category associated with prostitution. *Sex and the City* works through the problem of establishing the boundaries of respectability in a postfeminist culture where women share many of the same freedoms as men, but in which the residual effects of the double standard are still being felt. It strives to be sexually frank without being “vulgar.”

These women are of a generation old enough to have been influenced by feminism (in their thirties and forties) but too old to participate in a newly fashionable queer culture, despite their appropriation of camp as a style. They are resolutely heterosexual, despite occasional short-lived encounters with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals that simply reconfirm it. “I’m a tri-sexual,” says Samantha jokingly. “I’ll try anything once,” and indeed she does, briefly, have one lesbian lover. Carrie’s relationship with a 26-year-old bisexual founders when she can’t handle the thought that he’s been with a man, nor does she feel comfortable with his gender-bending friends. “I was too old to play this game,” she tells us in the voice-over (Episode 34 “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl . . .”). These episodes, like the one where Samantha dates an African American, simply mark where their sexual boundaries are drawn. Thus the women’s particular mix of bourgeois bohemianism is normalised.

Their transgression of bourgeois sexual decorum marks the foursome as “unruly,” a challenge to patriarchal structures of power, but their adherence to the sleek control of the commodified body makes this compatible with capitalism. Unlike Edina or Patsy, the unruly women in *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC2 1992–4, BBC1 1995–6), a British comedy that is located in a similar cultural milieu, if the women are made to look ridiculous it is a momentary aberration that causes embarrassment (as in the billboard scene). In contrast, the British comedy persistently satirises consumer culture and the feminine world of fashion, PR, and women’s magazines, through a farcical exaggeration of fashion styles and a slapstick mode of comedy that undermines the

bodily control and discipline that underpins glamour (often as a result of drug-taking or excessive drinking, a bohemian legacy of the 1960s in contemporary consumer society that plays a very minor role in *Sex and the City* in comparison) (see Arthurs 1999; Pat Kirkham and Beverley Skeggs 1998 for further discussion of *Absolutely Fabulous*). The comedy in *Sex and the City* depends instead on verbal wit and ironic distancing, a more intellectual, and, in class terms, a more bourgeois form than slapstick. It also enables the complicit critique that is considered to be characteristic of postmodernism (Feuer 1995; Klein 2000; Lash 1990).

The aestheticised self and sexual relations

The advert for Bailey’s Cream, the corporate sponsors of *Sex and the City*, exemplifies how in consumer culture the body as the bearer of sensation replaces the ethical self as an ideal. It presents a sensuous image of swirling, creamy liquid with the slogan “Let your senses guide you.” Rachel Bowlby refers to the ideal modern consumer as, “a receptacle and bearer of sensations, poser and posed, with no consistent identity, no moral self” (1993: 23). In this aestheticised culture the question has become, does it look good or feel good rather than, is this a good thing to do? Although *Sex and the City* rejects the traditional patriarchal dichotomy of virgin and whore, insisting in its explorations of the women’s multiple sexual experiences their rights to seek sexual satisfaction without shame, this doesn’t mean that there are no limits. Aesthetic boundaries replace moral boundaries so that men who can’t kiss very well, who smell, who are too short, or whose semen tastes peculiar are rejected on those grounds.

Despite the radical roots of this bohemian attitude, developed in opposition to the rationalist, puritan ethos of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism (in Romanticism and Surrealism as well as Dandyism), it is now fully integrated into consumer marketing and its appeal to our hedonistic impulses and imaginings. Lury explains that:

[A]n important part of this calculating hedonism is an emotional and cognitive distancing on the part of the individual since it is this distance which introduces the possibility of reflection on consumption and facilitates the adoption of playful and ironic ways of consuming.

(1996: 76)

Yet for women, Lury argues, this relation to an aestheticised, self-reflexive identity in which commodities are used creatively to re-fashion the self is more problematic than for men (1996: 118–55). This is because they occupy an unstable position in relation to the aestheticised self, an instability that is enacted in the oscillations in tone that characterise *Sex and the City* and its exploration of women’s sexuality in a consumer culture.

For the women in *Sex and the City*, it often appears as though hedonism and narcissism have displaced the masochist position they occupy in patriarchal structures of desire. The grotesque “other” of sadistic masculinity has been repressed (and displaced into *The Sopranos*, another successful HBO “quality” drama). In this economy of desire the city streets have lost the danger of a sadistic or repressing masculine

gaze. Instead of intimating the dark dangers that kept respectable women off the streets, New York is shown to be a place of freedom and safety – the worst that can happen is that their clothes might be splashed by a passing car (as happens to Carrie in the title sequence). These women move freely around the cafes and boutiques, with a confident sense of possession, enjoying the multiple pleasures of consumption in the company of other women and gay men. In this way their dependence on male lovers for emotional and sensual satisfaction is displaced; they always disappoint or disempower, as Mr Big does in the billboard scene by not showing up. A designer stiletto shoe, Carrie's trademark obsession, is different. It's always there to be possessed, offering a fetish substitute for the satisfactions denied by men. The autoeroticism legitimated by the narcissistic structure of the look in consumer culture offers the possibility of doing without men at all. The show's promotion of vibrators as a route to sexual satisfaction has resulted in a huge increase in sales of the "rabbit" model that was featured (Episode 9 "The Turtle and the Hare") (Clarissa Smith 2002).

The programme's representation of the women's dissatisfaction with their male lovers could be regarded as encouraging a rejection of men as a source of emotional and sexual satisfaction in favour of a feminine culture of gossip and shopping. It is the tight-knit relationship of the four women that is the only constant in the series. But they don't live together as in the cosy but adolescent comedy series *Friends*. The recurring message that for grown ups living in Manhattan means living alone constructs the single household as the norm, a trend that has been cited as one of the major stimuli to consumption in modern cities (Lury 1996).

Sex in this context becomes like shopping – a marker of identity, a source of pleasure – knowing how to choose the right goods is crucial. But men in *Sex and the City* are the only objects of desire that create consumer dissatisfaction. The women treat men as branded goods – the packaging has to be right but the difficulty is to find one whose use value lives up to the image. The quest becomes one in which they are looking for the phallus that would bring an end to a seemingly endless chain of desire. "In a city of infinite options there can be no better feeling than that you only have one," is the aphorism Carrie offers at the end of one episode (Episode 7 "The Monogamists"). And yet there is a recognition that the phallus will never live up to its promise of satisfaction and fulfilment. "In a city of great expectations is it time to settle for what you can get?" wonders Carrie (Episode 9 "The Turtle and the Hare"). The women try men out to see if they "fit for size," as Carrie tells a potential husband, but they never do. This is literally the case when promiscuous Samantha unexpectedly falls in love (Episode 12 "Oh Come All Ye Faithful"). When she has sex with her new lover after two weeks of uncharacteristic abstention, she is devastated. His dick is only three inches long! In *Sex and the City* size does matter.

Sex and the City incorporates the ambivalence in feminist evaluations of the aestheticised self – showing it to be both a source of confident autonomy and of disempowerment in its unstable oscillations. For instance, Carrie's performance is constructed around her role as a successful and famous journalist researching her newspaper column that bears the same name as the TV show. She is shown as a detached observer of her own and her friends' sexual desires and experiences. She self-reflexively and playfully deliberates on their consequences, not in terms of some overarching ethical position but from an aesthetic point of view of someone who has

to write a witty, readable column that will enhance her professional status. Sexual ethics are converted into a controlled display of witty aphorisms and the comedy of embarrassment. The same is true of the show's address to its viewers. As an audience we are positioned as detached observers of this sexual play, not as we would be in pornography for physical arousal and the satisfactions of masturbation, nor as lessons in morality, but to be amused.

When the oscillation swings back to close involvement, the mood is one of unsatisfied yearning not playfulness. Carrie's emotional involvement with the main man in her life produces the feeling that she is out of control – her desire for him can never be fully satisfied. Again this is considered characteristic of a consumer lifestyle in which consumers "experience moderate swings from being in control to being out of control and back again . . . Their lives are balanced between feelings of completeness and incompleteness" (Elizabeth Hirschmann cited in Lury 1996: 77). In this scene the consequences of an aestheticised relation to sexual relations are shown to be debilitating – for women. Carrie craves authenticity, and constantly wants to establish whether her relationship with Big is real or not. In one episode, where she is particularly distressed by her powerlessness in relation to Big, Carrie offers a poignant critique of the masquerade as a strategy of female empowerment.

I think I'm in love with him, and I'm terrified in case he thinks I'm not perfect . . . you should see what I'm like round him – it's like – I wear little outfits. I'm not like me. Sexy Carrie. Casual Carrie. Sometimes I catch myself actually posing – it's exhausting!

(Episode 11 "The Drought")

Later that evening Big visits her flat for the first time. She is nervous about this as another test of her self-presentation, but is reassured, "I like it just the way it is" he says. On seeing a couple having sex in the flat opposite, offering a distanced but explicit spectacle, Big turns to her and says, "Hell – we can do better than that!" The voice-over from Carrie, "And then he kissed me," places the scene in the realm of a Mills and Boon erotic novel for women – the unobtainable object of the heroine's desire succumbs when he recognises her true worth. Yet it also marks a return to the distancing that characterises the dominant, comic mode of the series. Carrie's worries about her unstable and inauthentic identity are resolved through the aestheticised pleasures of erotic spectacle and generic parody. And there is no end to these oscillations; its serial form doesn't provide the plenitude of narrative closure; instead its repetitions offer the consumer satisfactions of "diversity within sameness that is comfortable and comforting to most people" (Hirschman cited in Lury 1996: 77).

Conclusion

The fragmentation of the television market has allowed a sexually explicit and critical feminist discourse into television comedy, albeit within the parameters of a consumer culture and the limitations this imposes. This is a welcome innovation in women's representation on television in that it assumes and promotes women's right to sexual pleasure and validates women's friendship and culture. At the same time the

contradictions of its comedic and serial form expose this culture to interrogation and critique, thereby encouraging intellectual analysis. The analytic approaches used in this article are not confined to an academic elite but are available to a broad segment of educated women, the bourgeois bohemians, who read the quality press alongside women's magazines. An ability to see ourselves in these characters works not simply to confirm our sense of self but to question the costs as well as the benefits of living in a postfeminist consumer culture. It is in the messy contingencies of the everyday that feminism is produced or inhibited in practice, and it is this quality that *Sex and the City* is able to capture.

This establishes a space in popular culture for interrogation of our own complicity in the processes of commodification – women's narcissistic relation to the self, the production of fetishistic and alienated sexual relations – that continue to undermine our self-esteem and contentment. The programme offers evidence of the deleterious effects of economic liberalism in a society where moral and religious values are in decline, with no alternatives to the hedonistic and selfish values of capitalism. Whether this has the power to translate into feminist political action is beyond the scope of this article (but see Klein 2000; Whelahan 2000; Willis 1991 for scepticism in this respect). What remains more hidden from view is the gap between the lifestyle depicted and the experience of the majority of the women in the world, who are often the most disadvantaged by the economic inequalities on which the freedom to pleasurable consumption rests (Klein 2000; McRobbie 1997; Willis 1991). Yet in a post September 11 context, the connotations of *Sex and the City's* logo of the Manhattan skyline has changed. The guiltless triumph of consumer values no longer seems so secure.

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Notes

- 1 In a series of interviews with writers of the series that appeared on the website in July 2001 they were asked which characters they identified with most strongly. They all chose Miranda (http://www.hbo.com/cityinsiders_guide; accessed July 26, 2001).
- 2 The identification of the episodes follows the continuous numbering of the website episode summaries rather than the video compilations, which start again at number one for each season.
- 3 As technological and economic convergence gathers pace, regulatory frameworks are also converging. The Internet has been an important driver in this respect, resetting the boundaries for the public circulation of sexual material (Bernt Stubbe Ostergaard 1998).
- 4 The kind of attention given to women's sexual freedom and pleasure in second-wave feminism arises from the very specific social and political history of the

white middle-class women who dominated the movement. It is quite different from the political agenda around sexuality that arises from the historical positioning of black or working-class women as the embodied "other" of the white bourgeoisie (Donna Haraway 1990).

- 5 The four main characters' signature cocktail is called a "cosmopolitan," signaling this sorority. The show's title echoes that of a book, *Sex and the Single Girl* written by Helen Gurley Brown in 1962 who went on to be the founding editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1965 (Radner 1995).
- 6 Radner's (1995: 51–5) discussion of Cybil Shepherd's role in the television comedy *Moonlighting* (1986–7) also highlights the way intertextuality allows for differing inflexions of the same celebrity persona.

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3

Women with a Mission

Lynda La Plante, DCI Jane Tennison and the reconfiguration of TV crime drama

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Ever since *Widows* was first transmitted in 1983, writer Lynda La Plante has been at the forefront of British television crime drama. She has earned a reputation as a daring and controversial TV dramatist with a taste for violent and dark subject matter, known for her recurrent interest in traditionally 'male' genres and settings – a diamond heist in *Widows* (ITV 1983, 1985); a serial rape and murder investigation in *Prime Suspect* (ITV 1991);¹ ex-paratroopers readjusting to civilian life in *Civvies* (BBC 1992); a male prison in *The Governor* (ITV 1995, 1996). In 1993 a profile of her in *You* magazine commented, 'Every time she sits down at the word processor . . . what comes out is . . . brutality, blood and guts. The chief characteristic of her work is not optimism but a profound sense of the violence of human existence' (Thomas, 1993: 82). Her interest in 'male' genres, however, has frequently been combined with the presence of central, leading roles for women characters, most notably Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren), who investigates the murder of six women in *Prime Suspect's* quest to convict serial killer George Marlow. This has attracted popular plaudits for, and interest in, La Plante's work as a TV writer, opening up the once rather limited repertoire of roles available to women actors in TV crime drama. In 1996 *The Independent* declared her 'The most famous TV dramatist in Britain. She has "above-the-title" stardom . . . responsible for a rash of hard hitting, tough talking, no-holds-barred dramas' (Rampton, 1996: 30). With a pedigree like this behind her, La Plante's work is pivotal to an understanding of the shifts in British TV crime drama over the past two decades.

But despite this engrossing oeuvre, industry accolades including a BAFTA for *Prime Suspect* and international distribution and critical acclaim for *Prime Suspect* (including transmission on the US's respected 'Masterpiece Theatre'), sustained academic acknowledgement and analysis of La Plante's contribution to the genre have been decidedly thin on the ground. Julia Hallam has attributed this to the entrenched 'persistent marginalisation of women writers not only in the TV industry itself but also within the critical institutions of the academy', whereby women writers have been recurrently excluded from the canon of 'quality' television (2000: 141). In a similar