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Sex and the City: An Unfulfilled Fantasy

Sex and the City, the HBO program that supposedly celebrates contemporary singlehood and the modern woman, is really nothing more than a fantasy for women to project their lives upon. More so than the trappings of their environment—the booze, the nightlife, the fashions, the men, the free time—it is the four girls' questions and dilemmas, while representing many of the struggles women go through, that really capitulates viewers onto their own struggle of acceptance within their culture. Carrie's voiceovers "perpetuate the assumption that feminine identity [within the context of sexual relationships] is a perpetual struggle with dissatisfaction about oneself" because so much of it is "centered on lack and potential disappointment" (Bignell 217). This continual buildup of expectations, leading to colossal defeats, is a narrative used throughout the series to illustrate the complexities of life and the fallacies so inherent in our own hopes.

Sex and the City, arguably more than any other show, has focused on the importance of the Romantic Relationship as the be-all and end-all of fulfillment. But in later seasons, the show moves away from its sex comedy origins and delves into more dramatic territory, dealing with harder questions. It is here that the shift towards friendship becomes palpable, with the show visibly incorporating this other element in their lives to a central position within the narrative. With the absence or rejection of men in their lives (something the show dallies with but never fully undertakes), other things must fulfill the role that men do, and female friendship is one of them.

The series finale, "An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux", attempts to reconcile these two issues by showing how ideally, there is room for friends and for a man. Mr. Big pleads with the girls, "a guy's just lucky to come in fourth", knowing

full well that friends will always come first for Carrie, something she learns in Paris when she is abandoned by Aleksandr and alienated by the culture. This theory, "that you could have your ultimate soul bond in your friendships with women, while getting everything else you might need from a man" (Patchett) is both mocked and supported by the outside press; as fantastic as it sounds, the show's fantasy ultimately makes the messages hard to swallow whole. "The trusty romantic partners of our time are one's friends," writes Jefferson, and the singlehood of women, as popularly fetishized, is "rarely... spen[t]...without a coterie of girlfriends" (Traister). Celebrating friendship is meant as an anecdote to the constant, relentless focus on love, sex, and romantic relationships. Unfortunately, to write about this opposite, this force must again be referenced, thereby continuing the dialogue. This dialectical point cannot ever be fully reconciled because each party commands similar attention, and it can be argued that the entirety of the program is based around the tensions between the two forces.

The problem is that one episode, or one season, cannot erase the damage that is done by the series as a whole. *Sex and the City* raises provocative questions, many of which cannot be answered. Even in the end, where the audience is meant to believe in happily ever after, despite how much the show discussed the fallacy of that phrase, the show ultimately feels in order to end the story properly they must deliver a beautiful fantasy. The love that Carrie is searching for is "real love...ridiculous, inconvenient, consuming, can't-live-without-each-other-love," (Episode 94) the dream of every girl who watches the program. What if life can't deliver?

As much as *Sex and the City* wants to be an affirmation of life, whatever its form, it ultimately accepts the notion that fulfillment must have a partner. When the girls are truly single, as in they are not paired up, they are not happy. It is for many an inevitability of life, and the show must reflect that in spite of its fantasy. Yet the program steers clear of popular euphemisms for that person who they are

paired up with—there is no “better half”, “other half”, or even “significant other”. There is no “other”, no “parts of a whole”—even when discussing soulmates, the girls throw out the notion that a man can fulfill that section of them, instead that friends can be soulmates, a notion becoming increasingly accepted.

A cynical viewpoint, reflected in “Critical Condition” (episode 72), holds that men are expendable—and this question plagues Carrie Bradshaw here, when her book of columns is reviewed. Her book, also titled *Sex and the City*, represents one version of the audience’s “review” toward the show and how they interpret some of the messages given. The book represents Carrie’s career triumphs, but like the show, it symbolizes the struggles she has faced while working on it, and the impression she (and the show) leave. Her book, just like her questions and voiceover that each episode is based around, is a way of the show commenting on itself, acknowledging its own biases and criticisms, and answering those critics through the characters. This leaves a permanent impression compared to anything the creators could say or do outside of the narrative, because above all, that speaks for itself. This reflexivity, of which the audience is generally aware of, incorporates the audience’s reaction to the program’s messages, and is an example of the many postmodern touches included.

Other postmodern adornments included in the show are its explicit mentions and cameos of stars and products, including Lucy Liu and the company Fendi, incorporating them into a storyline. Semiotics analysis reveals some of these details. Carrie, like the actress who plays her, Sarah Jessica Parker, has naturally curly hair. She often wears it straightened, but when it is curly she is purely herself, with no artifice or grandeur attached. It is her trademark, and when Big in season two dates and marries a straight-haired model, she relishes in the parallels between her situation and a favorite movie, *The Way We Were*, even going so far as to reenact a pivotal scene, much to his confusion. The characters’ acknowledgement of this, and other details, is a version of intertextuality, a play on

the culture the girls and the audience live in, both grounding the story in real life and giving it a glossy spin.

Visual codes have always played a strong part in developing each of the characters. The clothes, hairstyles, and accessories all the characters wear are a reflection of their personalities and how they are feeling that day, and are often tied to a particular storyline. Throughout the final episodes, Carrie is wearing green and white. She wears green dresses and a white coat, white pearls and white shoes. It is the perfection of the dream of Paris in her mind. But these colors symbolize instead her transition from cold, aloof Paris—her boyfriend Aleksandr—and New York, her home, her friends, her life, her Big. Themes of transition, especially from winter to spring, enliven the episode. Samantha's flowers are in full bloom again, which are her lust for life, her sex drive, and the girls are clothed in scarves and other winter accessories. It is one of the only times that the show acknowledges seasons, because for most of the series the girls lived in "eternal spring", or a seasonless environment, enabling them to wear virtually anything. Now there are markers to firmly plant the girls in a setting.

In Paris, Carrie is clothed in combinations of black and white, which emote her feelings of anonymity, her unhappiness. Even the shade of green she wears in the climactic scene is dull and whitewashed over. Returning to New York, she dresses up in a vibrant green, a reversal of fortune, connoting the vigor, health, and happiness she has in that city. The white now is not blinding or cold, but moves toward a pale pink, another indication of spring, both in the weather and in her step. Her hair is loose and curly, bouncing in the wind. "It must be acknowledged that even the most pleasurable future is a risk. There are no securely happy endings," Jefferson wrote in 2002. This applies to the finale. Despite the romantic, "closure" ending for all four girls, deeper introspection reveals that life isn't going to be all cosmopolitans. Miranda now has to take care of a sick mother-in-law, and most viewers were left feeling fulfilled, but realized that Big may not be for Carrie

forever, and there was no mention of the typical wedding for her. But that's ok. "I am a single, and it will be fine," she says to the hotelier when he insists that there are only double rooms. This metaphor for the larger culture, a coupled culture, shows that "it will be fine" with her status, that she can deal, that she will live with it. The future tense is important because even if she isn't perfectly fine with it now, she will be. It emphasizes the journey, the gradualness of coming to terms with an issue in society. "The most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself," she voiceovers in the closing frame, again reiterating that spiritual fulfillment must begin and end with yourself, not someone else, no matter what society dictates. The program as a whole has always struggled with society's expectations upon single women, even as their status may change.

The finale's ending, one of strength, is incredibly filmic and Hollywoodesque, with its grand romantic gestures. The beauty of the episode leaves the viewer happy, and the producers have again perfectly manufactured the perfect myth—a view throughout the series they have argued against many times, but ultimately believe it can exist, in rare forms: a one night stand that turned into a relationship, which turned into a kid and a marriage for the hardest woman to please, Miranda, complete with a Hollywood kiss in the rain. But the myths, as the girls point out, also serve as a way to depress people because they aren't the ones who are living this dream life. "...The show's premise of its protagonists searching in the city for love and happiness was meant from the beginning to culminate in disappointment—but disappointment funnily, sexily, even glamorously portrayed, until disappointment itself started to look like love and happiness, and the object of the search, someone to share your life with, acquired the aspect of a dystopian and dysfunctional fantasy," argues Siegel. The show gives woman hope through disappointment, making them believe in something while crushing their hopes at the same time. *Sex and the City* is ultimately a fantasy, culminating in disappointment for the viewers, while

providing a cathartic release in that they can share, exalt, and criticize the show, just like their lives.

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