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Subject and the City: *Sex and the City's* Exposure of Feminine Pursuits in 'Secret Sex'

Introduction

In writing her column, "Sex and the City," Carrie Bradshaw 'speaks sex' to her readers by opening up discussion about feminine sexuality and desire through using her own experiences, as well as the stories from her girlfriends. And I started wondering— in copying Carrie's famous opening to her column— how does the series, *Sex and the City*, get away with exposing feminine sexuality and desire without objectifying its female characters as so many other forms of cinema do? In contrast to Linda Williams's analysis of hard-core pornography in her book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* the television series does not try expose feminine sexuality and pleasures through objectively broadcasting feminine 'nakedness' on screen for viewers to 'peer in' on (Williams). Instead, *Sex* places its four main characters, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Charlotte Young (Kristin Davis), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), and Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), as the subjects of their narratives through using their voices to not only express their desires, but to drive their pursuits of these wants and needs as well. Though the series as focuses on all four narratives in its representations of feminine sexuality, I will mainly focus on Carrie, as she is the main character and narrator of the show. However, my argument will explore how these four women, in relation to Carrie, highlight the show's use of different plots and perspectives to show the multiplicity of feminine pleasure and satisfaction (sexually or not). Therefore, through utilizing Williams's analysis of subjectivity in erotica film, as well as other writers' explorations of the female gaze and analysis' of feminine sexuality in television and film, *Sex and the City* exemplifies a form of cinema that

actively does not objectify its female characters. Instead, through the show's use of voice and multiple perspectives, *Sex* utilizes a confessional tone and anti-phallic narrative that exposes feminine sexuality and desire by showing an active pursuit of pleasure(s) and satisfaction(s)—sexual and otherwise— from its female characters. This way, in looking at season one, episode 6, “Secret Sex,” the episode does not adhere to making the show's female characters the objects of knowledge of sex, but instead makes its women characters the subjects of knowledge as they themselves ‘speak sex,’ which creates a structure of film that allows female storytellers’ a ‘say’ in how their sexuality and desires are represented. Therefore, *Sex and the City* opens up a wave of television and film that captures narratives that promise an honest depiction of feminine sexuality and desire for its viewers.

Subject versus Subject Matter

First, it is essential to examine what Williams means by subjectivity and how this relates to the female gaze structure in film and television. She defines “subject” through critiquing Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin’s analysis of stag films— a form of early pornography that’s primitive qualities include making its viewer “a male spectator who is encouraged to talk to, and even to reach into” the screen that displays “a female film body who spreads her legs (and labia) for the eye and hand behind the camera” (Williams 76). Di Lauro and Rabkin argue in *Dirty Movies* that this form objectifies male participants: ““they are even less ‘humanized than the women, who are, after all, the focus of attention’” (Williams 59). Their analysis shows as extremely ironic as focusing on the female’s naked body only makes her more of an “object” in this scenario. In response, Williams states that “male subjectivity is dominant,” and that Di Lauro and Rabkin mistake the difference between “subject” and “subject matter” in claiming that women are not objectified (59). She then explores the difference between subject and subject matter through

using art critic John Berger's examination of European art. Berger explains that in oil paintings of nudes "the principle (the real subject of these paintings) never even appears on the canvas... He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man...it is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity" (Williams 59-60). This way, the female bodies in both stag films and nude oil paintings become the "subject matter"; the matter for the subject to look at, and to spectate. Whereas, the "spectator" becomes the subjects as the female bodies "perform" or are "displayed" for, in these instances, *his* desire. By "assuming their nudity," the nude figures are reactive to the spectator instead of proactive in showing their naked bodies, and therefore, lack agency in their pursuit of pleasure as they merely "exist" for the spectator to look at and, thus, are objects of the spectator's desire. The naked women in stag films embrace a similar role as their nude bodies are used for the spectator's pursuit of pleasure versus their own pleasures. In advancing my argument, then, Williams's explanation of subjectivity has helped come to the conclusion that portray a "subject" means to be proactive in one's pursuit of pleasure or satisfaction rather than being the "subject matter" for an outsider or spectator's pursuit. Ultimately, Williams's discussion of subjectivity then helps show how the male gaze in television and film utilizes a similar structure in embodying a spectator's perspective.

Connecting Subjectivity to the Male & Female Gaze

Moreover, a better understanding of the male gaze helps to further explore the lack of agency women embrace as reactors rather than subjects through this lens. Paula Marantz Cohen's article, "What Have Clothes Got to Do with It? Romantic Comedy and the Female Gaze," highlights that an understanding of both the male and female gaze helps define and distinguish one another in film. Using Laura Mulvey's general theory, Cohen describes that the male gaze structure constitutes a "plot-spectacle" narrative where the women on screen constitute spectacle

by not moving to plot forward, but are “useful resting points and divisionary asides” and made “part of the hero’s reward” at the end of the film (79). She concludes, “together, plot and spectacle are fitted to the heterosexual gaze” that portrays a “plot-spectacle hierarchy in which action is paramount and material objects– and women themselves– occupy secondary fetishistic position” (80). In looking at Williams’s discussion of the subject and subject matter, the male gaze tends to favor women as the subject matter for the male protagonist to “spectate” as he actively participates as the subject of the film. Just as Berger casts the unseen male protagonist as the spectator in oil painting, the painted women who assume their naked bodies for his pleasure then occupy a “secondary fetishistic position” and embrace the spectator’s “spectacle.” The nude women become an object of the unseen protagonist’s desire as his gaze dominates the painting’s perspective just as the women in the plot-spectacle structure become an object of their male protagonist’s desire– an object to be looked at and “rewarded” at the end of his journey.

However, the female gaze constitutes a spectacle-plot structure that allows women to engage as subjects in television and film, and actively pursue their own desires, as shown in *Sex*. This way, the women are central to the narrative and the plot is secondary. Cohen describes the female gaze as, “women gaze as women, disconnected from a conventional male economy of desire, whether or not a man made the film or a patriarchal perspective informs it” (80). This leads Cohen to her argument that the female gaze teaches women “how to use the material world creatively and to assimilate things into style of being that defines and empowers them” (80). In other words, the female gaze utilizes materialism for self-expression; whereas, the male gaze uses material for self-gratification as material signifies women as ‘prizes’ that are made part of the ‘hero’s reward’ at the end of a film. Because she describes the women as a “reward,” a typically materialized image, as well as a tool used to gratify someone for their success, the

material world in the male gaze then objectifies women as a ‘prize’ to be gained as an end goal or conclusion. Consequently, then, in a male gaze centered structure material represents women’s desirability, but in a female gaze structure, women use material to express their desire. Therefore, through the female gaze, women become proactive in pursuing their desire instead of the object of– and thus reactionary to– the protagonist’s desire.

The Naked Dress

In terms of the female gaze, *Sex* utilizes the material world– namely, fashion– for self-expression as a way to empower its female characters. In season 1, episode 6, “Secret Sex,” Carrie wears, as Charlotte calls it, the ‘naked dress’ to express her sexual desire. In analyzing images used in this episode, Melissa Arias states:

What I immediately noticed when I saw Carrie was the dress she was wearing. It was a short white dress that almost looked like a nightgown. She also appeared to be wearing no bra underneath. While she is entitled to wear however she wants, I think the dress has a significant change of behavior on the man she goes on a date with. He perceives the dress as her giving him an invitation (CCLE).

Though she has a point here, the show utilizes the dress as a symbol for Carrie’s sexual pursuit, not to invite Big to sleep with her. In terms of the female gaze, Carrie uses the material world– and this dress in particular– to learn how to “use the material world creatively and to assimilate things into style of being that defines and empowers” her (Cohen 80). The dress is her way of expressing her sexual desire for Big– similar to how she confesses to her audience after talking with her girlfriends: “The truth is, I was dying to sleep with him.” As the episode progresses, the show continues to reveal that Big does not “perceive the dress as her giving him an invitation” because when the two of them sit in his limo, he looks at her dress and then back at her and says

that he can “restrain himself.” It is not until Carrie says that she can too, which she follows with leaning in for a kiss, that he realizes she invites him to sleep with her. This way, because the dress is used as a symbol to express her desire for Big, the dress also foreshadows Carrie’s pursuit for her own sexual pleasure as she does in the limo. Referring back to Berger’s analysis of oil paintings, Carrie does not wear the dress for Big to ‘spectate’ by assuming her ‘nakedness’ for him, which would make her the subject matter in this instance. Instead, she uses the dress to express the action she plans to take in order to move her sexual exploration with Big forward, and therefore pursue her sexual pleasure. Therefore, the dress emphasizes Carrie’s position as the subject as it articulates her sexual desire that she chooses to proactively pursue, which moves her narrative forward.

Involuntary Confession: The Frenzy of the Visible

Though one could argue that Carrie wears the naked dress to promote her desirability for Big, the show’s confessional tone only further addresses Carrie as a subject, and therefore pushes against the notion that the naked dress objectifies Carrie for Big’s desire. However, before engaging in the show’s confessional tone, I must first use Williams’s discussion of confession in *hard-core*, as it brings forth an analysis of its use of involuntary confession in showing female (sexual) pleasure. Similar to how she uses Berger’s analysis of oil paintings to define subjectivity, Williams uses Diderot’s literary fable of jewel-genitals to explore confession in literary and filmic pornography. She claims that both Diderot’s story and *hard-core* films “are narrative vehicles for the spectacular, involuntary presentation of the knowledge of pleasure as confessions of socially disruptive ‘sexual truths’” (30). In looking at Diderot’s story, she summarizes:

Diderot conjures a magical silver ring with the power to make the female speak. The

confessional ‘truth’ that is spoken in the presence of the invisible prince provides evidence that the elegant women of his court are not the figures of propriety that they seem... Where Diderot’s genie conjures up the magic silver ring that renders the prince invisible and forces the women to confess their pleasures unaware of his presence, the wizardry of cinematic representation provides its spectators with a seeming perfected form of invisibility. Each viewer is transported, by the magic of camera close-ups and editing, to the ideal position of witnessing bodies’ confessions of pleasure (Williams 31-32).

In referring back to the male gaze, Diderot’s tale utilizes material (the silver ring) to satisfy the male protagonist’s curiosity over feminine sexuality by forcing the women to confess their pleasures against their will. The material, then, signifies the prince’s self-gratification as he uses this ring to pursue his own satisfaction, as he ‘wins’ these confessions to fulfill his end-goal of exposing their pleasures. This way, the women involuntarily confess their pleasures, and therefore lack agency as their confessions are reactionary to the silver ring’s power, rather than confess these pleasures to pursue their own sexual pleasure. Therefore, this type of involuntary confession mirrors how the male gaze objectifies it’s ‘spectacle’ through spectating the nude women’s bodies in oil paintings and hard-core films. In Diderot’s case, the women confess their sexual pleasures *for* the prince’s curiosity, similar to how the nude women assume their nude bodies *for* the spectator’s desire.

In looking back at how Williams describes the close-up’s purpose in hard-core, *Sex*’s use of the naked dress portrays a stark contrast from hard-core in how the show presents confession. Filmic pornography embraces involuntary confession as the camera closes up on the female bodies and allows the viewers to ‘spectate’ without being seen, creating a “seeming perfected

form of invisibility”— similar to how the prince in Diderot forces the women to confess without him being seen (Williams 32). This way, the women involuntarily confess their bodily pleasures as the camera ‘peers in’ on their nude bodies without them choosing to express their ‘nakedness,’ similar to how the nude women assume their nude bodies for the spectator in oil paintings. On the other hand, Carrie chooses to wear the naked dress to express her sexual desire for Big. Big never forces her to wear the naked dress— or to express her desire for him— involuntarily. She ‘volunteers’ to wear the naked dress, just as she ‘volunteers’ to make the first move by going in for a kiss. Therefore, the naked dress also signifies a sense of voluntary confession from Carrie— or voluntary performance— through materialism, instead of the involuntary confession that the silver ring and close-up forces from the women’s voices and bodies.

In keeping with Williams’s discussion, she continues her examination of the close-up in hard-core as it attempts to uncover ‘invisible’ feminine bodily pleasure. She states that hard-core obsesses itself with seeking knowledge through exposing visual representations through “a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm, of the ‘thing’ itself” (Williams 49). However, in searching for visual proof of the ‘thing’ itself— this ‘thing’ being visual evidence of female arousal and orgasm— to expose feminine pleasure, hard-core runs into a major issue.

Williams explains:

The irony, however, is that, while it is possible...to ‘represent’ the physical pleasure of the male by showing erection and ejaculation, this maximum visibility proves elusive in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure. Anatomically, female orgasm takes place... in an ‘invisible place’ that cannot easily be seen (Williams 49).

She states that the goal of hard-core pornography is to make the confession of female bodily pleasures visible and that it “desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance

of feminine pleasure, but it's involuntary confession" (Williams 50). In other words, because there is no visible and anatomical proof to female bodily pleasures, the confession of these pleasures is portrayed as involuntary. She concludes that "the woman's ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake...seems to be at the root of all the genre's attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of control confession of pleasure, a hardcore 'frenzy of the visible'" (50). Ultimately, then, hard-core lacks subjectivity in its form when it comes to the female parts. Just as how the women assume their nude bodies in the oil painting, women in hard-core are expected to assume their naked bodies as a way of uncovering a 'truth' to what can never be seen anatomically. More importantly, the curiosity that resides in uncovering this 'truth' does not satisfy the women's' pleasures taking part in the film, but rather satisfies the 'frenzy of the visible' – to satisfy the spectator's curiosity over visualizing the 'invisible' female bodily pleasures. Therefore, the use of close-ups only emphasizes how hard-core objectifies the women participants because the women on screen do not choose to confess their 'nakedness' to pursue their pleasures. Instead, the camera closes up on their bodies in an attempt to confess bodily pleasures that cannot be seen in hopes of satisfying the spectator's curiosity.

Voluntary Confession: The Frenzy of the Audible

Whereas hard-core desires involuntary confession by trying to make the 'invisible' visible, *Sex* demonstrates voluntary confession because the show grants Carrie agency in confessing her private desires through using her own voice to make the 'inaudible' audible. It is important to note that the way in which the show uses female voice is not reactionary as in Diderot's fable– Carrie does not tell the viewers and her friends about her pleasures against her will, but instead to open up a discussion about 'sex' and 'the city.' The mere fact that these discussions portray what Carrie uses to write her column shows how she voluntarily confesses

these private thoughts to turn into public discussion. In Ashli Dyke's article, "'And I started Wondering...': Voiceover and Confession in 'Sex and the City,'" she argues that the show's use of Carrie's voiceover "makes public what we often keep private, particularly in regard to female sexuality and desire" (50). This way, whereas the silver ring and close-up force the women in Diderot's fable and hard-core to 'speak sex' through involuntarily confessing their pleasures, *Sex*'s use of Carrie's voice allows her to 'speak sex' by turning the private into the public on her own terms.

Before going into analysis of Carrie's voiceover, it's important to establish the significance of making her the narrator, and how this creates a voluntary confession that uncovers Carrie's private 'truths.' Dykes explains:

Carrie's voiceover functions as part of the larger project of the series to give voice and visibility to women's issues that have traditionally been considered private, such as female sexual desire, by eschewing the traditionally disembodied male voiceover and giving viewers access to Carrie's audible and thoroughly embodied narration. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe assert that the show 'challenges prohibitions and breaks the silence, so that women can begin to tell their stories and speak about sex differently' (Dykes 55).

In other words, if the show decided to have the traditional "disembodied male voiceover" give the viewers access to Carrie's private thoughts, *Sex* would showcase a similar use of involuntary confession like Diderot's fable and hard-core. For instance, the male narrator would have been embracing the 'invisible spectator' who 'peers in' on Carrie's thoughts, and therefore would have expressed her private desires and pleasures without her permission. He would have embraced a similar role to that of the invisible prince in Diderot that forces women to confess

their pleasure; the camera that allows the viewers to remain invisible and ‘peer’ onto female bodily pleasures; or even the male spectator whom the women assume their nakedness for in the oil paintings. If *Sex* utilized an invisible male narrator, the show would have placed Carrie’s pleasures as the subject matter of the show, as she would have had no control in how those pleasures were pursued as her pleasure would be pursued in reaction to the outside-narration. This type of form would have taken on a similar direction if the show would have had Carrie wear the naked dress to perform her desirability for Big; she merely would have been confessing her pleasures for the sake of the male narrator just as she would have worn the dress for the sake of Big’s satisfaction. However, by making Carrie embody the narrator role in confessing her own private thoughts to the public, *Sex* only continues to place her as the subject in her narrative. She tells her viewers and readers what she wants to confess, and the narrative makes her confession visible by following her pursuit for pleasure, as she makes these pleasures audible.

‘Speaking Sex’ in ‘Secret Sex’

One way the episode, “Secret Sex,” achieves voluntary confession through Carrie’s voice is not only through having her narrate in voice-over, but also through directly engaging with her viewers. She does this through looking straight into the camera as she confesses her sexual desire for Big: “The truth is, I was dying to sleep with him. But isn’t delayed gratification the definition of maturity?” By having Carrie look straight into the camera, the show only further emphasizes Carrie’s acknowledgement of her confession, as well as to whom she confesses to. Dykes examines the show’s approach to this style of direct confessional:

With this final confession before her date, Carrie illustrates the divide between what a woman wants and what she thinks is appropriate, a divide that can be particularly deep when it comes to sexuality. By situating her admission in the context of a ‘private’

confessional, the insinuation is there are still some emotions (namely, lust) to which one should not admit in public settings. However, the insinuation is subverted through the voicing of these desires through the main character of the show, a character position which, in the world of television, is supposed to be the most 'relatable' to the audience (Dykes 56-57).

I want to focus on Dykes's concluding sentence in her analysis, as by the show positioning Carrie as the narrator and having her directly confess to the camera, the show rebels against the idea that women cannot admit lusting in a public setting. It may suggest this type of confession typically takes place in private, however, Carrie's narration signifies what she ultimately writes in her column, an extremely public display of feminine sexuality and desire. The title of the episode also portrays a similar irony of confessing private thoughts publicly, as "Secret Sex" insinuates that sex— and therefore, sexuality— should be expressed in private, secret, settings. However, Carrie pushes against this 'rule' by publishing an article that 'speaks sex' for her readers. Ultimately, the show itself pushes against this notion by making Carrie the narrator, and having her confess her sexual desire directly to viewers on television, thus publicly displaying the 'secrets' of her sexuality.

Moreover, the way the camera positions Carrie, along with how Sarah Jessica Parker performs in this moment, shows that Carrie willingly wants to address these private (sexual) discoveries publicly. First and foremost, it is important to note that *Sex* films this confessional through the use of a close-up, making Carrie the center of attention. However, the close-up is not used to peer into Carrie's private thoughts as hard-core uses the close-up to peer into the 'invisible' female bodily pleasures. Because Carrie talks to the camera directly, she shows that she wants to confess her private desires towards Big; whereas, if the camera would have closed

up on Carrie while an outside narrator disclosed her private desires, the close-up would have mirrored a similar spectator-spectacle relationship as portrayed in hard-core. Next, not only does she show that she wants to confess her private desires to the public, but she also contrasts her private desires to 'public opinion.' For instance, the way Parker delivers the line, "But isn't delayed gratification the definition of maturity?" insinuates that Carrie herself does not think this. Instead, she shows that Carrie has gained this way of thought through an outside source that deems this appropriate for feminine sexuality. After saying this line in a confident and straightforward tone, as though Carrie has been 'trained' to ask this question or think this way, Parker then decided to raise her eyebrow and do a slight sideways smile to the camera. Her facial expressions embrace Carrie's playful side, and her performance shows that Carrie asks this question in a satirical manner; she does not actually feel this way or want to follow this 'rule' as her eyebrow raise and slight smile resemble her version of a 'wink' to the audience. This way, Carrie does not come from a place of explaining herself— in which case she would have seriously asked her viewers this question in hopes of their approval. Rather, Parker's performance implies that Carrie comes from a knowing place— she knows that 'public opinion' expects her to wait in pursuing her sexual desires and pleasures (as she puts it, delayed gratification). Yet, her "wink" to the audience shows that she teases the idea of not playing by 'the rules.' This only becomes further emphasized by wearing her 'naked dress' during her private (yet, public) confessional. The naked dress shows the irony that Carrie plays with here; she publicly addresses a private confession (that she wants to sleep with Big) just as she wears her 'nakedness' (a private attire) on public display. Clearly, Carrie expresses no desire for "delayed gratification" or to keep her sexual desire a 'secret.' Dykes expands on this:

Through confessing her desire to sleep with this mysterious new man in her life, Carrie gives voice to her own sexual needs and desire, and by addressing this confession directly to the camera, she establishes a relationship with the audience, encouraging them to find their own sexual voice. While her articulation of sexual desire is somewhat tempered through its situating as a 'private' confessional, when socially contextualized against the backdrop of the late 1990s, with its national discussion of 'sexual relations' with White House interns and the continued backlash against second-wave feminism, this frank admission of female sexual desire on television becomes a progressive moment (Dykes 57).

Therefore, Carrie shows the contrast between what women want and what outside forces deem appropriate, whilst also not allowing these 'rules' or 'expectations' to stop her from confessing her sexual desire, and from pursuing this desire. This way, Carrie's confession further emphasizes that she is subject to her narrative by voluntarily placing her private feelings on public display, and then acting on her sexual pursuit despite what others may think. And, ultimately, she also influences her feminine viewers to embrace and pursue their private desires as well.

Carrie also takes charge of 'speaking sex' in the episode "Secret Sex" through her voice-over when she has just slept with Big, which addresses the 'private' feminine desires in context of male-female relationships. Carrie does this by admitting in voice-over as the camera shows her and Big, presumed to have just slept with each other in crumpled sheets: "I can't be hemmed in by the rules; I go with my emotions. I mean some of the greatest romances of all time began with sex on the first date...I bet. I will not be the first to speak, and if he never calls me again,

I'll think of him fondly— as an asshole.” Carrie’s voice-over in this instance could be argued as coming from a place of explaining herself, as Erika Ganier explains:

I remember my comment was born out of...posing whether or not Carrie’s narration came from a knowing place or an explaining herself place. My observation was that because of her caring whether or not Mr. Big thought less of her for having slept with him on their first date— if you remember, she was in a private panic— she probably cared equally, if not more, what her audience thought. In this sense, she is a bit of a ‘people-pleaser’ (CCLE).

However, her concerns in this instance are not her way of explaining her decision to sleep with Big to her viewers because she has already confessed her sexual desire for him in her direct confessional. She also admits to not knowing whether long-term couples began with sex on the first date as she pauses and adds “I bet,” putting her insecurity and uncertainty over this on display. Dykes refers to this moment as Carrie’s way of reassuring herself as her reaction to having acted on her sexual desires makes her worry that she may have possibly ruined the possibility of a relationship (Dykes 57). This way, she comes from a private place of reassuring herself that she can possibly still pursue a relationship with Big, and decides to share this reassurance publicly with her viewers and readers. She does not try to trick her viewers into thinking she will succeed in gaining a relationship with Big, nor does she try to explain her choice to have sex with him. As Dykes points out:

Her voice-over functions as a nagging voice in her head, undercutting unmediated female sexual desire. However, this voiceover is not meant to indicate that women should not act of sexual desire; rather, it serves as recognition of the complex relationship many women have to their own sexuality” (58).

This way, the show exposes that though Carrie pursues her sexual desires with Big, this does not guarantee her overall satisfaction. Carrie's relationship with her sexuality is only one form of pleasure for her, as she also wants to pursue a serious relationship with Big. This way, the show admits the complexity that comes with feminine satisfaction— pleasure cannot be confessed through making the 'invisible' visible because, as Carrie points out, there are several different elements, sexually or not, of pursuing and achieving pleasure. The show does not try to find a way to prove Carrie's satisfaction because she pursues it for herself, not for the viewer's or even Big's sake. Therefore, Carrie confessing concerns over sleeping with Big is not her way of explaining her choice to have sex with him to her viewers to please them. Instead, it becomes her way of 'speaking sex' in starting a discussion about how she has a complicated relationship with her sexuality as she does not know if her sexual desires compliment or take away from her other needs and wants. Thus, her voice-over does the exact opposite of hard-core by not ensuring what cannot be guaranteed; whereas, hard-core tries to promise a visualization of pleasure it cannot visibly show.

Phallic Narrative: Seeking the 'Sexual Truth'

Another way *Sex* admits through confession that there is no singular 'truth' to feminine satisfaction and sexuality is through the use of multiple plots and perspectives. Before looking at *Sex*, it is essential to understand that in looking back at Williams's discussion of confession, she examines hard-core's goal to seek a 'sexual truth.' This can further be explained through her exploration of a phallic narrative, which I will later argue *Sex's* multi-plot and different perspectives reject. First, before going into what it means for cinema to be 'phallic,' I must first define fetishism through Williams. She defines fetishism through Freud's theory, which states that it is the "process whereby a male viewer of female sexual difference 'masters' the threat of

castration,” which is posed by the sexual difference between male and female organs (41). She continues, “Because the naked female body, when first seen by the little boy, seemed to ‘lack’ a penis, the unconscious desire of the male who has recourse to fetishism to disavow this ‘lack’ by putting a fetish in its place,” which becomes a substitute for the phallus (Williams 41). Because of this ‘lack’ of the phallus, hard-core runs into the issue, as discussed prior, of the ‘frenzy of the visible’ – how hard-core attempts to discover the ‘truth’ to female bodily pleasures that are ‘invisible’ unlike the phallus, which is extremely visible (Williams 50). As Williams describes in terms of fetishism:

For while a significant aspect of cinema’s development as a narrative form accepts and even cultivates, in the ‘masquerade of femininity,’ a range of fetish substitutes for the visible truth of women’s sexual difference, hard core is the one film genre that always tries to strip this mask away and see the visible ‘truth’ of sexual pleasure itself (49-50).

In searching for this ‘truth’ of female pleasure, Williams describes hard-core’s search an “(impossible) attempt” as female bodily pleasures and “orgasmic excitement” can “never be objectively measured” (50). This leads to her conclusion that this attempt tries to argue for a “fundamental sameness of male and female pleasure” (Williams 50). In other words, hard-core’s attempt to expose female bodily pleasures by replacing them with male arousal and ejaculation restricts them to the ‘sexual truth’ and visible proof male pleasures display (Williams 50). Referring back to the male gaze that utilizes a plot with a linear storytelling function that “is analogous to the male sex act in its forward motion, its drive for closure and conclusion,” hard-core adopts a phallogentric form that attempts to drive female bodily pleasures towards a ‘conclusion’ or ‘climax’ it cannot visually prove through the use of male orgasm (Cohen 79). In furthering my argument, I will continue to look at how the show’s multiple perspectives and

plots, such as between Carrie and Big, or between the four main characters, only highlights that *Sex* does not see “from the single perspective of the phallus” nor does its plot drive towards a ‘single truth’ or ‘climax’ (Williams 56). Rather, the show’s engagement with different perspectives displays the multitude of ‘truths’ that arise from the lack of “sameness” between feminine and masculine characters’ pleasures, as well as between the four main women’s desires.

Multi-Perspective and Multi-Plot in *SATC*

First, I want to look at Carrie’s voice-over in contrast to her actions with Big, which highlights the difference between how the two characters confess their satisfaction, and thus rejects the phallogocentric narratives argument for a fundamental “sameness” of male and female pleasure. After having confessed her concerns and promises that she will not be the “first one to speak,” Carrie breaks her promise and asks Big: “That was really and completely...on the first date. I mean, I didn’t plan that you know. What do you think?” However, Big only replies with: “I thought it was really pretty great, but what do I know? You feel like having Szechwan?” The lack of concern in his tone shows that he is not as concerned with the fact that they slept with each other on the first date as Carrie. The show does not offer Big’s narration, so I cannot say what his pleasures were in this instance, however his lack of concern does insinuate that he was pursuing satisfaction sexually and has gained it; whereas, Carrie’s desire for a relationship now conflicts with how she feels about having had sex with him. Also, by exposing that he thought the sex was “really pretty great” but also admits “but what do I know?” the show entails that Big’s satisfaction does not guarantee that the sex was pleasurable for both of them. Just because he thought the sex was “really pretty great” for him does not mean that the sex was, in fact, great. This way, by revealing Big’s perspective, *Sex* shows that it does not measure feminine pleasure through masculine pleasure because he does not speak for the both of them.

Another way that the show displays a lack of “sameness” between the character’s pleasures is through the contrast between their actions and Carrie’s voice-over. Dykes argues that her narration, “serves a purpose in presentations of female-male conversations, as she functions as an interpreter and fills in the ‘gaps’ between what is spoken and what is actually meant between men and women” (50). This scene displays this through her voice-over’s confession as the scene shifts to them going out for Szechwan: “Has Mr. Big discovered my weakness for great sex and greasy Chinese, or was going out to dinner merely a diversionary tactic to keep me from spending the night?” Here, *Sex* now also exposes Carrie’s sexual satisfaction as she admits the sex was “great.” By doing so through her voice-over, the show then does not use Big’s pleasure to measure Carrie’s, but gives her a voice to confess her own pleasures to her viewers. Not only that, Carrie also confesses concern that going out for Szechwan may just be Big’s tactic to get her to not stay overnight, which shows that though she has gained sexual satisfaction, she still wants to also pursue a romantic relationship with him, thus showing that her satisfaction cannot be measured. This way, *Sex* admits the multiplicity of satisfaction— in this case feminine satisfaction— and that there is no way to fulfill or entirely prove this. Therefore, the show uses feminine and masculine perspectives to show that the narrative does not depend of Big’s pleasure to inform or measure Carrie’s, as well as uses voice-over to give Carrie a chance to confess her own pleasure, and to show that there is no ‘singular truth’ or ‘conclusion’ to her desire for Big— sexually and romantically.

Finally, the show admits that it cannot find a ‘singular truth’ to feminine satisfaction— sexually or not— through using the different point of views of the four main women. One obvious way the show succeeds in doing this is through its multi-plot structure. Through this, the show follows each of the four women embark on their own experiences, and therefore does not follow

one perspective to give a 'singular truth' to feminine pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction.

However, it is also important to note that in following the stories of Carrie, Charlotte, Samantha, and Miranda, the show admits that it does not serve to depict every representation of feminine sexuality or satisfaction. In Kim Akass's article, "Sex and the City Finales," she brings up a problematic point for the show: "Representative of a certain time and place (New York's Manhattan, the turn-of-the-millennium years), aired during a particular ideological shift (pre- to post- September 11, 2001), and privileging a certain class of women (white, liberal, single, and mostly heterosexual), the show seemed to speak only to a limited audience" (318). Though Akass has a point for how this may make the show flawed, in phallogocentric terms, the show admits that it cannot represent these experiences for all women through only focusing on these four types of women. Through this admission, the show only emphasizes that there is not one singular truth to how women should, or do, pursue their wants. Thus, by not trying to create these four main women's narratives as a way to measure every woman's pursuits and pleasures, the show then rejects the singular, phallic, perspective.

Another way, though, that the show uses the four women to show different perspectives is through opening up their discussions amongst each other to viewers, which shows the multiplicity of the four women's' desires. Dyke's refers to these instances as "girl talk," in which she explains that Carrie's voice-over narration does not need to intervene as there is a mutual sense of self-disclosure amongst the women, and that because the viewer is privy to "girl talk" as well as Carrie's narration, "a feeling of closeness is established between Carrie and the viewer" (50). In other words, without Carrie's narration, "girl talk" not only proves to be an instance in which Carrie can publicly confess her private thoughts to her girlfriends, but where her girlfriends can also confess their private thoughts as well. Girl talk also signifies the

conversations that apply to Carrie's column in which she shares her girlfriend's stories to the public. Similar to how the show opens up the four women's' discussions to the viewer, Carrie shares these conversations as a way of 'speaking sex' in her column— and thus, girl talk becomes a place for the other women to publicly confess their private thoughts like Carrie.

In looking at girl talk's significance, the private confessions amongst the four women also utilize the use of materialism the show embraces to express their different lifestyles and point of views. For instance, "Secret Sex" shows how each of the four women 'speak sex' during an instance of girl talk before Carrie embarks on her date with Big. This session of girl talk arises out of Carrie's naked dress as Charlotte "interprets her wardrobe as a sign to have sex with Big," but Miranda confirms that "she's not going to have sex, she's just gonna look like sex" (Dykes 56). Like the naked dress, the four women's wardrobes compliment the different advices they give Carrie on whether or not to have sex on the first date. Just as the naked dress foreshadows Carrie's pursuit for sexual pleasure with Big, the other women's wardrobe (and props) show how these women pursue their sexual desires as well. The conversation starts with Charlotte, who warns Carrie that if she is "serious" about Big, she cannot sleep with him on the first date, but has to make him wait after *at least* five dates. She wears reading glasses and a sweater that covers her arms and shoulders, while she is also in charge of holding the cookies. Just as she holds the sweets, her wardrobe insinuates that she is 'sweet' and 'innocent,' whose more conservative in pursuing sexual pleasure as emphasized through her commitment to sticking to the 'rules.' Miranda, on the other hand, shows a little more skin as she wears a tank top and has a scarf wrapped around her shoulders, as well as holds a glass of wine to herself. She, as her wardrobe and props suggest, plays the 'middle man' between Charlotte and Samantha. She tells Carrie not to "fuck on the first date" but also mocks Charlotte's commitment to the 'rules.'

Samantha portrays the opposite to Charlotte as she wears a black jumpsuit and pours champagne as she says: “hey, if *it* happens, *it* happens.” The black jumpsuit signifies Samantha’s rebellious nature as its darker color separates her from the group and the top half of it looks as though she is wearing a halter dress, but as the camera zooms out and exposes her bottom half, it shows that she actually wears a jumpsuit. In a way, the jumpsuit in conjunction with how she takes charge of pouring the wine symbolizes that Samantha ‘wears the pants’ in her relationship with her sexuality. She makes her *own* rules despite the common expectations of feminine sexuality, as shown when she tells Carrie: “Reality check: a guy can just as easily dump you if you fuck him on the first date as he can if you wait until the tenth.” Dykes refers to the various advices from the four women as “viewpoints,” which shows how these women signify different point of views about, in this instance, sex (56). The way that *Sex* not only portrays these women through their words, but also through how they dress and act, successfully displays the different perspectives from the four women. Dykes explains the significance of these instances of girl talk:

These conversations, whether they take place over cocktails with all the women on a Friday night or in an early morning phone call, are part of a long tradition of ‘girl talk’ as well as the more specific consciousness-raising tactics of the second-wave women’s movement. While the characters are rarely driven to take public, political action about these issues, the honesty makes the personal political by allowing the women, as well as female viewers, to recognize the commonality and, at times, gender-specific nature of their problems (Dykes 55).

By having these women honestly confess to one another on how they pursue their sexual relationships– whether that means following the rules or not– not only reveals how feminine desires are complex because outside expectations impose certain standards of feminine sexuality,

but also highlights the multiplicity of feminine satisfaction as these women pursue their sexual pleasures in different ways. Therefore, by having these women embody different viewpoints– in this instance sexual viewpoints– the show embraces an anti-phallic narrative because it rejects using one singular ‘truth’ or perspective to inform the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to pursue pleasure.

Conclusion

Kim Akass ends her article on a hopeful note: “Maybe our girls will be back: older and wiser, still friends, and embracing the resolution of their stories. We can only wait and hope for that final finale” (321). There are so many pieces to this conclusion that demonstrate why *Sex and the City*, though flawed, proves itself as a form of television that progresses towards bringing forth narratives that embody an honest depiction of feminine pursuits for desire, pleasure, and satisfaction. First and foremost, Akass refers to the four main characters as “our girls,” whom “we” can only wait and hope to see again. The main characters do speak to women as a group– as a “we.” And, in return, they become “our girls” as if the characters were ‘our’ friends, as they share their secrets and stories with ‘us.’ This way, the show successfully engages an audience– primarily feminine audience– because it shows an honest depiction of feminine sexuality and satisfaction unlike other forms of cinema. However, the most significant piece of her conclusion I want to uncover is that she wishes for the show to embrace a “resolution.” Yet, isn’t the fact that *Sex* rejects the traditional cinematic narrative that drives for a conclusion or climax what makes this type of show special? Instead of focusing on a resolution for its four main characters, *Sex* puts its energy into making the women the subjects in their stories. By focusing on the main characters’ private pursuits publicly– even if they do not succeed in fulfilling these pursuits– the show influences a progressive movement in making private feminine desires public, but also making an honest depiction of them public instead of measuring

these desires through social norms and masculine pleasure. In the spirit of Carrie's endings to her articles: Then I realized, *Sex and the City* successfully places its women as the subjects in their city through giving them a voice in how they pursue their desires, and thus, gives the four main women an opportunity to become 'our girls' as they 'speak sex'— among other things— that influences us to pursue our private desires as well.

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