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SEX AND SUBJECTIVITY

Gazing and Glancing in HBO's *Sex and the City*

For the past three seasons, HBO's popular, Emmy-Award winning series *Sex and the City* has opened with a introductory sequence of shots that epitomize the paradoxical relationship between female subjectivity and objectivity that the show offers its viewers. In these shots, Carrie Bradshaw, the lead protagonist played by Sarah Jessica Parker, walks along a populated street, looking around her immediate locale. Moving from an atypical extreme close-up of Parker's expressive eyes, through a series of close-ups that reveal more of her body, the camera settles on a medium long shot of Parker, essentially providing the audience with an unflinching *gaze* at Parker in the process of *looking*. In these shots, Parker blinks, stares, raises her eyebrow, rolls her eyes, and peers over her shoulder—all gestures which indicate to the viewer that she is avidly and actively engaged in her ability to gaze. So, too, is the viewer engaged in such a project, for, as the camera's focus on Parker progressively reveals, she is dressed in a bizarre combination of feminine visual markers: high heels, a sheer pink tank top and a translucent tutu-like skirt reveal her body as most visibly *available*. However, just as Parker's form is fully exposed to the camera, she is drenched by water from the previous shot's bus rolling along the city street. Tripping, Parker's Carrie Bradshaw recovers herself to look at the bus where she is startlingly confronted by her own image: across the length of the bus is an advertisement for her newspaper column in which Carrie reclines on her stomach, hips upward, thighs bare, in a flesh colored dress. As the camera looks straight onto the bus, Carrie's *advertised* body is centered, and the surrounding ad's copy states "Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex* ... *(and isn't afraid to ask)" ["Sex" 1]. The opening credits' final shot shows Carrie looking behind her and toward the camera, presumably in shock at being attacked by the very vehicle which showcases her own image.

I begin this paper with a description of these shots because they clearly, if not ironically, address a vital aspect of the show and the topic of this paper: the ways in which *Sex and the City* presumes to offer its female characters a platform to look, only to deflect that gaze via the camera's display of their bodies. As with the opening credits, where Carrie can be seen as a subject actively engaged in looking, the camera has also, already, objectified her, displaying her body on the street in formations as spectacularized as her advertised and sexualized body exhibited across the bus. Thus, while the script may (or may not) open a space for the show's four protagonists to look at and talk about sex, the camera's surveillance of both their conversations and their bodies objectifies and commodifies them, pre-determining their position as corporeal objects. They may look—but that look is always returned, in manners always stronger, in methods always contained.

As a product of a premier cable channel, and one of its most successful original series, the award-winning *Sex and the City* also occupies an intriguing space in modern American television; as the creation of the television industry, produced, directed and orchestrated by talent accustomed to primetime television, *Sex and the City* also has the flexibility of content and camerawork that only cable access currently allows.¹ Likewise, the position of the show in conjunction with contemporary technology—DVD, VHS, websites, surround-sound systems, high resolution and large-screen television sets—raises several interesting theoretical questions regarding the televisual and contemporary looking relations. Using *Sex and the City* as a framework to consider these televisual situations, this paper is concerned to show how changes in technology and broadcasting alongside filmic production values challenge John Ellis's contentions that television is the site for the glance rather than the gaze.² In so doing, this paper addresses several questions regarding contemporary televisual experience(s). Namely, if the camera contributes to the objectification of women—even in productions showcasing actresses en-

1. Now in its sixth season (*Sex and the City* begins production on its sixth and final season 31 March 2003), *Sex and the City* is HBO's second most popular original series (McConville 3) and the first cable show to win an Emmy for best comedy series ["HBO"]. Likewise, the show has garnered Emmys for Sara Jessica Parker (best actress), Kim Cattrall (best supporting actress), Michael Patrick King (director), as well as awards for casting and costuming; the show also received a Screen Actors Guild award for "outstanding performance ensemble in a comedy series," and two Golden Globe awards for best actress (Parker) and comedy series ["HBO"]. In 1999, the show was further honored with a 1999 Lucy Award for quality women's shows [Potts 1-2].

2. While Ellis is not the sole originator of the glance theory, he is, as John Thorton Caldwell notes, "the most forceful proponent of this definitive view" [25]. Moreover, other theorists who proposed the idea of the glance (Raymond Williams, Marshall McLuhan) came to different conclusions regarding the ways and means by which the glance takes effect [Caldwell 25]. Thus, I am specifically addressing Ellis's theory of the glance in this paper.

gaged in looking—are there any sites of resistance available to television’s female spectators? Does *Sex and the City* and its employment of commodification of consumer goods reinforce women’s growing independence in the marketplace, or does the show merely offer an updated version of 1930s Hollywood product tie-ins aimed at the female consumer?

In her seminal 1975 article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey contends that classic Hollywood film functioned so as to advance the “socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” [22]. Here, Mulvey argued that “the male protagonist in the text is always in control of the gaze, the looker rather than the object of the look” [“General” 5] whilst, simultaneously, “cinema builds the way [women are] to be looked at into the spectacle itself” [Mulvey 32]. Hence, when the “objective” camera zooms in to foreground the female protagonists’ features, and when a film is edited to cut to a male reaction-shot regarding their bodies, the camera instigates the means by which, and the point of view from which, women are to be observed. Thus, as Mary Ann Doane contends, “for the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image [for] she is the image” [*Femme* 181].

In contrast to Mulvey, John Ellis’s highly influential 1982 text, *Visible Fictions*, argues that television “engages the glance rather than the gaze, and thus has a different relation to voyeurism from cinema’s” [128]. Ellis posits that there are many reasons for this, among them the small size and low resolution of television screens [127], the familiar setting and normal lighting conditions that typically accompany television watching [127], television’s “framework of presence and immediacy” [135], its role of direct address [134], its infrequent display of female bodies [142], and its use of sound rather than visual images to “anchor meaning” [129]. Accordingly, Ellis’s text postulates that television creates an environment whereby “no extraordinary effort is being invested in the activity of looking” [137]. Instead, Ellis argues that “[b]roadcast TV’s level of investment in voyeuristic activity is generally not intense enough to produce the investigatory and forward-moving narratives that are characteristic of entertainment cinema” [143] and thus to objectify women.

Garnering supporters and detractors alike, Ellis’s theory has, for the most part, been popularly accepted by television theorists over the past two decades. Nevertheless, there are many initial problems with his contentions, as John Thornton Caldwell succinctly delineates:

The viewer is not always, nor inherently, distracted. Second, if theorists would consider the similarities between television and film—rather than base universalizing assumptions on their “inevitable” differences—glance and surrender

theories would fall from their privileged theoretical pedestals. [...] Finally, even if viewers are inattentive, television works hard visually, not just through aural appeals, to attract the attention of the audience; after all, it is still very much in television's best narrative and economic interests to engage the viewer. Theorists should not jump to theoretical conclusions just because there is an ironing board in the room." [Caldwell 27]

Alongside Caldwell's contentions, many technological factors make Ellis's theory of the televisual glance rather doubtful today. The ownership and use of both VHS and DVD formats, for example, allow for multiple screenings of the same show, and judging from the over 433,000 mentions of *Sex and the City* on websites that the Google search engine records, multiple and complex viewings of television shows are not infrequent occurrences; HBO's office website for *Sex and the City* alone offers three separate discussion forums for in-depth episode discussion.³ Moreover, the accessibility of videocassettes and DVDs for rent and purchase has encouraged television viewers to watch both movies and shows when most convenient, and when attention might be devoted to them. HBO offers seasons one through four of *Sex and the City* on both DVD and VHS formats for purchase, and all versions are widely available from rental stores as well. In turn, DVDs, via speed and zoom features, allow viewers to control these prerecorded looking relations even further. Digital technology has even enhanced viewers' abilities to gaze, through powerful computer programs that now permit the cutting, pasting, cropping and highlighting of filmic images, and websites, such as HBO's, allow viewers to preview, screen and download clips of such visions. These changes in media technology and product availability demonstrate the ability of active viewership—as well as the desire of viewers to engage with television shows actively.

Beyond technology, television's production values have changed considerably since Ellis's 1982 writing, and the amount of money spent on most productions has increased dramatically from previous decades. HBO, for example, spent an estimated 1.5 million dollars per half-hour episode of *Sex and the City* in 1999 [McCorville 3], and spends quite a bit more today for its stars. Moreover, cable networks are also able to offer two other forms of gazing that network television is unable to provide. Without commercials between scenes to divert the spectator's attention, HBO tenders the uninterrupted viewing more akin to the filmic experience Mulvey describes than the televisual encounters of Ellis; moreover, without network standards against showing nudity and sexual relations, HBO can (and does) display the

3. The website features a bulletin board section, for posting questions and threads; a "city speak" section, where "fans speak their minds about Carrie's question of the week;" and a "think and type" section where users reflect on Carrie's weekly query ["HBO"].

female body in ways that Ellis claimed it could not [Ellis 142].⁴ Through production values and technological changes, coupled with premier cable's permissive content and lack of interruption, *Sex and the City* thus provides viewers with looking relations far more akin to gazing than glancing.

In each episode, *Sex and the City* employs a complex relationship of script to camera work with regards to this gaze. Based on the life and columns of real-life journalist Candace Bushnell, the series revolves around the exploits of the show's columnist protagonist Carrie Bradshaw (Parker) and her three cohorts: Samantha (Kim Cattrall), Charlotte (Kristin Davis) and Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), who play, respectively, the sexually-promiscuous, the sexually naive, and the sexually bitter stereotypical female roles and who, according to critic Tamala Edwards, "live the supaffly [sic] life and discard men quicker than last season's bag and shoes" [37]. In turn, and with the revolving sexual partners Edwards notes in her article, each episode focuses on a central question regarding sex which Carrie is exploring for her column, questions which, to borrow from Avis Lewallen, offer "almost a mini-encyclopaedia of female sexuality" [89]. The episodes then find their plot in exploring the different answers each friend offers to quandaries such as "Can women have sex like men?"; "How often is normal?"; "Should one exploit one's sexuality for fun and profit?"; "Is there a cold war between marrieds and singles?"; and "Are men in their twenties the new designer drug?" ["Sex" 1].⁵ All questions listed were key episodes in season one of *Sex and the City*.

As she searches for evidence to prove or disprove her questions regarding contemporary sexual relations, Carrie's career as a columnist situates her similarly to her position in the opening credits: as a voyeur of sexual secrets and an observer of her visual and aural surroundings. However, while actress Sarah Jessica Parker raves that "all the men on the show are objectified," it is the script and not the director's camera that provides such objectification [quoted in Kratochvil 33]. Rather, it is Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda who are made the objects of the camera's gaze, not their weekly male counterparts. Thus, while we *hear* their thoughts on men and men's physiques, the camera *offers* visions of their bodies in dialogue, sending the mixed message that women have aural authority if not visual autonomy. Likewise,

4. HBO's reputation for "adult content" and "brief nudity" is well-known [Will 73] and in their article, "Let's Talk About Sex," Antonin Kratochvil and A. J. Jacobs write that "the famously hands-off HBO (home of *Real Sex* and *Dream On*) will let Star [*Sex and the City*'s writer and producer] write racy" [Kratochvil 33]. Likewise, In another article by A. J. Jacobs, "The XXX Files," the author ponders: "Is there anything that's too hot for pay-TV?" [26]. While basic cable and network channels have more stringent rules of conduct, "no F-word, no frontal nudity," premier cable can offer these things and thereby provide very different looking relations than can network TV [Jacobs 21].

5. All questions listed were key episodes in season one of *Sex and the City*.

in the scenes where the protagonists are with men, the camera focuses on the women via male reaction-shots, female right of center framing and single-camera shots which “adhere to the codes and conventions of traditional cinema” [Hayward 320]. It is the women, not the men, who are exclusively displayed as objects on-screen. Being the *watched watcher* is the only filmic subject position the show promotes for women.

*Sex and the City*s veiled objectifying gaze is never more clearly at work than in the first season’s eleventh episode entitled “The Drought.”⁶ In this segment, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte are alarmed that they are not having sufficient sex, and Carrie searches for responses to her column’s topic: “How often is normal?” Worried about her own relationship, and pacing before her apartment window, Carrie, framed in a medium long shot, catches sight of her neighbors having sex in the building across from her window. As the camera cuts to a shot of a naked man and woman openly copulating in a window identical to and directly across from Carrie’s own, the camera begins a series of shot/reaction shots, all conjoined by Carrie’s voice-over telling the viewer that they are “a couple so obviously into each other there was only one thing to do: watch” [“Sex” 1]. While the dialogue and the reverse shot technique initially establish Carrie as the voyeur in the scene, the camera soon focuses on displaying Carrie’s watching body in parallel to the body of the passive woman whose form covers that of the actively engaged man. Soon Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha join Carrie, ironically demonstrating their spectatorship by describing themselves as “the nineties version of *matinée ladies*” [“Sex”] reflecting, once again, in dialogue, their belief in themselves as autonomous possessors of the gaze.

Nevertheless, and despite the episode’s obvious references to Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, neither Miranda, Charlotte, Samantha nor Carrie have what Laura Mulvey describes as the “use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point-of-view of the male protagonist [to] draw the spectators deeply into [their] position, making them share [their] uneasy gaze” [Mulvey 31]. Not only does the scene’s dialogue shift back to their own sexual frustrations, the camera’s focus is now directly upon them rather than upon the object of their commingled gaze. Thus, the viewer sees the four women, looking, even bending their heads to the left to continue watching the shifting couple; however, unlike in Hitchcock’s film, the audience is not absorbed into the women’s voyeuristic situation [Mulvey 31]; rather, the spectator is offered merely the amusement of *watching them watching*. Further unlike Jimmy Stewart, theirs is a passive not an active gaze; it is easily divert-

6. *Sex and the City* has a variety of writers and directors. “The Drought” was directed by Matthew Harrison and written by Michael Green and Michael Patrick King.

ed by their conversation and their focus on eating their “matinee snacks.”⁷ The result is a distancing, de-erotizing of the woman’s gaze [Hansen 271] which demonstrates Jill Dolan’s contentions that “women cannot simply express their subjectivity by objectifying men. A nude male in an objectified position remains an individual man, not necessarily a representation of the male” [Dolan 124]. Here, even the male being watched is in control—of his partner, and of his scrutinizing neighbors via a camera which never makes him into a spectacle. Viewers thus, ironically, watch the lead women more from his perspective than they do from the show’s own “matinée ladies.”

This desire to be watched is also built into the *mise-en-scène* and the dialogue, for, in each episode, when the women are not discussing their sexual relationships with men, they are conferring about purchases certain to garner male attention. In her discussion of blockbuster novels targeted to women, Avis Lewallen argues that the pages of such books drip with references to “expensive commodities and designer names [that] function as social guides, so full are they of useful tips on how to conduct yourself in difficult situations or upmarket company” [89]. With constant references to designers such as Versace, Dolce & Gabbana and Fendi, the show, too, discusses upscale brands as if they were mentioned to guide the spectator.

Perhaps more significantly, there are several links between these less-than-veiled references to haute couture in *Sex and the City* and a pattern of marketing goods to “matinee women” through filmic imagery. In his article, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window,” Charles Eckert writes about the relationship between product tie-ins and the female spectator in the 1930s. Noting that the U.S. economy became “suddenly aware of the importance of the consumer and of the dominant role of women in the purchasing of most consumer goods” [116], Eckert discusses the role Hollywood played in designing a relationship between on-screen personalities and consumer goods for female spectatorship. According to Eckert, by showcasing “fashions, furnishings, accessories, cosmetics and other manufactured items” [101], Hollywood was able to turn high-end brand names into labels as familiar “as the stars themselves” [104].

An interesting website testifying to this connection is “Carrie’s style”: “the first ever website dedicated solely to Carrie Bradshaw [...] and her fabulous fashion sense” [“Carrie’s” 1]. With pictures and pointers on Carrie’s choices in dresses, suits, scarves, hats, gloves, corsages, purses, belts and the like, this website offers informative tidbits such as “the vast majority of her shoes are Manolo Blahnik’s, with Jimmy Choo’s as a back up” alongside the sale pri-

7. One could posit their inattention as a commentary on the potential for Ellis’s glance, via distracted attention, in the cinema as well.

ce of such items: \$300-400 ["Carrie's"]. Rather than seeing "Carrie's Style" as a fan anomaly, this is exactly the information that other websites dedicated to the show discuss as well. HBO's official website, for instance, offers visitors fashion slide shows, behind the scenes conversations with the show's fashion designers, and an address book with contact information to the "shopping havens" where the "girls are shopping" ["HBO"]. In so doing, *Sex and the City* online links reinforce the connection between the show and the commodified bodies of models in *Vogue*, *Elle* or *Cosmopolitan*. Indeed *Cosmopolitan* made this connection explicit when it offered its July 2001 readers a "Your Sex and the City Summer Handbook" which coupled aspects of the show (such as definitions of the show's "vixen vocab," and advice column answers for the characters' love life dilemmas) with behind the scenes "fashion news flash" on what the show's actresses would be wearing, and photos of the purses "the fab four will carry this season" ["Your" 130-134]. Moreover, the article's offer of a website quizz "to discover which diva you're most like" links directly with the offer of shopping information available both in the magazine and on-line ["Your" 132, 134].

On-screen, on-line and in magazines, *Sex and the City* takes its cue from these early 1930s commodity outreaches to female spectators. As characters, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha concurrently model and discuss their purchases while shopping, dining, and attending manicure sessions that demonstrate to viewers the strong link between their "independence" as women and their purchasing power in the consumer marketplace. According to *Newsweek* and *Entertainment Weekly*, *Sex and the City* can be attributed with both the rise of Prada as a brand-name and the sharp reemergence of *Cosmopolitan*s (the favored drink of *Sex and the City*s four protagonists) in bars across the United States, respectively [Jacobs, Chang]. Yet, this connection between independence and consumption, subjectivity via purchasing power, is problematic at best, as Mary Ann Doane directly addresses when she writes: "The woman's ability to purchase, her subjectivity as a consumer, is qualified by a relation to commodities that is also ultimately subordinated to that intensification of the affective value of sexual relations that underpins a patriarchal society" [Doane, "Economy" 120]. Thus, while the ability to purchase goods independently is a form of power, such authority is subordinate to the system in which said goods are being purchased by said bodies.

Moreover, if, as Jill Dolan contends, "gender can't be performed without considering ethnicity, class and sexuality," the show's employment, from its lead protagonists to its one-line extras, of all-white, all-rich, all-thin bodies, covertly signifies important messages to women regarding their bodies, their purchasing power and their subjectivity [Dolan 109].⁸ In *Sex and the City*, the

ubiquitous absence of minority, overweight, lesbian and working bodies further delineates the norm that the only women who deserve to be gazed upon are those whose bodies signify as thin, white, and rich. Sadly, beneath the show's surface bravado of female independence and autonomy, *Sex and the City*'s message seems to be that such power lies in being wealthy, white, gaunt, beautiful and chic. And when you cannot control the right to look, maintain a body worthy of being looked at instead.

Sex and the City arrived on the air in the late 1990s at a time when similar contemporary works also explored the single life of white urban women. From Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* to Melissa Banks's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* to Fox Network's *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* is just one of many mediums exploring the ever-increasing numbers of single women.⁹ Like these texts, the show is often praised for its accurate, amusing portrayal of women and for its attempts to represent women as powerful players in the world of commerce, employment, sexuality and decision-making. However, it is Miriam Hansen's discussion of mainstream films geared toward female audiences that best summarizes the problems with HBO's award winning show:

The structural instability of the female spectator position in mainstream cinema surfaces as a textual instability in films specifically addressed to women, as an effect of the collision between immediate market interests and institutional structures of vision" [Hansen 271]

The institutional structures of narrative cinema found in *Sex and the City*'s gaze upon its female protagonists coupled with its immediate market interests result in such instability. While the program desires to (re)present women and their sexuality in subject positions, the show's shots, angles, and mise-en-scene privileges a masculine gaze which, nonetheless, undermines that vision. *Sex and the City*, instead, offers its viewers the notion that subjectivity can be gar-

8. Moreover, the show's executive producer Darren Star, previously of *90210* and *Melrose Place* fame, administers an enormous role in who gets seen, who gets to see, and, in this case, who gets perceived as able to gaze.

9. Tamala Edwards notes that "Forty-three million women are currently single—more than 40% of all adult females, up from about 30% in 1960.[...] If you separate out women of the most marriageable age, the numbers are even more head snapping: in 1963, 83% of women 25 to 55 were married; by 1997 that figure had dropped to 65%" [36]. Like Edwards, Yahlin Chang finds that "American women are staying single longer than ever; since 1960, the number of unmarried women in their late 20s has tripled. And they make more money—single women make 92 percent of men's wages today" [Chang 61]. Edwards, too, sees these growing numbers and growing wages as demonstrating that "single women as a group are wielding more and more clout" [36] and, thus, more and more shows, books and films are being created around this growing demographic [36] as publishing houses churn "out a cascade of books about the trials and triumphs of single, urban, female life" [Chang 60]. See Tamala M. Edwards's article, "Flying Solo" and Yahlin Chang's "Sex and the Single Girl" for further reading.

nered only through fashionable objects that, in turn, serve to objectify the body on-screen.¹⁰

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