

# “LIVING IN REALITY MEANS LIVING IN PAIN, FEAR, OR BROOKLYN”: THE REPRESENTATION OF NEW YORK IN *SEX AND THE CITY*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The importance of New York in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) is explicitly acknowledged in its very title. The opening credits already announce that “the City” is going to play an essential role in the series, virtually becoming its fifth character. The aim of this article is to discuss *Sex and the City*’s representation of New York, which is clearly reminiscent of Woody Allen’s cinema: as is often the case in Allen’s films, the Big Apple is realistically portrayed and highly romanticised at the same time. This article analyses Allen’s influence on *Sex and the City*’s depiction of this city, which is alternatively presented as the perfect scenario for romantic integration and as a cruel and chaotic dating “hell”.

**Keywords:** *Sex and the City*, Woody Allen, representation of New York.

**Title in Spanish:** “Living in Reality Means Living in Pain, Fear, or Brooklyn”: la representación de Nueva York en *Sex and the City*

**Resumen:** La importancia de la ciudad de Nueva York en *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) se hace evidente no sólo en su título, sino también en su cabecera, que anuncia el papel primordial que la ciudad va a desempeñar en el texto, hasta el punto de convertirse prácticamente en el quinto personaje de la serie. Este artículo analiza la representación que *Sex and the City* hace de Nueva York en relación con el cine de Woody Allen: como suele suceder en las películas del director neoyorquino, la serie ofrece un retrato simultáneamente realista e idealizado de la Gran Manzana. Este artículo considera la influencia de Allen en la representación que *Sex and the City* hace de Nueva York, una ciudad que unas veces se presenta como escenario perfecto para la integración romántica y otras como una caótica “jungla” sentimental.

**Palabras clave:** *Sex and the City*, Woody Allen, representación de Nueva York.

*Sex and the City*<sup>2</sup> is a popular American TV show broadcast by HBO between 1998 and 2004. Despite being addressed to an apparently limited demographic in an even more limited medium (HBO is a subscription-only, premium cable channel),<sup>3</sup> the show enjoyed

<sup>1</sup> **Date of reception:** 29 April 2011

**Date of acceptance:** 19 July 2011

<sup>2</sup> From now on, *Sex and the City* will be referred to as SATC.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of SATC’s first broadcasting (1998-2004), HBO only reached thirty-two million homes, in contrast with the networks’ access to at least one hundred million (Nelson 2002a: 30).

an unprecedented level of popularity in its heyday: critical acclaim<sup>4</sup> was accompanied by audience figures – 10.6 million viewers gathered in front of their TV sets in order to watch its eagerly anticipated finale (Braxton 2004). More than a decade after its debut, the popularity of the series does not seem to have decreased, as the success of its cinematic sequels and its constant re-runs in channels all around the world suggest.

SATC's impact on popular culture is matched by the considerable amount of attention it received on the part of the academia. Critics have written extensively about the series from different perspectives. The show has been most commonly discussed from a feminist point of view: during years, critics have engaged in a debate to elucidate whether SATC is a feminist or antifeminist show (Raven 1999; Bunting 2001; Kim 2001; Orenstein 2003; Wolf 2003; Brasfield 2006; Sayeau 2008). Similarly, many authors have been concerned with the series' progressive or conservative attitude towards the representation of gender, race, class and sexuality (Nelson 2002b; Arthurs 2003; Greven 2004; Gerhard 2005; Gill 2007; Baird 2008; Jermyn 2009; Escudero-Alías 2009). This essay will leave these issues aside, firstly, because there already exists an extensive body of critical work about them, and secondly, because the ambivalent ethos of self-interrogation which structures the text renders these debates virtually unsolvable. This article will deal with a less trite aspect of the show: the discourses it proposes about its setting, New York. With 40% of the program being shot on location (Sohn 2004: 101), the city occupies a highly conspicuous position in the series, so it is surprising how little critical attention it has received so far. Among the few authors who have analysed SATC's portrayal of New York is Fiona Handyside, who highlights the city's central role by stating that in this series, “it is far more difficult and heart-breaking to change your city than it is your partner” (2007: 407). Despite SATC's positive rendering of New York, she concludes that this idealisation has a conservative downside in the way female identity is coded: in her view, women's personal freedom is ultimately restricted to the confines of Manhattan (2007: 417). Deborah Jermyn, in her monographic book about the show also comments on its infatuation with the city (2009: 66). She emphasises the feminisation to which New York is subjected in the text, rendering it a harmless, safe space for women (2009: 82). As other authors have done before, she also points out the striking absence of class and race diversity in the series (2009: 82): as this essay will show, this is not “real” New York, but an A-list New York two degrees removed from reality.

SATC's representation of this city is worth analysing, especially if we take into account the show's popularity and cultural impact: SATC's success with the public has powerfully influenced the ways in which New York, and more specifically, Manhattan, is constructed at the turn of the millennium. In this sense, SATC points towards new directions in the way this city is going to be perceived in the future, but it relies heavily on the cinematic – rather than televisual – past that precedes it. This article argues that SATC's clearest reference in its representation of the Big Apple is Woody Allen's New York. Again, the connection between this series and this director's cinema is oddly absent from SATC's criticism, having been discussed only by Tom Grochowsky so far (2004). This article will try to shed some

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<sup>4</sup> During its six seasons, SATC was nominated for twenty-four Golden Globes, winning eight times. It was also nominated for fifty Emmy awards, winning seven times and becoming the first cable show to win the Emmy for an outstanding comedy series in 2001.

more light on Allen's influence on the show, focusing specifically on its depiction of the city of New York.<sup>5</sup>

#### INTRODUCING THE CITY

The importance of New York in the series is obvious. Not in vain, the "City" is explicitly mentioned in the show's title, coming only second after "sex". This gives us an idea of its relevance and points to the fact that the show does not simply deal with the protagonists' sexual adventures, but, more importantly, with the milieu in which they take place, focusing on contemporary urban issues such as the social games and sexual rituals which form an integral part of life in the city, and dissecting the dynamics of power among its inhabitants. Frequently referred to as "the fifth lady" by the actors and producers of the show (Sohn, 2004: 142), New York, and more specifically Manhattan, plays a paramount role in the lives of Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her friends. Indeed, Manhattan constitutes the ideal background for the protagonists' wild nights in town, romantic wanderings and shopping sprees. On the other hand, the city can also show a darker face: cold and alienating at times, its gigantic size and impersonal nature may also be a source of loneliness for its dwellers. This view of New York is clearly reminiscent of the cinema of Woody Allen. When talking about the city, referring to Allen, the New Yorker *par excellence* is practically unavoidable. No other director in the history of cinema has portrayed this city more often and with greatest care. For this reason, every time New York appears on screen today, whether on film or TV, the connection is inevitable. The case of SATC is slightly different, though, as the series self-consciously pays homage to Allen, drawing on "his" Manhattan and appropriating the image his films have created about the city.

Nowhere in the series is this textual homage clearer than in its title sequence, which is clearly evocative of the famous montage which opens *Manhattan*. Allen's film begins with an impressive series of shots of the city, beautifully accompanied by Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The music, together with the stunning views of the Big Apple in black and white romanticise the city "out of all proportion", as Allen's voice-over says at one point.<sup>6</sup> This opening sequence shows the director's love towards the city, enhancing its beauty and anticipating the numerous and equally idealised sights of Manhattan the film is going to offer the viewer. The montage is also accompanied by Allen's (or rather, Isaac's) humorous voice-over, who tries to find the right words for the opening scene of his novel. Thus, the spectator amusedly witnesses his clumsy attempts to find his voice until he finally comes up with the right words: "'Chapter One. He was as ... tough and romantic as the city he loved. Behind his black-rimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat.' I love this. 'New York was his town. And it always would be'". The openly comical undertones of these

<sup>5</sup> Since New York is featured in most of Allen's films in one way or another and an exhaustive analysis of the different discourses put forward by this director throughout his very extensive oeuvre would exceed the limits of this article, I will mainly refer to *Manhattan* (1979), the film I consider to be the most representative of Allen's ideas about the city.

<sup>6</sup> Much has been said by critics about this famous sequence. Ed Gallafent, for instance, argues that its effect is "to counterpoint achieved artistic expression identified with New York and the past (Gershwin) with attempts to find a mode of expression for the contemporary moment" (1989: 62).

words mock Isaac’s attempts at creating a transcending authorial power, but they do not diminish the omnipresence of his romantic perspective on the city, which is to dominate the whole narrative. Indeed, Allen’s unashamed subjectivity when it comes to representing his hometown on the screen is well-known. He has a profoundly personal view of the city and he never tries to disguise it. Through Allen’s eyes, we have access to a carefully selected array of sights and people that construct a very reduced universe usually focused on Jews and WASPs, overlooking New York’s multifarious reality. This is “Allen’s Manhattan”, his personal view of the city, not the real thing.

This subjective perspective of New York is also present in SATC and, as in the case of *Manhattan*, it is also announced in the opening sequence. Week after week, SATC’s viewers watch Carrie stroll the streets of her beloved New York to the rhythm of Douglas J. Cuomo’s jazzy, salsa beat. Close-ups of her face are intercut with POV shots of the city: the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building –which came to replace the World Trade Center after 9/11– or the Manhattan Bridge are displayed before our eyes, giving us a taste of what life in the city entails: excitement, power, fun... these meanings are conveyed through Carrie’s evident delight at what she sees together with the effect of dynamism produced by Cuomo’s lively theme and the quick editing. The links between both opening sequences are obvious: apart from SATC’s explicit reference to Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (\*But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972) in the bus ad for Carrie’s column, both sequences are connected by their will to establish the setting in which their respective stories are going to take place and to highlight its importance for the narrative. The evident differences in pacing are determined by their formats: in his 96-minute film, Allen devotes a nearly four-minute sequence to immerse the viewer in the magic of the city. SATC, on the contrary, with its 30-minute format, cannot afford such luxuries. Nevertheless, in just 35 seconds, the sequence still manages to encapsulate the same feelings of greatness and excitement Allen’s New York exudes, albeit, – as everything on TV – a little quicker.

As in the case of *Manhattan*, Carrie’s identification with the city is emphasised, as well as her subjectivity and her “authorial power”. In *Manhattan*, New York is presented through words, which are intimately linked to the narrator’s perspective. In the case of SATC’s opening sequence, words are replaced by Carrie’s gaze, which offers us her personal view of the city. Her navigation of the urban space confirms her agency through a series of shots of her face intercut with various sights of New York. In this way the show’s introduction constructs Carrie as an active subject in the narrative we are about to see: her bold outfit, flirtatious strutting and mild exhibitionism – her promotional photo on the bus features the famous “naked dress” –would seem to emphasise her “to-be-looked-at-ness” – an important element of her image – (Mulvey 1985: 309), but her self-confident attitude and the omnipresence of her gaze also anticipates her active role as narrator of the show. Indeed, after this sequence, everything is filtered through Carrie’s subjectivity, including the viewer’s experience of New York. The show’s opening, as in Allen’s case, is merely hinting at this fact. In the following lines, I will delve deeper into this subjective perspective of New York, exploring Allen’s relationship with Manhattan and SATC’s appropriation of these meanings.

## WOODY'S NEW YORK

"Chapter One. 'He adored New York City. He idolised it all out of proportion.' Uh, no. Make that 'he romanticised it all out of proportion. To him, no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsated to the great tunes of George Gershwin'" (*Manhattan*).

These are the opening words of *Manhattan*. They are part of the protagonist's voice-over as he tries to find a suitable beginning for his novel. This monologue is meant to define the character, but it might be easily applied to Allen himself as well, since both director and character are linked by their equally romantic ideas about New York. Allen's films repeatedly show gorgeous sights of the city which serve as backdrop for the exciting lives of their characters. These characters invariably belong to a middle/upper-class, educated, heterosexual, white milieu devoid of racial and sexual minorities. Working class or uneducated characters are also hard to find in Allen's films. This picture-perfect New York is, no doubt, Allen's ideal city, and he is not ashamed to admit it. With *Manhattan*, for instance, he said that he wished to communicate his "subjective, romantic view of contemporary life in Manhattan." (McCann, 1990:36). This was Allen's explicit aim in this film, but it is also a constant throughout his whole filmography, as many authors have noted (Wernblad, 1992; Lax, 2000; Girgus, 2002). Allen has directed forty-seven films to date, many of which have New York as setting or deal with it in some way. In all of them, the director shows a deeply personal perspective of the city, displaying a carefully selected array of realistically-looking images which are, nevertheless, by no means representative of what the city is really like. As Sam B. Girgus says, his films feature

romanticised New York streets that make the city an imaginary projection of an urban oasis imbued with enough stimulation to be exciting but never with so much as to become frightening. Interior spaces, whether in apartments or public areas, exude charm, taste, sophistication. The poor, the homeless, the insane and criminal, the deformed and disabled tend to live on other streets and occupy other spaces of New York. Similarly, at least until recently, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians usually remain off camera, thereby preventing the potential intrusion of dissonant social and political issues into Allen's narrative thrust and mental peregrinations (Girgus 2002: 4).

However, even though New York seems to be the only place Allen could live in, it is not always idyllic either. In his analysis of modern life and contemporary human relationships the city constitutes at times an important source of anxiety and alienation. Life in the big metropolis provides its dwellers with an abundance of cultural and intellectual stimuli as well as all kinds of exciting possibilities and services, like being able to order Chinese food at three in the morning. However, other kinds of "commodities", like moral values, ethic principles and human closeness tend to be scarce and precious. The concerns that the individual faces in the highly individualised society of today is powerfully exacerbated in Allen's films by the pressure of life in the big city. The need to fit in, to be successful in your profession, to have a satisfying relationship and to find your own identity in the process is an anxiety-ridden task which is aggravated by the huge size of the city. For this reason, Allen

occasionally yields to the temptation of presenting New York as “a metaphor for decay of contemporary culture”, as his alter-ego, Isaac, states at the beginning of *Manhattan*. These negative views of the Big Apple do not last too long, though. Isaac, for instance, has a very troubled relationship with New York. He is confused about his feelings towards the city and he frequently dismisses it and criticises it for its lack of values and the shallowness of its inhabitants. On the other hand, however, the film makes clear that “he can’t function anywhere other than New York”, as one of his friends says. Thus, Allen concedes that the city may have a “dark side”, but its benefits clearly outweigh its drawbacks. For instance, New York may be impersonal, but the anonymity of life in the city also gives you total freedom to pursue your true self. It may be intimidating, but the endless cultural and leisure possibilities it offers make up for it. Allen’s characters frequently find solace for their troubles in art exhibitions, movies, dinners with friends... These are the activities that make life worth-while, and there is no better place than New York for that. In this sense, Manhattan constitutes a sort of “cultural oasis” blessed by an infinite number of theatres, cinemas, art galleries, libraries, restaurants, night-clubs, museums and bookshops. All these places constitute important sources of joy which make life in New York highly enjoyable and fulfilling for Allen.

In this way, Manhattan is constructed in Allen’s imagination as an ideal. Of course, he has not been (and will not be) the only filmmaker to recreate New York on the screen. The Big Apple has been endlessly displayed in thousands of films, both old and new. It has been repeatedly destroyed by alien invasions, meteors, tsunamis and giant creatures. It has been the setting for criminal investigations and political conspiracies. It has also been the backdrop for innumerable romantic comedies and dramas, a place for love and romance. On TV, it has been represented just as often: from cop shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) or *CSI:NY* (2004-present) to sit-coms like *Seinfeld* (1990-1998), *Mad About You* (1992-1999), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Caroline in the City* (1995-1999) or *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present). New York has shown different faces and has been an indelible presence on our screens, both big and small. The omnipresence of New York in the media has made it into an icon, a symbol. New York lives in the minds of millions of people around the world not as it is, but as film and TV have constructed it. In this way, it has been turned into a quasi-mythical place that makes it virtually undistinguishable from its media representations. Thus, even though Allen is not alone in his fondness for New York, it is undeniable that he occupies a pre-eminent position as “ambassador” of the city. As Graham McCann points out,

Allen has made a personal province of his native city. New York is the subject and setting of many of Allen’s movies, but he is also its spokesperson in a way that goes beyond the call of civic duty. Through his movies, and even outside them, he seems to carry the city within him; it imbues him and he imbues it, it has created him yet he constantly recreates it ... no movie maker has *engaged* so thoroughly, movingly and intelligently with a single modern city than Woody Allen (1990: 10).

Indeed, throughout his vast filmography, Allen has recreated New York once and again before our eyes, wooing us with his ideas about what the city is, or rather, should be like.

Inevitably, these ideas have been absorbed by the popular unconscious, becoming one with reality. In the previous quotation McCann says that Allen constantly "recreates" the city. This is true, but for me, he does more than that. Does Allen merely "reproduce" New York in his films, or does he also "produce" it? I believe it is the latter. Allen's New York has worked its way into our consciousness, becoming part of its reality. This is so not only for the millions of people who dream of New York in the distance and see it as the magic, romantic place Allen has made of it, but also for those who visit it every year as foreigners. When we, "tourists", visit New York we cannot help the feeling of excitement at the recognition of some of Allen's most beloved sights: Central Park, the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, Elaine's... they all appear before our eyes not as they are, but filtered through our own "cinematic" conscience. They look like unreal places, mere locations for Allen's stories. In this way, these sites become inseparable from the meanings we had previously attached to them, even if they appear before our eyes as solid and real. Moreover, this romanticised view of New York is not only held by foreigners, but, in many cases, also by New Yorkers themselves, who have contributed to the perpetuation of the "myth".

#### CARRIE'S NEW YORK

New York takes an unusually important role in SATC. Countless films and TV series are set in the Big Apple, but it usually serves as mere backdrop for the action. In this show, however, it plays a paramount role. Not only does it constitute the background for the protagonists' lives, but it is actively integrated in the storylines. In this sense, SATC represents a remarkable departure from the way in which New York is normally portrayed nowadays in the romantic comedy genre – the one SATC is mostly indebted to. Tamar Jeffers McDonald complains about the "unspecific" rendering of this city in contemporary examples of this genre. For her, New York has been dispossessed of its idiosyncrasy on the big screen, being used as "shorthand to create a romantic mood, rather than to evoke specific locations. Real details of every day life are used as *mise-en-scène*, rather than as aspects which inform the narrative" (2007: 89-90). Clearly, this is not SATC's case, which presents a much more culturally specific depiction of its setting: it makes frequent references to its changing condition and its particular state at specific points in time, taking us on a tour of the hottest clubs, shops and restaurants, commenting on the city's mayoralty, taking notice of changing living trends by acknowledging the rise of previously degraded areas like the Meat-packing District, and highlighting important events like the 9/11 attacks on the city, for instance (Oria 2011: 132-133). SATC establishes a very recognisable – and time-specific – topography, making it literally possible to trace their characters' steps on a map of the city: Carrie, Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte (Kristin Davis) and Samantha (Kim Cattrall) do not just eat out – they have brunch at City Bakery. They do not go shopping – they buy \$400 sandals at Jimmy Choo. They do not just go out – they sip Cosmopolitans in trendy clubs like Commune. All these places shape a detailed urban geography frequented by the girls and based on Manhattan. Indeed, it is this particular area of the city that makes up SATC's universe. Other areas like Harlem, Queens or Brooklyn simply do not form part of the protagonists' exclusive world. For them, Manhattan represents the centre of the civilised world. It is coded as a magic land of endless possibilities, excitement and fun. On the

contrary, daring out of its limits means facing a harsh reality, and as Carrie says, "living in reality means living in pain, fear, or Brooklyn" ("Out of the Frying Pan", 6: 16). In the series, everything that is not Manhattan represents "the Other": among the places that are openly demonised in the series is Los Angeles, for its frivolity and lack of authenticity ("Escape from New York, 3: 13; "Sex and Another City" 3: 14); the countryside, an unknown and "dangerous" environment for urbanites ("Sex and the Country", 4: 9); Staten Island, for its lack of sophistication ("Where There's Smoke, 3: 1); Paris, a hostile place for foreigners ("An American Girl in Paris, Part Une", 6: 19; "An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux", 6: 20); or the suburbs, which are dreaded as a cemetery for the dreams and hopes of youth, the place where free single women end up when they settle down in a domestic routine openly despised by the show ("The Baby Shower", 1: 10). For this reason, Carrie, Charlotte and Samantha are horrified when Miranda decides to move to Brooklyn in the sixth season ("Out of the Frying Pan", 6: 16). At first, she resists the change fiercely because she is "a Manhattan girl" and she does not "like anything not Manhattan". Living in Brooklyn is out of the question because "even cabs won't go there", that is, it is an entirely different world, one too far removed from the girls' glamorous scene. Brooklyn's distance from Manhattan is not so much physical as symbolic. As Carrie says, living in Brooklyn means facing reality, that is, growing up, getting married, having a family... This is actually made explicit in the episode tellingly titled "I ♥ New York" (4: 18):

- Samantha: I'm always surprised when anyone leaves New York. I mean, where do they go?
- Miranda: The real world?

Eventually, Miranda ends up moving unwillingly because her single life and her new family life are not compatible in Manhattan: she cannot afford to lead the same lifestyle now that she has a husband, a child and two pets. She has to mature, and in SATC's world, that means being cast away from Manhattan, the utopic land of eternal youth and fun.

Indeed, Manhattan is presented in SATC as a quasi-magical place in which anything is possible. As in Allen's case, social, racial and sexual minorities are rarely present, depicting a highly idealised WASP world of glamour and luxury unattainable for most mortals. As noted before, Carrie's Manhattan is a world made up of sun-filled apartments in Park Avenue, trendy nightclubs, posh restaurants, exclusive shops, hip parties, sunny parks and stylish inaugurations of art galleries. In these places, the girls gossip about their sexual/romantic lives and socialise with the elite of New York: artists, writers, business men, PR executives, fashion designers... or simply millionaires with no obvious occupation. In this sense, Carrie's New York shows an obvious similarity with Allen's, as the world depicted in his films is equally limited to a very specific social milieu situated at the top of New York society. However, there is a significant difference: in Allen's Manhattan, most characters enjoy a prominent economic and social status, but this tends to be subordinated to the development of some kind of intellectual or artistic activity in the list of their priorities. Most of Allen's characters have intellectual or cultural aspirations: they are usually writers, artists, journalists or university lecturers. Alternatively, they work in the field of entertainment: they are actors, producers, playwrights or directors. It is unusual to



find characters outside of creative or intellectual professions, and if this is the case, they are normally dismissed by the narrative as shallow, unimaginative or flawed in some sense. So, in Allen's films, characters do belong to the social elite, but economic and power issues are not so strongly emphasised, and people's "worth" is ranked according to their intellectual or artistic achievements.

SATC is different in this aspect. The series does feature people in the world of the arts but this is not as significant as in Allen's case. Carrie herself is a writer, but her kind of writing would hardly qualify for Allen's standards of "intellectualism". SATC's world is less concerned with high culture and art, and much more preoccupied with issues like money and power. Unlike in Allen's films, which hardly feature business people, considering it a hollow, soulless activity, SATC's New York is plagued by characters who have "made it" financially speaking. Rather than being scorned by the series, white-collar characters in top executive positions are presented as rightful members of New York's "aristocracy" and, consequently, as highly desirable partners. The paradigmatic case of Mr. Big (Chris Noth) and Richard Wright (James Remar), two of the wealthiest and most powerful characters in the whole series is a good example, as their evident shortcomings as romantic partners and as human beings in general are readily "forgiven" by the text thanks to the allure of their economic might and privileged social status. This would be unthinkable in a Woody Allen movie, as in his Manhattan, this kind of characters are usually dismissed as uninteresting and soulless.

SATC's New York is thus different from Allen's in this aspect. In the series, the city is ruled, not so much by a natural flow of human relationships, but by a complex network of power games very much determined by the law of the market. A great part of the series' dynamics revolves around the trope of consumption, which encompasses Fendi bags as much as sexual conquests. As Susan Zieger points out, New York is openly presented in SATC as a place to be consumed (2004: 98). Actually, the series self-consciously encourages its viewers to perceive the city in this way. Its website informs the audience about the venues and hot places frequented by the girls. Maps with the shops featured in the show are also easily available. Moreover, the SATC Hotspots Bus Tour organised by "On Location Tours" in New York take fans to the actual locations in which the show was shot, thus promoting another kind of voyeuristic, but equally lucrative, form of consumption. Zieger sees this as a means to create an identity. According to her, in SATC, public identities are fashioned through consumption. Shopping is viewed as a way to access the public sphere, which is linked to John Hartley's concept of "DIY (Do It Yourself) Citizenship", a kind of citizenship which "is not enacted through the bodiless, abstracted rituals of voting and debating that are central to democracy classically conceived, but instead through merely becoming visible to others as a self-styled individual consumer" (Zieger 2004: 98). In this way, New York becomes a giant shop window showcasing a wide range of styles which can be freely adopted by the individual as a means to define his/her self. As Zieger puts it, "style signifies and resignifies as membership in an identity group" (2004: 101). Consumerist choices are therefore presented as an important part in the process of self-definition. Wearing a specific brand of clothes or possessing certain fashion accessories shape your identity and your status in the social ladder in a clear way. For instance, in the episode entitled "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" (4: 11), Samantha longs for a \$4,000 Hermes Birkin bag, not because she likes it, but because of what it represents:

- Carrie: The Birkin bag? That’s not even your style.
- Samantha: It’s not the style. It’s what it means. It means you’re out 4,000 bucks. When I’m carrying that bag, I’ll know I’ve made it.

So, in this case, owning a bag means success, but outfits and fashion items in general may have other meanings attached to them, depending on the kind of identity one wishes to project. When the girls travel to Los Angeles, for example, Miranda realises how the loose morals of the place and its openness about sex is made obvious in their people’s clothing (“Escape from New York”, 3: 13). This dynamics of consumption does not only apply to the clothes the characters wear and the cocktails they drink. As the title of the show already announces, sex is also included in this consumerist spree. The girls change partners as easily as they change shoes, dismissing “faulty items” and leaping on the most coveted bachelors in the scene as if it were sale season at Chanel. Admittedly, the characters display different degrees of sexual “voraciousness” –Samantha obviously occupies the highest position in the “consumption pyramid”). However, the premise of the series is clearly based on this dynamics of “relationship consumption”. Despite all the disappointments chain-relationships may bring, week after week, the girls are invariably shown picking themselves up and dusting themselves off, ready for their next affair, hoping to find themselves in the next relationship.

This consumption-based identity endorsed by SATC’s ethos and fuelled by the myriad romantic possibilities offered by the city is quite different from Allen’s idea of what self-definition involves. As happens to Carrie, Allen’s protagonists also find themselves in constant search of their true selves, struggling to define their self-identity in a confusing, postmodern world which has been deprived of all certainties and traditions. However, the path towards self-realisation is different for Allen. To start with, his characters do not look for self-identity in material things. They belong to the upper class, and they may as well own the latest Hermes handbag, but their possessions are rarely emphasised as a positive trait of their identity. Rather, they are defined by their musical tastes, reading habits or moral principles.<sup>7</sup> Dressing style and designer shoes are not really an issue for these characters, who tend to look for their identities in two basic premises: a fulfilling professional activity and a satisfying relationship with a partner. A perfect balance between the two would appear to be the key to their happiness, but of course, things are not so easy. Leading a reasonably satisfying professional life seems to be the most easily attainable of the two goals, as Allen’s characters are not usually afraid of drastic change when a job does not suit them. Generally, they always go for intellectually stimulating occupations. Finding the perfect match, on the other hand, is a much more problematic issue. In fact, it is the subject most Allen’s films revolve around. Sure, sex is present in Allen’s films – although not often explicitly – and characters have frequent sexual encounters, many of which are devoid of feeling. However, SATC’s sense of voracious sexual consumption is largely absent. Rather, the emphasis is on the quest for true love. Sex is presented not so much as an end in itself but as a means to achieve true satisfaction with a partner at all levels: sentimental, sexual and intellectual. The three requirements usually need to be met for the relationship to work, which is quite an

<sup>7</sup> *Manhattan*’s initial scene at Elaine’s is very representative of this. In this opening scene we are introduced to the main characters, who are described by their opinions about issues like ethics and the essence of art.

extraordinary happening. Thus, meeting your twin soul in the city proves to be an extremely difficult task. Nevertheless, if this is achieved the reward is total fulfilment as a human being.<sup>8</sup> In Allen's films self-identity is found in the other, that is, in a satisfying relationship with a partner who completes you in all senses. Of course, this ideal is really hard to attain, and it constitutes the core of the dramatic conflict in many of Allen's films.

So, Woody's and Carrie's social scene and the dynamics that governs them are clearly different. However, they generally inhabit the "same New York". That is, a highly idealised version of the city mainly created and perpetuated by Hollywood. Yes, SATC's Manhattan is a consumption paradise. But it is much more than this. What makes it so attractive is the persistent idealisation to which it is subjected. One of the most interesting aspects of SATC's representation of New York is the complex equilibrium which establishes between its realistic aesthetic and attention to urban detail and the "fantastic" character of the world it presents. The text's commitment to authenticity in the display of "real" New York contrasts with its escapist premise. The show is willing to acknowledge new trends, hotspots and changing living conditions in the city but this does not prevent it from presenting it as a magical space rife with transformative possibilities. This "double" view of Manhattan is reflected in the show's visual style: on the one hand, with its extensive location shooting, the city looks deliberately realistic, borrowing on occasion from the documentary aesthetics. On the other, New York is simultaneously made to look beautiful and glamorous, using cinematic visual techniques<sup>9</sup> and classic Manhattan iconography to convey its "magical" character. This idealisation of the city is two-fold: it comprehends both a romantic evocation of old-fashioned New York as stage for love and romance, and a "fantastic" quality of the city as leisure playground and cosy home. As in Allen's case, SATC's New York is not "real". It is not the over-crowded, dirty, expensive and dangerous city it is generally assumed to be. The girls stroll its streets confidently, unconcerned about their personal safety, because in this New York, the worst thing that may happen to them is being splashed by a car. Actually, Carrie gets mugged once, but this is not presented as a really dangerous situation. Her physical integrity is never on the line, the real tragedy being her stolen Manolos ("What Goes Around Comes Around", 3: 17). Similarly, the girls live in centrally-situated, spacious apartments whose rent in real life would be exorbitant. Even though their jobs allow them a relative affluence, how they manage to pay the rent, buy \$4,000 bags and spend most of their time partying in highly exclusive venues is simply inexplicable. The answer to this is quite simple: as mentioned before, this is not "real" New York, but a fairy tale version of it. As it is the case with Allen's movies (but in a much greater measure), SATC partly presents itself as an escapist fantasy. The world of luxury and glamour it features is one of the clearest sources of pleasure provided by the show and, arguably, one of the keys to its success. How do Carrie and her friends manage to lead such a lifestyle? Where does their huge income come from if they are always having brunch? As the series' high ratings and

<sup>8</sup> This is quite an extraordinary happening, as Allen's endings tend toward the bittersweet. However, there are exceptions, like Mickey's (Woody Allen) case in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986).

<sup>9</sup> As Grochowski points out, SATC displays a cinematic aesthetic rather than televisual thanks to techniques such as moving cameras, cinematic shot-countershots, long takes and sophisticated night time (and day-for-night) photography (2004: 154). As a result, SATC's New York is closer to the more spectacular "look" cinema has accustomed us to than to the TV sitcom, for instance, which uses a three-camera set-up on a single stage.

endurance through time attest to, audiences are willing to suspend their disbelief in order to enjoy the fantasy SATC's New York proposes. It can also be argued that this extreme delight in the characters' leisure activities is a convention of the genre. Many sit-coms revolve around their characters' leisurely lives, without giving much explanation about how they make a living. Contemporary series like *Friends* or *How I Met Your Mother* are examples of this.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, SATC's New York is idealised, but only in part, as the series makes sure to include enough elements of realism to make it recognisable to the audience, and not only in terms of its urban geography. This is pointed out by Deborah Jermyn's modest ethnographic study, which affirms that "elements of fantasy and realism inhabit the same text and the female viewer can take pleasure in both" (2004: 214). Her findings imply that part of the show's success lies in its ability to "touch a nerve" while simultaneously offering escapism. According to Jermyn, female viewers may find elements of identification in the realistic portrayal of female friendship and the troubles and tribulations modern women face today. At the same time, they find an escapist gratification in the fabulous representation of New York, a setting which gives a flavour of glamour and excitement to the show constructing it as a quasi-mythical place.

However, New York is not only presented as an appropriate setting for leisure and fun activities. It is also the perfect backdrop for love. As happens in Allen's films, New York is presented as an ideal space for romance.<sup>11</sup> When Carrie is in love, the city transforms itself into an enchanted place. At the beginning of her relationship with Mr. Big, for instance, she feels the joy of the beginning of the relationship, and the city is presented as a magical environment in which Carrie's romantic fantasies are enacted. The lovers wander the city freely and their love is framed by the spectacular views of New York's skyline and the fall of autumn leaves in Central Park. Thus, one of the most populated metropolises of the world is reduced to the couple of lovers, as they only have eyes for each other: "lately it seemed as if the entire city... had been magically reduced to only two people... us" ("The Monogamists", 1: 7). This romantic infatuation with the city is clearly reminiscent of Allen's films. In *Manhattan*, for instance, New York is transformed into a magical space for romance at various points in the movie. Isaac and Mary's (Diane Keaton) first walk, for instance, is an example of this. After meeting for the first time in daylight and disliking each other, they meet again at night and, somehow, the magic of the city makes their connection possible. The music that accompanies the couple's wanderings – Gershwin's "Somebody to Watch

<sup>10</sup> This fantasy view of New York and the Woody Allen influence on it has also been pointed out by critics like Glen Creeber, who argues the following: "Clearly this 'narrative space' has strong elements of fantasy within it. The version of New York constructed by SATC owes more to the bourgeois, middle-class comedies of Woody Allen than the gritty realism of Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee or even David Chase (see *The Sopranos* above). Its makers self-consciously constructed a highly stylised and fashionable world that is built (perhaps like its real generic predecessors *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [CBS, 1970-7] and *Rhoda* [1974-8]) on a combination of real and idealised representations" (2004:148).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, Allen is not the only filmmaker that has presented the city in these terms. He is part of a long tradition of romantic films, from classics like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *An Affair to Remember* (1957) to recent features like *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) or *Enchanted* (2007). A great number of romantic comedies and dramas like these have also shown New York in this way, contributing to its romanticisation in the popular unconscious.

over Me" – and the visual techniques deployed by Allen emphasise the role of the city in the romantic union. We see, for instance, a long shot of the lovers' silhouettes against a stunning backdrop: the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, with dawn about to break.



The characters' fascination with the beauty of the city becomes then a point in common between the two:

- Mary: Isn't it beautiful out?
- Isaac: Yeah, it's really, really, so pretty when the lights start to come up.
- Mary: I know. I love it.
- Isaac: Boy, this is really a great city. I don't care what anybody says. It's really a knockout, you know.

*Manhattan* is an example of how, in Allen's films, New York is usually coded as a magic space for romantic transformation. The choice of Central Park, New York's "natural oasis" and one of its most emblematic sites, as the locus for the romantic union evokes the Shakespearian green world: a hidden, "enchanted" place of retreat in the middle of nature which allows for the communion of souls. In *Manhattan*, Isaac and Mary decide to go to the park for a walk in their second meeting. However, a violent storm breaks. The storm creates a different kind of enchantment than in the previous scene, but equally romantic, as they are forced to take shelter in the Hayden Planetarium. This place, which is conveniently dimly-lit, feels far removed from reality. The stars, planets and lunar landscape that surround them create a parallel reality which creates the perfect scenario for the birth of the couple's love.

SATC also plays on the city as Shakespearian space of transformation. Following with the example of *Manhattan* and Central Park, there is a scene in the movie that is openly alluded to in the series. The scene in which Isaac and his 17-year-old girlfriend, Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), take a carriage ride in the park is one of the best-known moments in the history of recent cinema. Isaac thinks the whole situation is "corny", but Tracy, who has never done such a thing, thinks it is "fun". Allen's character, who is much older and knows better, feels self-conscious reprising an activity he knows has been performed before by thousands of couples in that same park, aware that their relationship is by no

means unique, as young lovers usually think. Being more experienced than Tracy and having been through several break-ups, he does not seem to buy into the romanticism of the scene initially. However, as the Gershwin's music and the beautiful black and white photography announce, he is gradually taken in until he finally surrenders to the fantasy, kissing Tracy passionately.

In the SATC's episode entitled “I ♥ New York” (4: 18), Carrie and Big also take a carriage ride through Central Park. It is Big's last night in New York before moving to Napa (California) and Carrie wants to have a true “New York” night with him. This includes, apparently, reprising the scene of Allen's 1970s movie. Like Isaac in *Manhattan*, Big finds it “very corny”. Carrie thinks otherwise: “Nope. Classic”. This can be read as an explicit reference to Allen's film, which has entered the vaults of “classic cinema”. In any case, SATC's re-enactment of the scene embeds different layers of intertextual meanings. Allen's film was already aware of the “artificiality” of the scene: in an era shaken by the sexual revolution, he is conscious of the impossibility of playing by the rules of old-fashioned romance represented by the carriage ride. Nevertheless, he falls for it temporarily, as the music and cinematography emphasise. Carrie and Big's carriage scene adds another layer of meanings to the issue: on the one hand, it plays with the same concerns Allen had about the sexual revolution putting an end to naive romanticism: at the turn of the century, when everything has been said and done, the lovers are aware of the long tradition of New York romance preceding them, so the enactment of their love cannot be innocent. They utter words of love with the knowledge that they have already been said by countless couples before, most of whose relationships did not work out. On the other hand, SATC establishes a direct dialogue with *Manhattan*, thus introducing an intertext which complicates the scene: the series is aware, firstly, of the complexity of contemporary romantic relationships, and secondly, of how the topic has been endlessly dealt with in popular culture.

Thus, this scene shows how the series does not aim to portray real New York. Rather, it plays with the images of New York endlessly disseminated by popular culture. The series appropriates the meanings already attached to New York and makes them its own. At the same time, it reworks them, adapting them to the contemporary context: thus, SATC implicitly addresses the viewer familiar with Woody Allen's cinema, posing questions like, how have romantic relationships in the city of New York evolved in the 30-year gap that separates both texts? Is there any difference? Have we learnt anything? Straight-forward answers to these questions are not usually provided by the text, but the show does tackle them constantly. Another example of SATC's appropriation and reworking of the meanings attached to New York as a place for romance takes place in the same episode (“I ♥ New York”) when Big invites Carrie over to his apartment. When she gets there, he tells her that he is moving. She cannot believe what she is hearing, incredulous that Big may live in any other place than New York: “You can't leave New York. You're the Chrysler Building.” With these words, Big's identification with New York is emphasised, an association which, by the way, adds to Carrie's infatuation with him. Since he is leaving shortly, everything in the apartment is packed, except for an old turntable and some vinyl records. Carrie mocks his old-fashioned musical taste, laughing at him when he plays Henry Mancini's “Moon River”, the central theme of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. This song became very popular when it was first released and the film, which epitomised the ultimate New York romantic fantasy,

is considered as a classic today. At first, Carrie tries to show some "postmodern irony": she dismisses it as corny because she knows the meanings attached to the song and she knows better. However, Big lures her into the fantasy:

- Carrie: You can't be serious!
- Big: Wait, wait, wait...
- Carrie: So corny...
- Big: No. It's classic. Listen. This was my parents' favourite song.

Again, the term "classic" is brought into the scene as the perfect excuse for the enactment of "traditional" romantic protocols which have lost a great deal of credibility in the present. The power of the music takes them back to the past, a time of innocence relationship-wise. It must be noted that the film was released in 1961, just before the beginning of the sexual revolution. It can be argued that these were the last years of "stability" in the field of heterosexual romance, so the choice of this particular song for this scene is quite meaningful. As the music plays, the couple is gradually taken in by its spell and they slow-dance. The song is in vinyl, which adds to the atmosphere of old-fashioned romance it creates, but it is scratched, and this breaks the enchantment just when they are about to kiss. This takes Carrie out of her momentary infatuation and back to "reality", a reality in which relationships are not as innocent as "Moon River" suggests. Once the spell is broken postmodern irony is restored again: "That pizza will be fantastic for breakfast", Carrie says. This sentence alludes directly to the film, making clear that she is familiar with it and with the rest of popular culture's texts which have propagated such starry-eyed ideals about romance. This lets Big know that she is not buying into the fantasy because, being a turn-of-the-century woman, she knows better. Later on, at the end of the episode the same music is played, but now it has a slightly different meaning: accompanying a picture-perfect image of autumnal New York, the theme emphasises the text's sincere nostalgia for traditional romance and everything it represents, implicitly mourning the loss of innocence brought about by the new age: as Carrie's voice-over narration appropriately announces, "a new season has begun".

SATC's cynicism was clear from the very beginning, as Carrie's words in the very first episode of the series attest to – which, coincidentally, also contain a reference to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: "Welcome to the age of *uninnocence*... where no one goes to breakfast at Tiffany's and no one has affairs to remember. Instead, we get up at 7 a.m. and have affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible" ("Sex and the City", 1: 1). However, despite the series' self-confessed scepticism in matters of love, its episodes are full of examples of this kind of nostalgia for the good old times of uncomplicated relationships. In this sense, the series displays a great similarity with Allen's films, which also combine an awareness of the impossibility of traditional heterosexual love with a longing for a past in which romance was still possible. In both groups of texts, the same dichotomy can be found: cynical awareness does not prevent the texts' basking in some of the most hackneyed conventions of romantic love, which finds in New York its perfect scenario.

In this way, SATC offers its viewers a deeply romanticised image of the Big Apple which helps construct the show's glamorous and escapist world. As has been shown, this idealised representation of the city has its roots in a long tradition of films set in New York, and more

specifically, Woody Allen’s, who can be considered New York’s best ambassador in the history of cinema. Allen’s films have contributed to the shaping of SATC’s universe, just like this show, thanks to its remarkable cultural impact, will surely influence future representations of the Big Apple both on the small and the big screen, expanding on its visual “heritage” and creating new myths about the city. As in the case of Allen’s films, New York plays a role of paramount importance in SATC, as it does not only constitute the background for the action, it also forms an integral part of what the series is all about, offering a culturally-specific portrayal of the city which sets the show apart from its usual representations in contemporary romantic comedy. As has been shown, this portrayal is both highly realist in its will to present us with the city’s specific idiosyncrasy at a given moment in time, and unequivocally “fantastic”, since New York is simultaneously coded not only as an escapist fantasy world – some kind of “Neverland” for young, hip and well-off singles –, but also as an idealised playground for romantic transformation, the place “where love happens” and the individual can be whole. This is New York’s gentler face. As in the case of Allen’s films, this romanticised view of the city is often problematic, though: New York can also present itself as cold and alienating at times, a kind of “dating hell” with a high potential for disappointment, which turns the quest for one’s twin soul into a formidable task. For this reason, at the end of the day, it is the city itself that is regarded, both in Carrie’s and Allen’s case, as their “true love”, the partner that will never fail them or let them down. When all is said and done, New York can always be relied on: it is the place that offers solace and comfort, the place where one’s wildest dreams can be realised, the place where the individual can find his/her true self and, more importantly, the perfect scenario for romantic transformation and personal self-realisation. You may be alone in this city, but you will never be lonely because, as Carrie says, “New York is the perfect place to be single. The city is your date” (“Anchors Away”, 5: 1)<sup>12</sup>.

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