

Sex and the City:
FEMINISM AND MASS CULTURE
(Empowerment & Consumerism)

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1 Introduction

As a fan of *Sex and the City*, I have spent countless hours over the years revelling in the series' rich characters and enthralling narrative, and enjoying its 'real' and comical quality. As a student of media, I am fascinated by the show's enormous success and the vast media-attention it has received. *Sex and the City* centers on the lives of four American affluent thirty-something women in Manhattan. The show focuses specifically on sex and relationship columnist Carrie Bradshaw, who mediates the experiences of herself and her three friends. Six seasons, and a total of ninety-four (approximately twenty-five-minute) episodes of the show were created, and were aired on American cable network HBO between 1998 and 2004 (and subsequently on commercial channels worldwide).¹

Much of the media-attention *Sex and the City* has received (especially in its earlier seasons) has focused on the female characters' candid discussions of sex from a female point of view, and its (sometimes) graphic but comical depiction of their sexual encounters. Alongside this content, the show has also featured comprehensive discussion and probing of women's position in contemporary society, often addressing issues related to the women's movement. It remains to be questioned precisely which aspect of the series appealed to all its many (mostly female) fans and avid viewers. While feminism is somewhat of a dirty word in (pop)culture today, and explicit feminist issues are almost completely absent in popular discourse, *Sex and the City*, arguably highly inflected with feminist subject-matter, was (and still is) very much 'in vogue'. Can *Sex and the City* be considered as part of postfeminism or third wave feminism? Or does the show merely incorporate certain feminist-aware content in order to cater to the modern woman? As a product of a large media corporation, the show's primary (if not only) objective is to produce profit. Is that which is thought to attract the target audience of (relatively affluent) young women merely being inserted in order to obtain greater financial gain from them? In other words: *Sex and the City* is both a text addressing feminist issues, and a product of a media industry (culture industry); does one preclude the other?

It is this aspect which I want to probe in this essay. I want to examine to what extent *Sex and the City* can be called feminist, emancipatory, conservative, or even

¹ *Sex and the City* is based on the book *Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell, published in 1996 by Atlantic Monthly Press.

manipulative (in the sense of ideology), and problematize potential feminist claims/content by using theories of consumerism and mass culture. In this account, I will also take into consideration feminism's general view on the system of capitalism, and different views on the relation between consumerism and the raising of critical awareness of society. I will be analyzing these issues by looking at feminist themes throughout the six seasons of *Sex and the City*, performing short textual analyses. I will then connect these analyses to theories of consumerism, specifically the theories of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Fredric Jameson. I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to reveal some overpowering manipulative or misleading nature in the series, or to 'prove' that *Sex and the City* is either 'good' or 'bad' for its viewers. I would merely like to reveal some of the contradictions and tensions that reside in the text, and examine how the theories of the aforementioned authors could offer a valuable contribution to textual analysis of the series (and also at which points these theories prove to be ineffective). In the second chapter, I will present a theoretical framework, with which I intend to perform the analysis of *Sex and the City*, in chapter three. Finally, in chapter four, I will offer my conclusions on the analysis.

2 Theoretical framework

When speaking about media texts that, in some way, deal with issues of feminism and women's empowerment, the (seemingly obvious) fact has to be addressed that these texts do not come into existence naturally or spontaneously. Rather: they are created intentionally, and with specific intentions, by producers. However much pleasure or value a text may hold for its consumers (due to its content), as a product of a media corporation it will have been intended primarily to produce profit.² Thus, when studying *Sex and the City*, produced by HBO (part of Time Warner), this context has to be addressed. Keeping these issues in mind, I will focus on the role of culture within capitalism (as seen by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Fredric Jameson) in this chapter, after providing an overview of some of the main divisions and different arguments that compose feminist theory. In the last paragraph of this chapter, I will connect the previous two paragraphs, combining issues of feminism and consumerism in order to construct a theoretical foundation for my analysis of *Sex and the City*.

2.1 Feminism

In *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, an overview is given of the different waves of feminism in recent history (the discussion is focused mainly on the United Kingdom and the United States). 'Early feminism' is explained as being "any attempt to contend with **patriarchy** in its many manifestations between 1550-1700." (emphasis in original)³ Patriarchy is then defined as follows:

The term 'patriarchal' refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organisation of procreation to the

² As Philip Smith states on the work of Adorno: "his general insistence [is] that business and money are centrally involved in much cultural production, and [that] we need to be alert to the consequences of this fact." (Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 2001: p. 47.)

³ Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. "Early Feminism", p. 3-15. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 3.

internalised norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference.⁴

Early feminism, according to this author, “fought its battles in cultural and social arenas”, and was concerned with the unequal rights of women that resulted from a prevailing notion that “women were an inferior branch of the human race [...] with fewer capabilities than men for moral behaviour and rational thought.”⁵ Early feminists attempted to counteract this notion of women as inferior to men by stressing that it is culturally constructed rather than biologically determined or ‘natural’, and called attention to the ways in which women are equally capable to men, as well as those in which women are uniquely valuable as females.⁶ Jane Anger, as an example of an early feminist, battled some of the core principles which were used to justify the oppression of women. In *Her Protection for Women* (1589), she “refutes the notion of ‘posterior et inferior’, using the progression of God’s creation to point out that logically, Eve is last and *best*.” (emphasis in original)⁷

‘First wave feminism’, or ‘modern feminism’, is situated in the late 18th to early 20th century, and is concerned mainly with issues pertaining to the legal and economic rights of women, as demonstrated by the suffragette-movement.⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft can be considered the chief representative of the first wave of feminism, and dealt mainly with issues concerning the construction of femininity in society.⁹ Her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) focused on the “inadequate, misdirected **education** of young girls” (emphasis in original), which, according to Wollstonecraft, did not prepare them for “the possibility of economic independence”.¹⁰ The author here stresses that although first wave feminism achieved great advancement in the empowerment of women, the ‘feminists’ of the first wave were still not only “ambivalent about the extent of their own feminism, and

⁴ Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. “Early Feminism”, p. 3-15. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 3. Hodgson-Wright is quoting Chris Whedon here (*Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 1987).

⁵ Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. “Early Feminism”, p. 3-15. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 15; p. 5.

⁶ Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. “Early Feminism”, p. 3-15. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 11.

⁷ Stephanie Hodgson-Wright. “Early Feminism”, p. 3-15. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 6-7.

⁸ Valerie Sanders. “First Wave Feminism”, p. 16-28. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 16.

⁹ Valerie Sanders. “First Wave Feminism”, p. 16-28. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; *ibid.*

over-anxious to distance themselves from unconventional lifestyles and behaviour”, but also “seemed concerned mainly with the plight of intelligent middle-class single women.”¹¹ Thus, first wave feminism was mainly concerned with individual cases, narrowing its scope to those women who were already in relatively privileged positions.

‘Second wave feminism’, however, extended this scope, focusing also on the position of black women and working class women during the mid- to late- 20th century, as well as on female sexuality (including lesbianism).¹² Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), often seen as “heralding feminism’s second wave”, demonstrates the difference between the ‘older feminism of equal rights’ and this new wave, which was focused more on ‘women’s liberation’ from oppression.¹³ Friedan’s work attempted to raise consciousness about “the widespread frustration felt by her contemporaries”, and identified ‘the feminine mystique’: a pervasive cultural image of femininity that promotes general passivity in women, preventing women from “[...] reach[ing] maturity, identity, completeness of self.”¹⁴ The author explains that “[w]hilst ‘old feminism’ was individualist and reformist [...] ‘women’s liberation’ was collective and revolutionary”, and “possesse[d] a sharper and far more **radical feminist** consciousness” (emphasis in original).¹⁵ This collective character of second wave feminism can be found also in one of its main slogans, ‘the personal is political’, stressing that “male power is exercised and reinforced through ‘personal’ institutions such as **marriage**, child-rearing and sexual practices.” (emphasis in original)¹⁶ Thus, second wave feminism is characterized by its ‘double focus’ on both collective and individual/personal aspects, or as the author says: “on women as an oppressed *social* group and on the female *body* with its need for sexual autonomy as a primary site of

¹¹ Valerie Sanders. “First Wave Feminism”, p. 16-28. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 27; *ibid.*

¹² Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 29.

¹³ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 35; p. 29; *ibid.* The author identifies Simone de Beauvoir, arguing that “the key to women’s oppression lay in their cultural construction as *Other* [emphasis in original]” as having a significant influence on the work of Friedan (p. 35).

¹⁴ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 35; *ibid.*

¹⁵ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 29; *ibid.*

¹⁶ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 30.

that oppression.” (emphases in original)¹⁷ Attention was also placed in second wave feminism on the role of ideology in patriarchal domination, and on the way women can be said to internalize patriarchal ideology, “and with it their inferior status.”¹⁸

‘Postfeminism’ started being widely used as a term around the early 1980’s.¹⁹ The term has often been used in the media as “indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated **feminist** movement” (emphasis in original), though the author explains that the term is ambiguous and “there is little agreement among those with whom it is popularly associated as to a central canon or agenda.”²⁰ Thus, ‘postfeminism’ does not necessarily mean anti-feminist, and as the author explains: “while it can certainly be interpreted as suggestive of a relapse *back* to a former set of ideological beliefs, it can also be read as indicating the *continuation* of the originating term’s aims and ideologies, albeit on a different level.” (emphases in original)²¹ On the side of those theorists who do view postfeminism as a ‘backlash’ on feminism, reverting or undermining its goals and achievements, the author places Tania Modleski and Susan Faludi, among others. Faludi states that: “[w]e’re all “post-feminist” now, [...] meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care.”²² Furthermore, Faludi sees postfeminism as “a knee-jerk reaction on the part of the mainstream in defence of the *status quo*” (emphasis in original), meaning: the status of women gaining power.²³

This last argument is similar to the later work of Germaine Greer, which also formed a reaction against postfeminism. However, whereas Faludi sees postfeminism as a backlash against feminism enabled (at least in part) by the attitude of women themselves, Greer sees postfeminism as a direct manipulation of women (by large corporations), whereby women are kept dependent of the patriarchal system of oppression by the promise of fulfillment. As the author, and Greer herself, state:

¹⁷ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 31.

¹⁸ Sue Thornham. “Second Wave Feminism”, p. 29-42. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 36.

¹⁹ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; p. 43.

²¹ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 44-45.

²² Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 45. Gamble is quoting Susan Faludi here (*The Undeclared War Against Women*, 1991).

²³ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 46.

“postfeminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon, for ‘the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but the multi-national corporations that see women as their territory’.”²⁴ Greer thus sees postfeminism as a contemporary phenomenon through which women are led to believe that feminism is completed and thus redundant, as they can already have everything they want within the current state of society. Clearly, Greer disagrees with this notion, and sees postfeminism itself as the very proof that female oppression still exists.

The notion of a backlash can also be employed differently, as is explained: “some of the women predominantly identified with postfeminism have themselves employed the backlash argument in attacks on second wave feminism.”²⁵ Examples of this are authors who accuse second wave feminism of “foster[ing] an inappropriate image of female victimisation”.²⁶ As Katie Roiphe claims:

feminists are closer to their backlash than they like to think. The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims.... This image of a delicate women bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from.²⁷

As is explained in the glossary of *The Routledge Companion*, postfeminism can then also be seen as a ‘third wave’ of feminism, with its members not seeing themselves as ‘anti-feminists’, but rather “characteris[ing] themselves as the precursors of a shift in aims and objectives of feminism”.²⁸

Most of all, the author views postfeminism as “a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought”.²⁹ When placed in such a context, postfeminism, in parallel with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, “will tend to question the ideological process by which ‘man’ and

²⁴ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 51. Gamble is quoting Germaine Greer here (*The Whole Woman*, 1999).

²⁵ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 46.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* Gamble is quoting Katie Roiphe here (*The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*, 1993).

²⁸ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 298.

²⁹ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 50.

'woman' are placed in separate, oppositional, categories".³⁰ Theorists that are said to employ this type of view are, among others, Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler.³¹

In line with this 'poststructuralist' feminist framework is (media theorist) Liesbet van Zoonen. Her *Feminist Media Studies* offers many insights into feminist issues in the area of media that are relevant at this point.³² Van Zoonen employs non-essentialist conceptions of gender, which, interweaved with the element of power, results in a conception of gender as "a particular discourse, that is, a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference, which arises from and relegates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts."³³

Van Zoonen similarly applies a 'cultural studies framework', dealing with issues of representation and "the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within a society", and employs central concepts from Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, allowing her to question: "how is gender discourse negotiated in the 'moments' of the construction of media meanings – production, text and reception?"³⁴ With this, van Zoonen criticizes the 'sender-message-receiver' model, "in which media are conceived as transmitting particular messages about gender", that van Zoonen argues is often used in feminist research.³⁵ She opposes this model by, for instance, arguing that viewing media as distorting the 'reality' of women and women's position in society "ignores the contradictory and contested nature of gender", and incorrectly presumes that reality is unambiguous and that it can somehow be represented by media in the first place.³⁶

Van Zoonen offers examples of how feminist thought can be categorized. She mentions one particular theorist's division into typologies: "Leslie Steeves (1987) for instance, distinguishes between radical feminism which has a strong interest in pornography, liberal feminism concerned among other things with stereotypes and

³⁰ Sarah Gamble. "Postfeminism", p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 50.

³¹ I will discuss the work of Judith Butler in the chapter on sex and the female body.

³² Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994.

³³ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 33. (Though van Zoonen says on page 4: "The influence of poststructuralism is salient here, although I only hesitantly want to use such a label for my own work.")

³⁴ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 7; p. 6, van Zoonen is quoting John Corner here ("Meaning, genre and context: the problematics of "Public Knowledge" in the new audience studies, 1991); p. 9.

³⁵ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 29.

³⁶ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 34; p. 31.

gender socialization, and Marxist and socialist feminism focusing on the interaction between gender, class and ideology.”³⁷

Van Zoonen then pays special attention to socialist feminism, as it forms an important basis for the type of cultural studies framework she herself applies.³⁸ According to van Zoonen, theories of ideology (as “part of the ‘critical’ domain in communication studies and cultural studies”) often ignored issues of gender.³⁹ Socialist feminism (in particular) intervened in this theoretical field and became especially interested in “connecting the capitalist mode of production to the oppression of women.”⁴⁰ It then found three areas that form useful sources for this theoretical project, namely (Neo-)Marxism, psychoanalysis, and ideology theory. From Marxism, beside “the political economic analysis of capitalism”, the notion is taken that “human nature [is] constituted in society”, meaning that: “[s]pecific historical conditions create distinctive human types”.⁴¹ However, whereas traditional Marxism only distinguishes two human types (the capitalist and the worker), “socialist feminism acknowledges that human beings are defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and nationality as well.”⁴² Van Zoonen continues explaining that the theoretical challenge of socialist feminism then becomes: “to relate these differences, and gender difference in particular, to historical, social and economic conditions.”⁴³

Within psychoanalytic theory, the work of Jacques Lacan is particularly relevant to socialist feminists, according to van Zoonen. In the work of Lacan, the notion of the ‘symbolic order’ is essential, which is “inevitably patriarchal, due to the structural position of the father as the intervening third party between mother and child”.⁴⁴ Because “[s]ubmission to the patriarchal symbolic order [...] is a prerequisite for human autonomy and sanity”, women are, according to this theory, necessarily to be relegated to the (inferior) position of ‘otherness’ (being in lack of a phallus), since in the symbolic order “‘the feminine’ has no place and cannot be spoken.”⁴⁵ Thus, for

³⁷ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 12. Van Zoonen also states however, that “[t]he problems with such classifications are manifold.” (p. 12)

³⁸ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 22; *ibid.*; *ibid.* Van Zoonen is quoting A. Jaggar here (*Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 1983).

⁴² Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 23; *ibid.*

Lacan, as for Freud, it is the 'gendered subjectivity' of women which 'destines' them to occupy a secondary and inferior position in society.⁴⁶

Although in theories of ideology of Marxists such as Althusser and Gramsci, issues of gender are ignored, "the ideological mechanisms they analyse have been a source of inspiration for socialist feminists".⁴⁷ Van Zoonen cites O'Sullivan (*et al.*), who defines ideology as:

The means by which ruling economic classes generalize and extend their supremacy across the whole range of social activity, and naturalize it in the process, so that their rule is accepted and natural and inevitable, and therefore legitimate and binding.
[...]⁴⁸

Ideology theory, when applied to gender and oppression, can then explain how 'gender and patriarchal relations are reproduced' overall in society, and "how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content."⁴⁹ Although van Zoonen thus states to have been influenced by socialist feminism, she (as already mentioned above) criticizes the transmission view of communication that is dominant in most (traditional) feminist research. Contemporary media studies (both from feminist and from cultural studies perspectives) instead view meaning as "contradictory, divided and plural, in other words as polysemic".⁵⁰

As we have seen in this paragraph, 'feminism' can mean many different things, and can encompass a wide variety of political and academic thought. Early feminism can be considered to be the early attempts to attack general patriarchal suppression and question the cultural constructs that positioned women as inferior to men, while first wave feminism pertained mainly to the economic and legal rights of women. Second wave feminism focused less on equal rights, and more on general liberation of women from oppression. This oppression related to broader issues of society, culture,

⁴⁶ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 22.

⁴⁷ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Van Zoonen is quoting T. O'Sullivan, J. Hartley, D. Saunders, and J. Fiske (eds.) (*Key Concepts in Communication*, 1989: p. 109.)

⁴⁹ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 23; p. 24. Van Zoonen does, however, argue that studies which perform ideological analyses of media run the risk of "leaving the impression of an all pervasive hegemonic process from which there is no escape." (p. 26) I will return to this critique on ideology theory later.

⁵⁰ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 27. Van Zoonen is citing David Morley here ("Changing paradigm in audience studies", 1989).

ideology, class, race, and the female body. Postfeminism (or third wave feminism) can be seen to indicate a continuation of second wave feminism (albeit with more postmodernist or poststructuralist influences), while it can also represent a certain critical backlash *against* earlier waves of feminism. Feminist media studies adopts some of the insights related to postfeminism, as the section on van Zoonen demonstrates, and also includes Marxist work, ideology theory and psychoanalysis. Thus, historically, feminism can be seen to have developed from a specific movement based on practical (social and legislative) issues pertaining to the everyday lives of women to a broad field of political, social, cultural and academic work.

2.2 The culture industry/mass culture

In this paragraph, I will discuss the function of (mass-) culture within capitalism, as seen by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Fredric Jameson. In order to do so, I will first discuss more broadly Adorno and Horkheimer's view on capitalist society, before turning more specifically to their conception of culture within that society.

In *Cultural Theory*, Philip Smith explains Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of the relation between the Enlightenment and capitalism, as presented in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Smith clarifies how the authors see the Enlightenment as having led to citizens being passive in modern capitalist society:

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the project of the Enlightenment has reached a dead end. It was supposed to bring human freedom and encourage critical thinking. Yet rationality, reason, and scientific knowledge have brought with them the instrumental control of social life. Instead of leading to an intelligent and caring society, the Enlightenment has resulted in a world that is shaped by a narrow, pragmatic form of rationality. Bureaucratic, technological, and ideological forces have limited human freedom and created a **mass society** of passive, uniform consumers. [emphasis in original]⁵¹

Adorno and Horkheimer would not use the term 'dead end' to describe the transition from a potentially free society to one of passivity and control, because their dialectical approach would cause them to view freedom and oppression as two different sides

⁵¹ Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 2001: p. 46.

within Enlightenment. Hence, they would not consider capitalism as the end of or a break with Enlightenment, but rather as its ‘flipside’: as the opposite contained within itself. However, Smith’s point about rationality in capitalism stands, and it is this rationality that is “combined with capitalism in the **culture industry**” (emphasis in original) according to Adorno and Horkheimer.⁵² Thus, (the logic of) capitalism dominates and controls society and its members, as is demonstrated in the culture industry.

This process is discussed more specifically in the essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”.⁵³ Here, Adorno and Horkheimer speak of ‘manipulation’ and ‘deception’ by the culture industry of its consumers, because the culture industry purports to meet “the needs of the consumers”, while in reality, the products offered to them fulfill (only those) needs that are produced by the culture industry itself.⁵⁴ As it is no secret that our culture is “nothing but business”, the manipulation and deception is not a result of consumers being kept unaware of the nature of the products they consume.⁵⁵ The authors explain: “[t]he mentality of the public, which allegedly and actually favors the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system, not an excuse for it.”⁵⁶ The consumers of the culture industry’s products are manipulated into believing that their own needs are fulfilled. Because they believe that the culture industry is merely providing them with what they want, they never question or threaten the system itself, while: “[i]n reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly.”⁵⁷

Mass culture in the culture industry is ultimately characterized by homogeneity and uniformity (“[a]ll mass culture under monopoly is identical”), because cultural products are part of a ‘system’: that is, they are “standard products”, the ‘well- organized’ outcome of ‘mass production’.⁵⁸ Thus, the authors do not deny the possibility of relative difference between the separate products of the culture industry, but merely contend that all culture is the same in essence because it originates in the same planned logic: “the mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same.”⁵⁹ As a result, cultural products may vary greatly *in the eyes*

⁵² Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 2001: p. 46.

⁵³ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002.

⁵⁴ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 95; p. 94; p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 96.

⁵⁷ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 95.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; p. 94; p. 95; *ibid.*; *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 97.

of the consumer (enough to ensure continuation of consumption), but the differences between the cultural products are “completely defined by the purpose they serve within the schema”: their only function is to “assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers.”⁶⁰ Thus, a certain degree of product-differentiation ensures that each individual consumer will continue consuming: “[s]omething is provided for everyone so that no one can escape”, as the authors say.⁶¹ What is essential is that consumers are manipulated to believe they are free simply because they can choose between either (conform) product of the culture industry, while “the executive powers [are determined] to produce or let pass nothing which does not conform to their tables, [or] to their concept of the consumer”.⁶²

There is an additional way in which Adorno and Horkheimer say the culture industry deceives its consumers. According to the authors, the products of the culture industry do not show consumers reality, but “document only the surface of social reality”.⁶³ Film (and television is also mentioned in a previous section) “creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema” (through technology).⁶⁴ Because “film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination”, the consumers do not become aware that there is a possible gap between the fictional reality and actual social reality.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the consumer is left no room for critical thought: “not for a moment allowing him or her to suspect that resistance is possible.”⁶⁶ Consumers will thus not question the system or the social reality of the world they inhabit, nor the unrealistic images offered to them in the cultural products.

In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, Jameson elaborates on the relation between mass culture and ideology in late capitalism.⁶⁷ Basing his ideas on certain theorists of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, he criticizes the “conception of mass culture as sheer manipulation, sheer commercial brainwashing and empty distraction by the multinational corporations who obviously control every feature of the production and distribution of mass culture today”, held by some

⁶⁰ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 98; p. 97.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 96.

⁶³ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 97.

⁶⁴ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 99.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 100.

⁶⁶ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 113.

⁶⁷ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979.

theorists.⁶⁸ In order to better determine the role of culture in contemporary mass society (as opposed to modernist), Jameson remodels some aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer's work. He explains:

Both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; only where modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.⁶⁹

Following Norman Holland's revision of Freud's model of repression, Jameson argues for a more refined conception of repression in mass culture. Rather than seeing mass culture as providing "empty distraction or "mere" false consciousness", thereby instilling particular ideologies onto members of society, this conception "allows us to grasp mass culture [...] as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order to be "managed" or repressed."⁷⁰ In this model of 'displacement' or 'containment', the actual worries, fears and hopes that circulate in society *are* addressed by mass culture, but they are subsequently 'managed' and rendered harmless.⁷¹ This model then:

allows us to think repression and wish-fulfilment together within the unity of a single mechanism [...], which strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be laid to rest.⁷²

What is essential for Jameson in this model is that mass culture must offer some 'wish-fulfilling' components in order to perform its ideological function:

⁶⁸ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 1979: p. 138.

⁶⁹ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 1979: p. 141. Jameson critiques the "valorisation of traditional modernist high art as the locus of some genuinely critical and subversive, "autonomous" aesthetic production" of the Frankfurter Schule (p. 133).

⁷⁰ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 1979: p. 141; *ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; *ibid.*; *ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated.⁷³

Borrowing terms from theorists of the Frankfurt School, he states that “we cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of works like these [*i.e. Jaws*] unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function as well”, with which Jameson refers to “the Utopian or transcendent functions of mass culture”.⁷⁴ This leads Jameson to state that “anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness”.⁷⁵

To summarize, the role the authors of both articles ascribe to culture in mass society, though similar in some ways, also differs significantly. Adorno and Horkheimer do not seem to acknowledge a possibility for actual (relevant) social issues to be addressed in mass culture, emphasizing how false needs are instilled into the consumers by products of the culture industry. Because only the surface of social reality is revealed, there seems to be no potential for criticism or resistance in their model. Conversely, Jameson’s model *does* offer a possibility of some degree of criticism (however limited or harmless). For him, addressing or evoking hopes and desires, relevant issues and problems within social reality is not only possible, but indeed an essential part of the ideological functioning of mass culture.

2.3 Consumerism and empowerment

How can we connect theories of the culture industry and mass culture to feminism? As Philip Smith states in *Cultural Theory*: “[a]ccording to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry plays a major role in the reproduction of capitalism.”⁷⁶ In order to clarify how capitalism can be connected to the oppression of women by feminists, we can cite Tricia Davis, who offers an example of this question being addressed from a Marxist perspective:

⁷³ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979: p. 141; p. 144.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 2001: p. 46.

Engels's work linked the subordination of women historically with the rise of private property and class society. On the basis of this connection it followed that women's emancipation could not be achieved through the winning of bourgeois rights, which was seen as the characteristic aim of feminist organizations. Complete equality could only be achieved by the defeat of capitalism.⁷⁷

Unlike Marxist feminism, which focused on the role of capitalism within the oppression of women, and radical feminism, which studied the role of gender and patriarchy, socialist feminism looks both at economic and cultural processes to explain the oppression of women in society. Thus, when socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein explains in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* that: “[m]ale supremacy and capitalism are defined as the core relations determining the oppression of women today”, this includes a Marxist perspective of women as a class within society, but rejects the economic determinism of classic Marxist socialism.⁷⁸ This type of perspective of capitalism and society is analogous to that of Marxist theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, who also included notions of culture (and ideology) in their theories of capitalism as oppressive. It is then with this conception of socialist feminism as combining socio-economic elements (such as class) with cultural elements (for instance, patriarchy) that we can connect feminism to theories of the culture industry and mass culture, and that we can focus on the cultural dimension of oppression.

Of course, the assertion that capitalism oppresses women precludes many feminist claims in areas other than Marxist and socialist feminism, for instance the view (held by first wave feminists and, more generally, by liberal feminists) that economic independence of individual women can lead to some form of female empowerment. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer would criticize this view, and contend that empowerment cannot be achieved within capitalism (or the culture industry), for two reasons. The first reason has to do with the possibility for critical

⁷⁷ Tricia Davis. “‘What Kind of Woman is She?’ Women and Communist Party Politics, 1941-1955.”, p. 85-107. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p 87. As Andrew Hewitt succinctly puts it in his essay “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?”: “The problem, it would seem, is that in liberating themselves from domination, women merely liberate themselves into a more complex system of power.” (Andrew Hewitt, “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited”, p. 69-96. In: Renée Heberle, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, 2006: p. 82 [Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press]).

⁷⁸ Zillah R. Eisenstein. “Introduction”, p. 1-4. In: Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, 1979: p. 1.

views within the culture industry. As the authors would say (according to Smith): “[the culture industry] produces stultified and content consumers without any critical faculties”, incapable of being critical of the products they are being offered or of the social world they inhabit.⁷⁹ In other words, consumers will not become conscious of their oppressed position within capitalism because the products of the culture industry keep them content and submissive, and the same goes for women in society. The second reason why empowerment and capitalism could not coincide in the view of Adorno and Horkheimer is because any form of empowerment that is made possible by capitalism or the culture industry is necessarily part of that same system or logic. Because the authors see capitalism as oppressive in essence (as in Marxism), empowerment within that system would not be a form of actual empowerment.⁸⁰ Consumption could thus not entail any degree of empowerment for women, and would actually effect the opposite.

How can we then, following this notion, make sense of those products of the culture industry which *do* address social issues (such as the inequality of women in society) in some way? Adorno and Horkheimer would see these products as manipulating its consumers into thinking the culture industry offers them real choice and providing them with what they desire. Criticism of any part of the (all-encompassing) system of the culture industry, however significant it may seem to the consumer, will not endanger the system in any real way. Any critical content would thus merely be product-differentiation intentionally inserted there by the producers in order to ensure continuation of consumption (because ultimately, the products are ‘all the same’). The authors would contend that the products of the culture industry do not reveal reality, and do not call attention to the gap between the reality of fiction and that of our own world. As a result, consumers will not become critical of the images of reality offered to them in the products; they will not question the state of society or their social conditions, and will not “suspect that resistance is possible.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Smith, *Cultural Theory*, 2001: p. 46.

⁸⁰ As Adorno and Horkheimer state: “The consumers are the workers and salaried employees, the farmers and petty bourgeois. Capitalist production hems them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 106). Thus, this corresponds to Eisenstein’s conception of capitalist as one of the ‘core relations determining the oppression of women’ (see above). Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer, following Marx, see capitalism as oppressing consumers/the proletariat, Eisenstein here applies this notion more narrowly, seeing women as the oppressed section of society.

⁸¹ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 113. As Mary Anne Franks explains in “An-aesthetic Theory. Adorno, Sexuality, and Memory”: “In Adorno’s view, the culture industry – [...] – erodes the

Jameson would not see the cultural products as mere 'empty distraction', and argue that real social issues *are* addressed. However, these issues will only be addressed in order to be contained, rendered harmless, and as such the products will not pose any real threat to the system. Moreover, the products will also provide some sort of utopian aspect that will enable the consumer to be manipulated even more thoroughly. Thus, for Jameson, the fact that products of mass culture do address real social issues does not *refute* the original concept of manipulation of consumers under (late) capitalism, but rather *confirms* it.

Clearly, these conceptions of culture and society under capitalism raise some significant questions in the analysis of television texts. I would like to contend that two general sets of questions are of concern when speaking about such cultural texts. The first one is the form and ideological content of the text. Is it possible for a product of the culture industry to express (some) critique of society, and can it correspond to an oppositional ideology? Applied to the interests of this essay: can a product of the culture industry express feminist concerns if feminism can be said to run counter to the system of capitalism?

The second set of questions has to do with the functioning of the cultural product within capitalism. Is it possible for a product of the culture industry to spark a critical attitude toward capitalism in its consumers, or even lead to a form of empowerment? I believe these are essential questions when studying *Sex and the City*. In the next section, then, I will begin discussing and analyzing *Sex and the City* in relation to feminism and the culture industry/mass culture. In doing this, I will attempt to answer both sets of questions pertaining to the role of culture in capitalist society.

human capacity to recognize and resist suffering. [...] The culture industry domesticates people through an endless supply of products, aimed at reconciling them with a consumption-driven, stupefied existence that actively represses the consideration of human suffering through mindless diversions and "entertainment." ("An-aesthetic Theory. Adorno, Sexuality, and Memory", p. 193-215. In: Renée Heberle, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, 2006: p. 194. [Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press])

3 Analysis

An important part of the praise *Sex and the City* has received since its inception has had to do with its truthful depiction of life of women in contemporary society, and its focus on the various issues and problems women encounter. The topics that are addressed can often be connected directly to the women's movement. Astrid Henry places the show within feminist discourse in her article "Orgasms and empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism": "[i]n many ways, *Sex and the City* has functioned as a forum about women's sexuality as it has been shaped by the feminist movement of the last 30 years."⁸² Although fictional, the show was originally intended as "a comedy about sex from a female point of view, which was a totally uncharted arena on TV", and was thus meant to address real issues, and do so in an unusually candid manner.⁸³ The show's actors also acknowledge their own and *Sex and the City's* affiliation with the women's movement (even though it is stated that the show was not intended as an explicitly 'feminist' show):

These characters, and the actresses playing them, reap enormous benefits from the women's movement. The characters have sexual freedom, opportunity, and the ability to be successful. They have the ability to be leaders and to be strong, assertive, and confident. If you grow up with the right to choose, vote, dress how you want, sleep with who you want, and have the kind of friendships you want, those things are the fabric of who you are. [Sarah Jessica Parker]

and:

The show is really about a cultural movement, which we didn't realize at first. Our generation and those since have grown up with choices. We didn't have to get married by a certain age, we could be career women if we wanted to be. Our mothers didn't have those choices growing up. [Kristin Davis]⁸⁴

While *Sex and the City* could thus be seen to address certain women's issues and form a valuable addition to the range of images of women in media, attention is also

⁸² Astrid Henry, "Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism", p. 65-82. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 66.

⁸³ Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 14.

⁸⁴ Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 24; p. 44.

brought to the fact that apparently, seeing empowered women in this manner (in media and in reality) is not such a common occurrence yet. Henry comments on the possible 'unrealistic' aspect of the series: "The critique - and anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a common one, particularly among straight men - is that no 'real' woman would ever behave like these women characters, even as women viewers clearly report otherwise in their embrace of the programme."⁸⁵ Different questions then arise pertaining to *Sex and the City's* larger relation to reality and society: Does *Sex and the City* offer a realistic image of (certain) women today?; How can *Sex and the City* be said to be unrealistic and for whom?; Could *Sex and the City*, if unrealistic, still carry value for its (female) viewers?

These questions, though relevant, are difficult (if not impossible) to answer. My intention in this essay is to probe the show's affiliation with feminist issues, which, I believe, form the root of these questions. In this section then, I will address a number of relevant feminist themes and topics, some of which mentioned in the first chapter, which I will then use to analyze *Sex and the City's* feminist potential. I will problematize these issues by employing the (as I argued before) indisputably relevant theories of consumerism and mass culture in order to answer questions such as: How are feminist issues addressed and represented?; What kind of solutions/resolutions are offered by the series' narrative?; How do these solutions/resolutions, and the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer and Jameson affect the series' feminist potential? Once again, I want to stress here that it is not my intention to expose some 'evil' anti-feminist message behind *Sex and the City*. Rather, this essay should be seen as a critical analysis of the series, with the objective of presenting possible tensions and contradictions that reside in the text.

3.1 The characters

3.1.1 The characters: Introduction

It makes sense to start this part with an introduction of the four main female characters of *Sex and the City* and also with an account of the way in which the

⁸⁵ Astrid Henry, "Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism", p. 65-82. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 80.

characters are presented as being connected to feminist-related issues. Being the main character and also the narrator of the show (as *New York Star* sex and relationship columnist), Carrie Bradshaw can be seen as functioning as the mediator between the three other women (and their views), and also between the women and the viewers, and thus, broadly speaking, her opinions and statements remain fairly general (that is, they are usually not as bold and distinct as those of the other three main characters). Carrie functions as the ‘reasonable’ and ‘levelheaded’ character, additionally making the others’ (often razor-sharp) statements more manageable and relatable for the viewers.⁸⁶ The other three main characters each represent a more distinct female type (or ‘archetype’).

Miranda Hobbes, for instance, is the cynic and skeptic of the group: as a corporate lawyer, she has no time for nonsense or romantic drivel, and with her matter-of-factness and pragmatism she “represents the realist in all of us”.⁸⁷ Miranda does not shy away from expressing her rage at society’s “sexual double standard” (which she encounters often in her male-dominated occupation), and, indeed: “[h]er favorite coffee-shop topics are sexism, power, and hypocrisy”.⁸⁸ In this sense, Miranda explicitly addresses several key feminist issues, and her character seems most directly and consciously affected by the women’s movement.

Charlotte York, the traditionally feminine and ever-romantic character, appears the absolute opposite of Miranda. Her unshakeable faith and optimism in the possibility of finding the perfect man with which to enter an equally perfect and fulfilling marriage is the main driving force for her character. Although Charlotte is a highly educated person and a successful art dealer, her profession is, arguably, not as fundamental to her sense of self and self-worth as it is for Miranda.

Samantha Jones (a public relations executive), not unlike Miranda in her pragmatism and sobriety, is by far the most sexually uninhibited of the four characters (as Samantha explains: “I’m tri-sexual – I’ll try anything once”). Always frank and open-minded, she does not let herself be judged or restrained by society’s expectations of women. Samantha is Charlotte’s opposite in terms of her complete lack of romantic desire, wanting (only) anonymous, emotion-free sex. These are, in short, the general features of the four main female characters of the show. In the next

⁸⁶ Of course, Carrie does have her own distinct character traits and problems: as is explained in ‘the official *Sex and the City* companion book’: “Carrie’s search for a man while she struggles to maintain her independence has always been the show’s central emotional story line.” (Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 19.)

⁸⁷ Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 83.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; *ibid.*

section, I will relate some of these features or characteristics to notions of femininity and masculinity.

3.1.2 Gender: Femininity/masculinity

A recurring topic in *Sex and the City* is the question of what ultimately separates women from men. This question is sometimes explicitly addressed and at other times only implicitly alluded to, but it is a staple feature of the friends' conversations and Carrie's column. The four female characters are all presented as maintaining a different (specific) relation to traditional categories of femininity and masculinity.

This is most clearly represented in the characters' style of dress. The sharpest opposition in this sense is between Miranda and Charlotte: Miranda is often dressed (also of course for practical reasons) in stern-looking, dark-colored suits, whereas Charlotte usually wears more traditional 50's- and 60's-style dresses with flower prints, ruffles and the occasional bow. Thus, Miranda is visually constructed as rather 'masculine', and Charlotte as 'feminine', and this may be said to be mirrored in their character (or rather: their dress could be seen as a *reflection* of their supposed character). This division into traditional gendered categories is referred to by Cynthia Nixon (who plays Miranda) when she says that: "Samantha and Miranda are the more masculine characters, and Carrie and Charlotte are the more feminine".⁸⁹

Although as a viewer, I might be inclined to agree with Nixon's assertion, I also sense this statement being in conflict with some of the show's prevailing ideas: *Sex and the City*, in its themes and dialogue, often attempts to investigate and challenge the traditional, culturally constructed categories of male/masculinity and female/femininity to which Nixon here alludes. Indeed, the characters often prove unwilling to accept the gender-biases and submit to what society expects them to be as women, and seem to recognize the possibility of multiple versions of 'femininity'.

What is essentially the question here is whether, in *Sex and the City*, gender is presented as "a dichotomous category" or as an "identity formation with multiple possibilities".⁹⁰ It may seem that, in its celebration of femininity and female friendship and its persistent depiction of male dysfunction and inadequacy, the show

⁸⁹ Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 85.

⁹⁰ Natalie Fenton. "Feminism and Popular Culture", p. 104-116. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 109; *ibid.*

privileges femininity over masculinity, and thus maintains a categorical distinction between 'male' and 'female'. In *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, this type of view is connected to 'emancipatory' feminism, which attempts to: "reverse [binary structures] so that the **feminine** will be privileged over the **masculine**" (emphases in original).⁹¹

However, while *Sex and the City* does celebrate the women's friendship as something valuable and unique, it does not present it as something *exclusively* female or as attributable to some essential female quality, and the show does indeed present women as being capable of being dysfunctional as well. Thus it does not seem that *Sex and the City* retains as dichotomous a view of gender as lies at the basis of emancipatory feminism. Indeed, the show does address the gender-prejudices that exist in society but discards the essentialist notion of gender for a more post-structuralist conception of gender. For instance: while such traits and qualities as dependency, vulnerability, and emotionalism are presented as *traditionally* 'feminine' and we see the female characters battling these supposed 'feminine' traits, the notion that they are inherent to women is presented as just that: the result of a traditional (old-fashioned) conception of gender. For this reason, it is interesting that Charlotte, the most traditional in her outlook of the four women, is the character that seems to worry most about appearing or acting 'feminine'.⁹² It is particularly interesting that in an episode titled "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" (episode 4 of season 3), Charlotte, when dressed as a man for a photo shoot, is finally able to abandon her sexual inhibitions. Presumably, Charlotte considers sexual forwardness to be an 'unfeminine' quality, thus explaining why her gender-crossing allows her to act more 'like a man'.⁹³ The characters, and particularly Samantha and Miranda, can be seen to possess many qualities traditionally seen as 'masculine' (independence, assertiveness, rationality), while oftentimes, the men in their lives turn out to be needy and over-emotionalist. But though there is thus clearly an acknowledgement of and playfulness with these traditional gender constructions, it is not suggested that any quality is inherently male or female. This also explains why the feminist accusation that (some) media texts present maleness as the goal for women is not really applicable to *Sex and the City*: (especially) Miranda and Samantha are not trying to be men, they are

⁹¹ Sophia Phoca. "Feminism and Gender", p. 55-65. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 55.

⁹² Also, this brings up Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender.

⁹³ Charlotte also assumes that other women accede to traditional categories of gender. This is exemplified by her statement that: "Women really just want to be rescued".

merely trying to be (more) empowered and (more) independent women.⁹⁴ I will further discuss issues of independence in the next paragraph.

3.1.3 Labor and finance (independence)

As I mentioned, Miranda is the character who most clearly attaches self-worth and a sense of independence to her profession. She seems to feel strongly that women should work outside of the home, and often voices this opinion. Despite the fact that she is in a high-income profession and is financially independent (of a man), Miranda constantly struggles with dependence, and her attitude of self-sufficiency is repeatedly put to the test.

As dependence can be an ambiguous term, it may be relevant to distinguish between different types of dependency, for instance, between *emotional* and *material* dependence, as Mary McIntosh does in “The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics”.⁹⁵ This distinction broadens our insight into the four characters’ struggles, as a different type of dependency is battled in different instances by the women. While it is apparent to the viewer that all four women are well-off financially (and thus can be seen as relatively materially independent), we do witness them facing issues of material dependency, as becomes clear when Carrie faces eviction after her break-up with Aidan (in “Ring a Ding Ding”, episode 16 of season 4).

Carrie, never having been anything but completely independent, faces the possibility of becoming financially dependent of a man (Mr. Big), as she has made some poor financial decisions and needs financial support. While Charlotte is financially capable of helping Carrie out of her predicament, she does not offer this help to her friend, much to Carrie’s dismay. Carrie decides to confront Charlotte about this, telling her that she feels her friend is being unsupportive of her and furthermore righteous about her (Charlotte’s) own state of independence. Carrie reminds Charlotte that she has never been judgmental toward Charlotte, and suggests

⁹⁴ This accusation is connected to liberal feminism. As is stated in *The Routledge Companion*: “Janus accuses certain studies of women’s representation in the media of being consistent with a **liberal** feminist perspective which sets up male versus female categories. [...] In her view, this perspective only leads to cosmetic changes in the representation of women because it defines ‘maleness’ as the goal for women in media images.” (emphasis in original) (Natalie Fenton. “Feminism and Popular Culture”, p. 104-116. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 107.)

⁹⁵ Mary McIntosh. “The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics.”, p. 109-129. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 126.

that Charlotte's own independence is questionable, after discovering that she still sometimes wears her wedding-ring (even though she is divorced from her ex-husband Trey). Also, Charlotte still lives in her ex-husband's park-avenue apartment, though Carrie does not (explicitly) mention this. Thus, while Charlotte views Carrie's lack of material independence as worth disapproving of, she fails to examine the fact that she finds a great amount of reassurance in being someone's wife.

In a symbolic resolution, Charlotte eventually gives her ring to Carrie for her down payment, and thus one woman's dependency is traded for another's independence. Interestingly, the option of becoming dependent on another *woman* (her friend Charlotte) carries a completely (that is: a less negative) different meaning for Carrie from her other alternative: becoming dependent on a man (Mr. Big). The question thus arises whether it is really independence that is the issue here, or whether it has more to do with male/female power-relations.

Miranda is also completely financially independent, and could also be said to be emotionally independent. The dependency she struggles with then, is perhaps best described as physical. In episode 7 of season 4 ("Time and Punishment"), Miranda, after getting in an argument with Charlotte over Charlotte's decision to quit working (and thus quit a job she loves) in order to focus more on her family, gets a neck spasm while drying her hair (as she has just come out of the shower).⁹⁶ This ends up in a embarrassing situation, in which Aidan, Carrie's boyfriend, has to lift (rescue) a naked and immovable Miranda off her bathroom floor to take her to the chiropractor. As Miranda criticizes another's lack of independence, she herself falls prey to dependency. Miranda's encounters with issues of self-sufficiency also take the shape of prejudice: though Miranda is not limited by dependency, she *is* often limited by other people's preconceptions of her as a woman. This is also given attention in an episode titled "Four Women and a Funeral" (season 2, episode 5), in which we see Miranda face the prejudices against and expectations of single, independent women in contemporary society.

⁹⁶ Charlotte calls Miranda (early in the morning) on the phone in order to confront her about her supposed judgemental attitude toward Charlotte's decision, stating that: "You think I'm one of those women [...] one of those women we hate, who just works until she gets married". Charlotte defends her decision by saying that: "The women's movement is supposed to be about choice, and if I choose to quit my job, that is my choice!" Miranda, responding by saying "The women's movement? Jesus Christ, I haven't even had coffee yet!", suggests that Charlotte may not be behind her *own* choice, leaving Charlotte yelling: "I choose my choice! I choose my choice!"

Early on in the episode, we see Miranda being shown a large (and presumably expensive) apartment that she is considering buying. As (short-haired) Miranda walks through the apartment, dressed in a high-collared suit and carrying a briefcase, the female broker enquires: “So, it’s just you?”. Miranda declares (smiling): “Yep. Just me.”, to which the broker incredulously replies: “Such a big apartment to buy for just you!” Miranda, unscathed by the remark, deftly and unapologetically responds with: “I have a lot of shoes”, at which both women laugh. Miranda then repeats her “Just me” in response to the broker’s inquiries about a possible boyfriend moving in, and also, without hesitation, turns down the woman’s offer to set Miranda up with her son. Finally, Miranda confidently declares: “I’ll take it”, leaving the broker satisfied but somewhat astounded. The voice-over of Carrie Bradshaw ends the scene, explaining: “And with that, Ms. Miranda Hobbes, esquire, a.k.a. ‘Just me’, bought herself her first apartment and promptly took herself out for a drink”, hinting not only at Miranda’s financial independence, but also making clear that this woman does not need a man to take her out (reinforced by Miranda just having turned down a date): she can go celebrate her accomplishment by having a drink all by herself.

However, later on in the episode, Miranda’s control and autonomy reduce somewhat during a scene in which we see her sitting at a paper-littered desk, across from a male mortgage representative. Throughout this scene, by being harassed with more critical enquiries about her single status, being asked whether her father will be providing the down payment, and disparagingly being told to “check the single woman-box”, Miranda gradually loses her bold attitude and seems to become more and more discouraged. At lunch, she tells her friends that she does not need a man, after which she gets told (not too surprisingly, by Charlotte) that “men don’t want a woman who’s too self-sufficient”. In the final part of the episode, Miranda calls Carrie on the telephone after nearly choking on some take-away in her new apartment. Panicked, she tells her friend: “I’m gonna die alone Carrie!”, having been frightened by her new neighbor telling her that the previous unmarried female owner died there, her cat supposedly eating “half her face”. The next day, Miranda experiences a panic-attack while exploring her new neighborhood. Thus, in the course of this episode we see Miranda temporarily lose her independent and bold attitude in the face of incessant prejudice about single women. She becomes convinced that she is not

indeed the self-proclaimed (voluntary) and independent single woman she thought she was, but rather a defective and helpless spinster.⁹⁷

When discussing issues of independence, a relevant topic to focus on is labor. Labor is a key feminist issue, particularly for first wave feminism, emphasizing equal rights for women, and liberal feminism, focusing on the economic empowerment of individual women. Miranda, combining a child with her work in seasons 5 and 6, faces the prejudices against working mothers and thus some of these (first wave and liberal feminist) work-related issues. Indeed, Miranda could be said to exemplify a liberal feminist attitude toward work, as she requests no special treatment during and after her pregnancy, and in fact insists on her work being judged along the same standards as her childless (largely male) colleagues. Miranda's autonomy in the field of labor represents the more general 'empoweredness' of her character: for her, having a career equals being independent.

As several authors point out, not every type of feminism sustains as optimistic a conception of labor as (for instance) liberal feminism. We could cite here the notion (which I also mentioned and explained in the previous chapter) that because labor is connected to the capitalist system, it is inherently tied to, and indeed reproduces, oppression.⁹⁸ Thus, we could say that although the four women may be financially independent, they are still dependent on a system which could be seen as inherently oppressive (to women). Emancipation in this sense may thus not be *actual* emancipation. This complicates any conception of the four characters being emancipated, and truly independent, since their lives are (obviously) inseparably tied to several aspects of the system of capitalism.

Though I have suggested that the women in *Sex and the City* are largely independent in most areas of their lives, it still seems they are searching for something or someone to fulfill them (though this would not really hold for Samantha). A relevant question to pose is: why does such a large portion of a show

⁹⁷ I will continue on the subject of the single woman in the next chapter.

⁹⁸ For a brief explanation of socialist feminism, see paragraph 2.1 and 2.3 in the previous chapter. When I say that labor reproduces oppression, I here mean labor outside the home. However, this point is also valid for child labor and labor inside the home, connected to the family, as these types of labor reproduce labor *itself*. As Mary McIntosh explains: "the family system helps to create and reproduce the conditions necessary for capitalist production", and housework can be seen as "the production and reproduction of a commodity essential to capitalism, namely labour power itself." (Mary McIntosh. "The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics.", p. 109-129. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 110; *ibid.*) I will return to the family as key for the reproduction of capitalism in the next chapter.

about independent women revolve around men and relationships? I will return to this subject in the next chapter, but first I will focus my attention on issues of class and race.

3.1.4 Class and race

Welcome to the age of un-innocence. No one has breakfast at Tiffany's, and no one has affairs to remember. Instead, we have breakfast at seven AM and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible. Self-protection and closing the deal are paramount. Cupid has flown the co-op. How the hell did we get into this mess?

This is how New York is introduced by Carrie in the first episode of *Sex and the City* (titled "Sex and the City"). New York is clearly portrayed as a city in which romance is a thing of the past (and connected to the fantasy world of cinema); a city of cynical men and women who are equally cynical when it comes to love and relationships. Carrie continues by explaining Manhattan women specifically:

There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of women like this in the city. We all know them, and we all agree they are great. They travel, they pay taxes, they'll spend four hundred dollars on a pair of Manolo Blahnik-strappy sandals. And they're alone.

Three elements are mentioned in these segments: modern urban life, the financial independence of women, and the inability of those women to enter successful relationships. What is addressed here is not only changed urban life (in comparison to the past) in general: it is, more specifically, a change in relations between men and women. Whether the cause or the effect of this change, the financial empowerment of women is established as one of the key defining elements of the modern city. As Samantha explains later on in the episode (addressing Charlotte): "Sweetheart, this is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much money and power as men, plus: the equal luxury of treating men as sex-objects."

What becomes clear in these quotes is that the empowerment of New York/Manhattan-women is presented as being directly connected to *economic* empowerment. Women pay their *own* taxes; they can spend four hundred dollars on *themselves*, and (thus) they are now equal to men, in several ways (financially, but

also sexually). Thus, it seems as though the project of feminism is completed, as New York-women are fully emancipated. While this perception can be questioned (and it *is* questioned throughout the series), broader issues also have to be addressed if this perception would be assumed to be true only for the show. If independence and equality with men is indeed inherent to modern New York-women due to financial empowerment, where does this leave women who do *not* live in New York; who are *not* economically empowered? Is feminism not an option for them?

Diane Negra addresses this aspect of *Sex and the City* in ““Quality Postfeminism?” *Sex and the Single Girl* on HBO”.⁹⁹ Negra states that:

While “*Sex and the City*” offers a welcome ambiguity and ambivalence about those dilemmas that are most likely to be oversimplified, caricatured and romanticized within a self-proclaimed “postfeminist” popular culture [...] there are also, I think, some significant limitations that come as a consequence of locating the “single girl” experience so exclusively in affluent, urban New York. In fact, the emphasis on such a setting may run the risk of deflecting attention from the alienation and diminished citizenship of single women who exist in a variety of class categories and geographical locations and whose lives play out at a significant remove from the luxury and consumerist pleasures so frequently highlighted by the series.¹⁰⁰

As Negra rightly points out, feminism and female independence may be an option for affluent women in *Sex and the City*, but what does that mean for women (in reality) who are not part of the economical and cultural elite? Astrid Henry mentions similar problems in regard to other categories of identity when she states about *Sex and the City* that:

While the programme offers an important alternative to mainstream media images of female sexuality and sexual pleasure, its vision of female empowerment is severely

⁹⁹ Negra, ““Quality Postfeminism?” *Sex and the Single Girl* on HBO”, 2004. Diane Negra teaches film and television at the University of East Anglia. I will focus more closely on ‘the single woman’ later on in this essay.

¹⁰⁰ Negra, ““Quality Postfeminism?” *Sex and the Single Girl* on HBO”, 2004: p. 11. This point can also be brought into connection with Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments, by suggesting that feminism in *Sex and the City* is portrayed in such a way that its image is easy to consume. Clearly, Negra is speaking about class in the classic sense of the word (as in: high class versus lower, working class), rather than the Marxist feminist sense, which would indicate women as a oppressed class within patriarchal capitalist society in opposition to men.

limited by the fact that all four of its protagonists are white, heterosexual, thin, conventionally attractive and, importantly, economically well off.¹⁰¹

Both authors are indeed right at suggesting that the characters' class and racial positions are relevant for the *Sex and the City's* feminist context and potential, and thus it is relevant to note that the specifics of the women's background are rarely addressed in the series. We are made aware that the four women differ somewhat in background (for instance, Charlotte is an Episcopalian WASP from a traditional upper-class family while Carry was raised by her single mother), but mostly, this is something which is assumed rather than explicitly stated. Furthermore, ultimately the women all occupy the same privileged (white and affluent) position. There *are* some (though arguably relatively very few) episodes in which issues of class are somehow addressed, a good example of which is "The Caste System" (episode 10 of season 2) Interestingly enough, this issue here automatically becomes intertwined with issues of gender and power.

Early on in the episode, we see the four women be given a pedicure in a salon. Sitting alongside each other on a large (regal-looking) sofa, they chat about Miranda and Miranda's boyfriend Steve's situation (they are in conflict over the fact that Miranda is a lawyer and thus has a higher income than Steve, who is a barman) while four female pedicurists sit kneeled at their feet. The conversation, centering on the fact that Steve is a barman with no higher aspirations, leads Charlotte to say: "you're talking about more than a difference in income, you're talking about a difference in background and education. This guy is working class". The other three women are visibly (and audibly) astonished by this remark. In response to her friends' comments, Charlotte then says: "you're trying to pretend that we live in a classless society, and we don't", discreetly signaling at the pedicurists sitting at their feet. The pedicurists, who we only see from the back, and therefore do not observe a reaction to the conversation from, are then stared at by the four friends.

The conversation then turns to the relation between income and gender. Charlotte says to Miranda: "Honestly, I don't know how you can get serious with a guy whose entire future is based on tips", leading Carrie to incredulously reply: "Wait a minute! Rich men date not so rich women all the time. I mean, come on, look at me

¹⁰¹ Astrid Henry, "Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism", p. 65-82. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 70.

and Big! It's not about money! It's about compatibility". Charlotte then responds: "Yeah but it's normal for the guy to have more money", to which Samantha objects: "Oh come on! I know lots of women who make more money than their husbands!". Miranda finally concludes: "When single men have a lot of money it works to their advantage, but when a single woman has money, it's a problem you have to deal with. It's ridiculous! I wanna enjoy my success, not apologize for it!"¹⁰² By the end of the episode, Steve breaks up with Miranda, apologetically telling her that her the difference in income 'didn't make him feel good about himself'. Interestingly enough, here Steve alludes to the fact that it is not the difference in income that causes Steve to feel inferior to Miranda, but the fact that the person with the higher income is a *woman*. Thus, the fact that the four women occupy a privileged position *is* addressed in the series' narrative here, and some sense is also generated that this is far from standard. However, we as viewers are still never shown what the alternative to this privileged position is, and so we never get a real sense of what life for 'normal' modern women (according to *Sex and the City*) may be.

Similarly, though the issue of race is also addressed in the series narrative, this is not done in such a way that the relation between the women's privileged position and their possible feminism/empowerment can be critically assessed.¹⁰³ Thus, no sense is given of what female empowerment could mean beyond *Sex and the City*, or beyond the position of privilege.¹⁰⁴

I want to return shortly to the opening quotes of this paragraph and to economic empowerment now, and the related issue of consumption. As became clear in the quotes, New York women are independent according to *Sex and the City* primarily because they are *financially* independent, and this is displayed in their consumption habits. How do you know a woman is emancipated? –she can buy four hundred dollar-shoes. The question arises: if female empowerment is expressed most vividly in consumption (as indeed is often the case in *Sex and the City*), does this mean that

¹⁰² This plotline reoccurs in season six, when Carrie's boyfriend Berger is unable to deal with Carrie being professionally more successful than him.

¹⁰³ The issue of race is addressed most notably in episode 5 of season 3, titled "No Ifs, Ands, or Butts", in which Samantha dates an African-American man whose sister tells Samantha that "you're white, and I have a problem with my only brother getting serious with a white woman", and, later on, to: "Get your little white pussy away from my brother!"

¹⁰⁴ This is not to suggest that a fictional series *should* address the world beyond the fictional (in fact, it would be surprising). Rather, I want to suggest that *Sex and the City's* feminist claims should not be taken for granted.

empowerment is only attainable through consumption; and concomitantly, that to *not consume* is to *not be feminist*?

This assertion would suggest that female empowerment is necessarily tied to capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer however, see capitalism as necessarily oppressive (as I mentioned in the previous chapter), and furthermore, would say that empowerment could never be actual empowerment if achieved *within* the system of capitalism. Hence, they might see the claim or suggestion of consumption as some kind of liberation in *Sex and the City* as merely another way of ‘stultifying’ viewers. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument, pointing out how the products of the culture industry “document only the surface of social reality”, would seem to be applicable.¹⁰⁵ The suggestion that *Sex and the City* portrays independent, empowered women sidesteps the question whether this is actually true (for the series), and the question of how this relates to real women in society (as Negra and Henry also pointed out).

Using Jameson’s theory of displacement (or containment), it would become relevant to identify what real social problems are addressed by *Sex and the City*, and what solutions to these problems are offered by the narrative. As becomes clear in the quotes, women are cynical and feel unfulfilled. Is this presented as being solvable through consumption? Is their unhappiness presented as a wider societal problem (for instance, due to prejudices against powerful women), or as an individual one (for instance, as being a question of finding the right man)? Is there a possibility of a feminist critique in the assertion that these successful women are not happy, or can we speak of a manipulation of female viewers’ worries? These last questions will be further addressed in the next chapter on relationships.

3.2 Relationships

Sex and the City is a show dealing mainly with the subjects of sex and relationships. In this chapter, I will therefore address a number of issues from the perspective of specific relationships that are key to *Sex and the City*, and that also occupy an important role within feminist theory, namely dating, the single woman as opposed to the (traditional) family, the related issue of childrearing, and the relationship

¹⁰⁵ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 97.

between the four women. I will also connect the different topics to issues of consumerism and oppression.

3.2.1 Dating

All we talk about any more is Big, or balls, or small dicks! How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends? It's like seventh grade with bank accounts! What about *us*? What *we* think, *we* feel, *we* know? Christ! Does it always have to be about them?

Finally, during one brunch with her four friends (in episode 1 of season 2), Miranda can take no more of the women's obsessing over men. Though later on in this episode (appropriately titled "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"), she apologizes for her outburst, Miranda's point remains valid. Indeed, a very large portion of *Sex and the City* is centered on the women's relationships with men.

Although this may not be surprising (as the show's title *is Sex and the City*), it is relevant to note that not only the dialogue, but also the broader narrative seems, at least at times, to be largely driven by male characters. It is significant that although many episodes do not offer any real (final) narrative resolution, inviting ambiguity instead, in the last few episodes of the last season (season 6), narrative resolution *is* suddenly achieved, and, furthermore, each of the four women finds relational fulfillment. It does seem that the suggestion, occasionally put forward throughout the six seasons of *Sex and the City*, that women do not necessarily need a partner in order to become happy, is discarded completely for a more traditional, romantic ending. Was everything that the four characters experienced throughout the series merely meant to build up to their 'rescue from solitary' or can the resolution be seen as a mere narrative detail, leaving intact all its previous claims and implications?

If we were to look at this question from a perspective of *ideology*, it might seem as though there is a clear and definite message behind *Sex and the City*: that it is normal to obsess about men, and that true love and happiness will come to those who are patient. As I mentioned before, for Jameson it is key to examine which problems are addressed and how these problems are then resolved. It is then relevant to differentiate between two ways in which real problems (social and political 'worries, fears and hopes') are repressed or managed in a mass cultural text (in order

to be rendered harmless).¹⁰⁶ First, *real problems* become displaced onto *false problems*; and second, *real problems* are solved through *false solutions*.

If we were then to apply these two different versions of ‘containment’ to *Sex and the City*, we could say that real problems that are addressed are inequality between men and women in society, and the failure of women in finding fulfillment in life. A feminist way of looking at these problems might lead us to conclude that these problems are caused by structural flaws within patriarchal (capitalist) society. But when we examine *Sex and the City*, a different interpretation could be said to be at the show’s basis. Although the possibility is addressed in individual episodes that the four women suffer from society’s structural inequalities, when we look at the show’s wider narrative and ideological content, something else is exposed. Indeed then, societal problems are largely presented as being *individual* problems (not having the right attitude), and many problems are presented as being solvable through shopping and as being a matter of finding the right man.¹⁰⁷ It is for this reason that the show’s central focus on dating and relationships is highly relevant, as finding the perfect relationship is often presented as the end-all solution to all problems.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, as I mentioned, success in the field of relationships even forms the narrative solution to the *entire series*, as all four women find personal and relational happiness in the final season. Though it could be claimed that the success that the four women encounter in their love lives in these final episodes is merely meant to mirror their individual success and happiness as independent women (and thus that the latter is not a result of the former), I would suggest that this is a less convincing explanation. For instance, I deem it highly relevant that even Samantha, the character who never attaches value to long-term relationships and finds personal fulfillment through her (sexual) freedom as a single woman, miraculously finds bliss in a monogamous relationships during season 6. If there were no ideological

¹⁰⁶ The assumption here, following Jameson’s assertion that the mass cultural text must address real problems in order to fulfil its ideological function, is that *Sex and the City* does indeed address actual social and political problems.

¹⁰⁷ Astrid Henry comments on the way feminism is often reduced to this ‘ideology of choice’ on television. She accuses *Sex and the City* of this same fault, claiming that the show often narrowly focuses on individual life choices, “from choices regarding sexual partners to sexual acts, marriage, motherhood and careers”. As Henry points out, this can avoid representing “political and social issues in ways that suggest the need for collective action or change other than on the individual level”. (Astrid Henry, “Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism”, p. 65-82. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 71; p. 71-72; p. 71.)

¹⁰⁸ Though dating does not in fact make the four women happy in the first five seasons, this is presented as the result of the men being flawed, rather than the solution being off beam in the first place. Thus, while time and again the women are disappointed in their relationships, this is in fact the *justification* for them to continue searching.

emphasis on traditional relationships and the show really did advocate women's right to a self-defined life, then how and why would the queen of 'sleeping around and loving it' suddenly completely change her disposition toward relationships? Thus, it does seem that relationships are offered as a false solution to a problem (unhappiness) here, (though Samantha is not even aware that she has a problem that needs to be solved in the first place, as she *is* happy).

On the other hand, instances could also be named in *Sex and the City* where finding the perfect relationship is not presented as the solution to all the women's problems. One example of this can, surprisingly, also be found at the end of season 6. In the last two episodes (season 6, episode 19, "An American Girl in Paris (Part Une)" and episode 20, "An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux)"), Carrie is confronted with her desire of finding true romance, as she moves to Paris in order to accompany her new boyfriend Aleksandr Petrovsky, abandoning her entire New York-life (including her job, apartment and friends). What appears to build up as a perfect fairytale ending to the series, turns out to be a near disaster, as Carrie is unable to find true happiness in her new hometown. Symbolically losing her signature 'Carrie'-necklace, being slapped by a Parisian child, and stepping in a pile of dog litter in her formerly flawless outfit, Carrie is harshly awoken from her perfect Parisian dream, realizing that she is a New Yorker at heart and is thus far too cynical to believe in fairytales and romance. She does (immediately) re-enter a relationship, but it is a genuinely 'real', problem-ridden one that she opts for, rather than the picture-perfect, superficial one that she leaves behind in Paris. Thus, though Carrie is portrayed as finding happiness in the form of a relationship, her search is presented as problematic and complicated, and ultimately, she remains true to herself rather than continuing pursuing a utopia.

The same could be said for Charlotte's character, who also discovers that her fairytale is not real (in seasons 5 and 6). Being 'rescued' after having fallen in the middle of a busy street, Charlotte falls in love with her 'knight in shining armor', Trey MacDougal, and they eventually marry. Charlotte, having obsessed all her life about finding the perfect man to enter marriage with, is blissfully happy, until it becomes apparent that her knight suffers from impotence-problems. The couple end up divorcing, after which Charlotte meets a new bed-partner, her divorce lawyer Harry Goldenblatt. While at first, Charlotte does not deem (the Jewish, bald and chubby) Harry adequate as a real potential partner, she turns around after realizing that superficial perfection is of no importance compared to true love. Charlotte even

converts to Judaism in order to wed Harry, producing the most significant transition in the character throughout the series.

Thus, if these examples illustrate the false solutions (to not feeling fulfilled) being offered to the viewer, they are not as ideologically simple or straightforward as Jameson's theory might cause to expect. On the other hand, the examples *do* still end in (all of) the women finding a relationship, and arguably being rescued in some way by a man from solitude (which equals 'misery'). From this feminist point of view, however, one could also suggest, as Liesbet van Zoonen does, that searching for a man *actively* need not be un-feminist.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps it is then not the possible underlying ideology of the narrative, but rather the way in which the women and their search is portrayed that is key in determining how to assess the issues of dating and in *Sex and the City*.

At this point, I would like to introduce the concept of reification, related to processes such as objectification, instrumentalization and commodification. As Jameson says:

The theory of reification [...] describes the way in which, under capitalism, the older traditional forms of human activity are instrumentally reorganized and "taylorized," analytically fragmented and reconstructed according to various rational models of efficiency, and essentially restructured along the lines of a differentiation between means and ends.¹¹⁰

In the process of reification, every aspect of human life begins to follow the logic of capitalism, and even human relationships become objects to be consumed: "by its transformation into a commodity a thing, of whatever type, has been reduced to a means for its own consumption. It no longer has any qualitative value in itself, but only insofar as it can be "used".¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Van Zoonen argues, following Arbuthnot and Seneca's analysis (1982) of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, that the film can be seen as a feminist text, as: "[t]he two actresses Monroe and Russell Portray strong, independent women who have ventured on a boat trip jointly to seek a husband. The heterosexual quest for romance might be the manifest narrative of the film, but underneath it is a story of resistance to male objectification and female love and friendship. There is a continuous tension between the romantic text and the feminist 'subtext' Monroe and Russell are constructed as objects for the male gaze but they always return the look, scanning their surroundings for appropriate husband material. In their dress and stature they resist sexual objectification which is furthermore prevented by particular camera angles and lighting." (Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 95-96.)

¹¹⁰ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 1979: p. 130.

¹¹¹ Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", 1979: p. 131.

The concept of reification is applicable to the four main female characters of *Sex and the City*, as they could be seen as four 'prototypes' of woman clearly distinguishable and easily consumable for viewers, but it can also be applied to the men and the relationships in the show, in two ways. Firstly, the men could be seen as consumer objects for the women, as they are 'used' and then swiftly disposed of when turning out to be somehow inadequate. Secondly, it could be said that the dating in the series is exploited for its comical value, as one man after another becomes reduced to 'small-dick guy', 'funky-spunk guy', or 'up-the-butt guy'.¹¹²

Another reason I introduce the concept of reification at this particular point, is because I believe it is relevant also for the previously mentioned episode, in which Carrie moves to Paris. Particularly when connecting this episode to Jameson, it is noticeable that many of the key events in this plotline center around consumption. While out on her first Parisian day of shopping in a flawless and sophisticated outfit, Carrie drips rainwater from her umbrella all over the perfectly polished marble floors of the *Dior* shop she is just entering, causing her to trip and fall. Letting out a terrified shriek, she hurls herself and all her purse's contents across the shop floor, immediately being helped up by two startled French shop-assistants in fine suits. We witness the snooty looks of the other customers as Carrie, visibly mortified, attempts to recollect herself and grab her belongings off the floor. Later on, Carrie discovers that she has lost her signature 'Carrie'-necklace (as I mentioned before), about which she distraughtly explains that: "It cost like nothing but...it's priceless and I've just had it forever, so.." Later that day, Carrie sees four friends having lunch, as she herself used to do with her friends, as she walks down another Parisian street. She stares at the women through a melancholic smile, after which she calls Miranda in New York and confesses that she feels lonely and miserable in Paris and that she misses New York.

Throughout this episode (and the following one) it is made clear that Carrie, a true New Yorker at heart, does not belong in Paris, a city where everything is magical, beautiful, clean and perfect (as opposed to the gritty reality of New York). What is

¹¹² From a feminist perspective, it could be suggested that in its reversal of patterns of objectification, the series represents an empowered feminist critique. However, arguments could also be made to undermine this claim. For instance, Mary Ann Doane argues that such a reversal of objectification constitutes itself "[...] as aberrations whose acknowledgement simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy". Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the masquerade; theorizing the female spectator", 1982: p. 44 (cited in van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 91).

most remarkable, however, is both this contrast (between Carrie/New York and Paris) and Carrie's longing for her hometown are conveyed through particular acts of consumption. She realizes she does not fit in when her inelegant manner of consuming exposes her as a New Yorker (consumption evidently being *the* distinguishing trait of a true Parisienne); she misses home when she realizes that she can no longer share the delights of lunching/consuming with her friends; and she feels she has abandoned her true self when she loses a consumer-object that she feels represents her New York-self. Thus, it is ultimately consumption which identifies Carrie as a New Yorker, and indeed: Carrie's entire Parisian experience is defined in terms of commodities and objects.

In this manner, reification and commodification prove to be relevant concepts when analyzing *Sex and the City*, as the logic of consumption and commodification defined (all) experiences and relationships. Dating and relationships become portrayed as the search (the *shopping*) for the ultimate and perfect commodity, and relationships are reduced to the means to that end. This then also leads us back to Jameson's theory of ideology, as the search for the perfect relationships can be seen as a false, or utopic, solution to all problems.

Conversely, other narrative details from the mentioned episode could be cited to contest this argument. It may be relevant, for instance, that when Carrie loses her (materially worthless) necklace, the infinitely more costly version she receives as a replacement from Aleksandr does not offer her any consolation. In this sense, it may be valid to argue that it is in fact the symbolic, more emotional value of the object that is of importance to Carrie, rather than its exchange value, as the necklace symbolizes her friendship with her New York-friends. Similarly, it may not be the act of consumption that Carrie regrets not being able to share with her friends (as she sees the four French women having lunch), but the act of sharing *itself*.

3.2.2 The single woman vs. the family

A constant struggle the women in *Sex and the City* face has to do with the societal pressure they feel to be in a monogamous relationship and to create a traditional family. The notion of 'the single woman' is often addressed in the series, and this is also relevant for feminist questions, as being single is considered an important issue and privilege in terms of self-definition for women. Furthermore, as the family is seen

as a key site of patriarchal oppression by certain feminists, it is relevant to investigate the role of traditional, heterosexual relationships in the series. The characters often face the prejudices against single women (of a certain age), as I also demonstrated in the paragraph on dependence/independence, and it is questioned time and again whether women are actually free in their lives, or whether they are conditioned by patriarchal society and the institution of family to aspire to a traditionally shaped lifestyle. In this paragraph, I will probe these issues, and also question their ideological and feminist implications for the series.

A thirty-four-year-old guy with no money and no place to live, because he's single, he's a catch. But a thirty-four-year-old woman with a job and a great home, because she's single, is considered tragic.

Once, again, it is Miranda who succinctly assesses the inequalities between men and women that exist in society (in episode 9 of season 3, titled "Easy Come, Easy Go"). This time, it is the stigma attached to the single woman that Miranda addresses, as she also does in the first episode of season 1:

I have a friend, who had always gone out with extremely sexy guys, and just had a good time. One day she woke up, and she was forty-one. She couldn't get any more dates. She had a complete physical breakdown, couldn't hold on to her job, and had to move back to Wisconsin to live with her mother. Trust me, this is not a story that makes *men* feel bad.

As Miranda asserts, being single is not really an option for women over thirty. While overall in *Sex and the City*, the single life is celebrated, indeed it is also established that 'the fabulous single life' may be a severely limited option, available only to young women, as older single men are seen as virile skirt-chasers, while older single women are regarded as spinsters.¹¹³ Thus, it seems that women are only allowed a life of 'singlehood' by society as long as they are still young and, importantly, conventionally

¹¹³ Florence Keyworth points to the sexism of terms like 'maid' and 'spinster', when she states that: "[c]ontempt for old women stretches back down the centuries and, like other sexist attitudes, has become embedded in the language. The phrase 'old man' has a ring of affection. When young men use it in speaking to each other, it denotes amiability. For young women to address each other as 'old woman' would be unthinkable. The phrase is invariably an insult." (Florence Keyworth. "Invisible Struggles: The Politics of Ageing", p. 131-142. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 132)

physically attractive, while for men, age and attractiveness are not conditions for being allowed to be single.

The women in *Sex and the City* do at times let themselves be manipulated and controlled by the societal myth that declares that women must get married before a certain age, though they also strongly oppose its discriminatory implications. In “They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?” (season 2, episode 4), this contradiction appears. There, a very candid and unflattering photograph of Carrie (holding a burning cigarette) which was taken after a night out dancing with her fellow-single friends, is put on the cover of ‘New York’-magazine (without her approval) with the caption: “Single & Fabulous? Eat, drink, and never-be-married”. Carrie remarks on the hostility of the caption, as Charlotte reads aloud from the article (during one of the women’s brunch-/lunch-dates): “Single was fun at twenty, but you want to ask these women how fun will all-night club-hopping be at forty?” Charlotte defiantly asks “Who’s out all night?”, after which Samantha exclaims: “Who’s forty?!” “Fuck them! Exclamation point!”, Miranda then decides, and clarifies: “Every few years an article like this surfaces as a cautionary tale to scare young women into marriage.” Charlotte then continues reading: “Filling their lives with an endless parade of decoys and distractions to avoid the fact that they are completely alone.” As Miranda snatches the magazine out of Charlotte’s hands, resolutely closing it, she states that the magazine-story has ‘nothing to do with them’, leaving Samantha and Charlotte to conclude that they *are* indeed single and fabulous. Though they declare to be unaffected by the horror-story, we are subsequently shown all three women looking scared and doubtful, while Carrie’s voice-over states that she has “a sneaking suspicion that they didn’t quite believe it.” Thus, while the four women are aware that the magazine story is part of an oppressive, patriarchal myth, they are unable to escape its ideological force. And indeed: later on in the episode, we see both Charlotte, Samantha *and* Miranda succumbing to their fears of ending up as old spinsters, as all three decide to date a man they have no real interest in; and Carrie lets the fear of the spinster-myth impede on her social life.¹¹⁴

By the end of the episode, Charlotte, Samantha and Miranda all dump their ‘precautionary men’, and Carrie faces her fears head-on, and thus singleness is reestablished as a legitimate option. However, I must once again bring up the fact

¹¹⁴ Miranda even goes as far as to fake a orgasm in order to maintain a possible relationship, leading Carrie to wonder (in her column): “Has the fear of being alone suddenly raised the bar on faking? Are we faking more than orgasms? Are we faking entire relationships? Is it better to fake it than be alone?”

that by the end of the series, none of the four characters, now in their late thirties, end up single. The question whether singleness is really an option for women over thirty is thus not really adequately answered, as we are given no narrative example of an 'older' woman ending up single and happy. As mentioned above, sexuality and sexual freedom become important elements to take into account, as aging and singleness (in comparison to how men are positioned within these issues) inevitably lead to questions of attractiveness. I will continue on this topic in the chapter on sex and the female body.

Equal to the societal pressure to be in a traditional relationship is the pressure to rear children. This, too, is a topic that is addressed many times throughout *Sex and the City*. The women often wonder whether they want to have children, ought to have children, and whether they are still able to at their age. After Samantha discovers she has breast-cancer in season 6, she encounters (what she believes are) prejudices against unmarried, childless women.

In "Catch 38" (episode 15 of season 6), Samantha visits her doctor for a check-up, and inquires what may have caused her cancer. The doctor then informs her that her disease may be an effect of 'lifestyle-choices', and says that "some studies have shown women who haven't had children have a increased chance of getting [cancer]". Samantha, enraged by (what she perceives as) the male doctor's insinuation that she may have brought the disease onto herself, storms out of the examination room, informing the man that she will find herself a woman doctor who understands her. Samantha later tells her friends: "Like it's my fault! I shouldn't be punished for not having kids! I should be rewarded! Since when did kids become the 'get-out-of-cancer-free'-card? He's basically saying I'm a whore who deserves chemo!" Here, Samantha speaks of her cancer as being a supposed punishment for her choices in life, suggesting that society/the doctor perceives staying childless as the *wrong* choice (suitably followed by a form of punishment). Though outraged and in absolute disagreement with this suggestion, Samantha does seem to be familiar with this type of misogynist myth.

Although this societal pressure on women is confronted and criticized in the series, the right for women to bear children and to have control over their own bodies is also addressed. Throughout the series (but mostly in seasons 5 and 6), we witness the women discussing and confronting pregnancy as related to work, and it is also

revealed that some of them have had abortions in the past. Above all, it is free choice that is propagated, and indeed, having children is certainly not portrayed as necessarily the 'wrong (or right) choice' in *Sex and the City*, as is demonstrated by the storyline in which Miranda moves from Manhattan to Brooklyn to start a new future with her new husband and newborn.

In "Out of the Frying Pan" (season 6, episode 16), Miranda, hesitant to give up her (single) life as she knows it and worried that she will enter a life of social seclusion, is unsure whether she is willing to give up her small Manhattan apartment and move to a bigger house with a garden in Brooklyn for her new family. While viewing her potential new home, Miranda seems already decided, until her husband Steve reminds her that "this isn't just about you anymore [...] we're a family". Watching her husband, son, and dog play in the yard, Miranda visibly opens up to the possibility of choosing her family's needs over her own, as we hear Carrie's voice-over say: "That day, Miranda couldn't deny what was best for her family". Though at this moment, it appears as though Miranda has shed her characteristically sober and cynical individuality (as a strong woman), slipping instead into a more passive and self-effacing position of wife and mother, she immediately reclaims her original Manhattan-self as she firmly points out to the male landlord what is not yet satisfactory about the house, and thus "negotiate[s] her way into her future". Miranda is still a lawyer; she is still *herself*.

Thus, opting for a more traditional family life is not always presented as necessarily being 'unfeminist' or un-empowering, or as being the result of societal pressure, though in earlier seasons, it *was* questioned whether family life was a viable option for an independent woman. For instance, in season 1 (episode 10, "The Baby Shower") the four women reacquaint with an old friend who is no longer the single New York-wild child she used to be, but instead a suburban mother-to-be. The four women are astounded by the fact that a woman their age is 'settling down' already, which leads Carrie to comment that: "The party had turned into a preview. A preview of a life I didn't know if I was ready for". It is suggested in the episode that the mothers the women meet at the baby shower long for their old lives and regret giving up their careers, forever shelving their single selves. By the end of the episode, the four friends' life as happy singles is validated, and Miranda's earlier assertion that motherhood is "a cult [...] they all think the same, dress the same, and sacrifice themselves to the same cause: babies" is underlined.

Similarly, in season 6, the gap between single women and family women is emphasized. Furthermore, family and childbearing is connected to issues of self-worth in the episode, titled “A Woman’s Right to Shoes” (episode 9). Here, Carrie is disparaged for the fact that she spends hundreds of dollars on Manolo Blahnik-shoes, after she is forced to take them off at a child-friendly party and the heels are subsequently stolen. Carrie later reluctantly accepts the offer of her previously remarkably unsympathetic friend to repay her for the stolen shoes. However, after the friend discovers that the shoes had in fact cost Carrie 485 dollars, she declines her offer, saying that she, unlike Carrie, has a *real* life and responsibilities. She concludes by saying: “I really don’t think that we should have to pay for your extravagant lifestyle.” Carrie leaves feeling mistreated and judged and later tells Miranda that it is not the money that is at stake, but that it is a matter of ‘a woman’s right to shoes’ and of acceptance of someone’s individual choices. Carrie comes to the conclusion that “if you are single, after graduation, there isn’t one occasion where people celebrate *you*” (she does not perceive birthdays as valid exceptions, because ‘everyone has those’) and that she has spent thousands of dollars over the years on gifts for other people’s choices to get married or have a baby. Displeased by the idea that Carrie may never receive gifts for similar occasions as she may stay single and childless forever, she defiantly informs her friend that she is getting married to *herself* and that she is registered for gifts at Manolo Blahnik. Carrie sums her triumph up by saying: “One giant step for me, one small step for single womankind.”¹¹⁵

Here, it is not so much family life or motherhood that produces the clash between the family woman and the single woman, but the inability or unwillingness of individuals to respect other people’s (other women’s) life-choices. It is Carrie’s friend’s individual (somewhat hypocritical, as Carrie reminds her friend that she herself used to buy and wear Manolo Blahniks) and selfish attitude which causes the conflict. Interestingly enough, family and childbearing are once again defined through consumption here, as Carrie’s singleness allows her to spend great amounts of money on herself, creating a gap with her friend, who can no longer do so, as she has a family to support. In this episode, singleness is thus equated with the freedom to consume.

¹¹⁵ Charlotte similarly, struggles with her feeling of self-worth as a single, childless woman as she turns out to be reproductively challenged (in season 6).

Rosalind Brunt describes how the single woman can be connected to consumerism from a liberal feminist point of view. According to Brunt, a “dramatic reversal of attitudes towards the ‘single’ woman” occurs in the sixties and seventies, where:

From being associated with a lack and an absence – no men, missing-out, on-the-shelf, unfeminine, unattractive, frustrated, unfulfilled by children – she is elevated to a position of desirability, now the envy of the woman ‘stuck’ in marriage and motherhood.¹¹⁶

‘The single girl’ is thus: “economically independent, has some kind of ‘career’ with surplus money to spend on herself, indulge her own leisure, and, most important, survive in the world of *men*” [emphasis in original].¹¹⁷ This explanation fits perfectly with the just mentioned episode of *Sex and the City*, and it could also lead us to assert that Carrie’s friend is unwilling to sympathize with her situation as Carrie, as a single woman, is the object of the married woman’s envy. Brunt continues to explain how:

The single girl ethos fits well with consumerism because it extends the marketplace into the arena of sexuality. It emphasises the need to spend money on commodities that embellish and improve the body in the competition for getting and keeping men.¹¹⁸

This view could easily be applied to *Sex and the City*, as we constantly see the attractive women shopping for shoes and sexy outfits (I will return on this topic later). However, I would argue that although vast amounts of time and money are spent on shopping for shoes etcetera, it is not presented in *Sex and the City* as meant to enhance their appearance *for men*. Instead, spending money on oneself is presented as an inherently gratifying act for single women (rather than a means toward attractiveness for others).

During this time (in the sixties and seventies) of shifting attitudes toward single women, a problem described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as ‘the problem with no name’ emerged into feminist discourse. Housewives

¹¹⁶ Rosalind Brunt. “‘An Immense Verbosity’: Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970’s”, p. 143-170. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 152; *ibid.* Brunt is citing the 1979 study of Ehrenreich and English on expert advice to women.

¹¹⁷ Rosalind Brunt. “‘An Immense Verbosity’: Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970’s”, p. 143-170. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 153.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

and mothers, “appear[ing] to have everything they had apparently been born for”, feeling increasingly unfulfilled with their lives and trapped and restless in their house, started asking the question: ‘is this all?’¹¹⁹ As “[e]ach suburban wife struggled with [this problem] alone”, one response was to “remain in the realm of private neurosis and exhort the housewife/mother to emulate the individualism and competitiveness of ‘the single girl’ herself.”¹²⁰ Thus, this collective problem was attempted to be solved with the individual solution of consumerism, the delights of the marketplace supposedly gratifying women in order for them to “cheerfully abnegat[e] themselves to the service of others in domestic labour.”¹²¹

Mica Nava connects Friedan’s views with theories of consumerism of Adorno, Horkheimer, and particularly Herbert Marcuse, and asserts how “the desiring and buying of things creates social conformity and political acquiescence. It militates against radical social change.”¹²² This can then be connected to the socialist feminist viewpoint, originating in the 1970’s, which sees the family as one of the key sites of patriarchal power relations, as “the family system helps to create and reproduce the conditions necessary for capitalist production.”¹²³ Though housework (and the reproduction of labor power), rather than consumption, was seen as “the key to the economic relation between the family and capitalist production”, consumption was seen as ‘working in the same direction’, that is: toward the oppression of women.¹²⁴ Furthermore: “the new socialist analysis - the perception of the existing family, with unpaid domestic work by women as its key characteristic, as a necessary or at least very important prop to the capitalist system - was matched by a feminist analysis of the family as the primary location of women’s specific oppression *as women*”

¹¹⁹ Rosalind Brunt. “‘An Immense Verbosity’: Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970’s”, p. 143-170. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 153. Friedan herself formulates it as following: “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: ‘Is this all?’” (Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1965: p. 13.)

¹²⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1965: p. 13; Rosalind Brunt. “‘An Immense Verbosity’: Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970’s”, p. 143-170. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 153.

¹²¹ Rosalind Brunt. “‘An Immense Verbosity’: Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970’s”, p. 143-170. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 154.

¹²² Nava, “Consumerism Reconsidered: Buying and Power”, 1991: p. 160. Mica Nava cites Hebert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* (1964). I should clarify that Nava herself opposes the (what she deems as) rather misogynistic view of women as cultural dupes of capitalism.

¹²³ Mary McIntosh. “The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics.”, p. 109-129. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 110.

¹²⁴ Mary McIntosh. “The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics.”, p. 109-129. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 111.

(emphasis mine), as “existing models of masculinity and femininity” are reproduced in young children, teaching girls how to primarily be mothers and house makers.¹²⁵

In *Sex and the City*, the family is not inherently presented as a site of oppression, and needless to say, the relation between the family and capitalism is never explicitly addressed. While family life *is* portrayed as possibly being detrimental to a woman’s individuality, independence and, particularly, to her career, this has more to do with individual choices and character-traits. If we would look at this question from the perspective of consumerism and mass culture, as for instance in the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer and Jameson, the suggestion would become viable that a product of the culture industry/mass culture *could not* present either singleness or the family as oppressive to women, as the realization that women are oppressed would endanger the consumerism on which the culture industry relies.¹²⁶

3.2.3 Community of women

At the center of *Sex and the City* is the friendship between the four main female characters. Whereas we hardly ever hear about or see their biological family, the four friends are always present in each other’s lives. Indeed, (as in many 90’s television series and sitcoms) the traditional family is replaced in *Sex and the City* by a non-traditional family of friends. This is visually demonstrated in the episode I mentioned earlier (“Four Women and a Funeral”, season 2, episode 5), where Miranda is faced with the prejudices against single woman as she searches for an apartment. At the end of that episode, we see Miranda symbolically placing a photo of her with her three friends on her new mantelpiece, as she contently smiles. Within the context of the episode, this act of Samantha clearly signifies that she is *not* alone (as everyone seems to imply throughout the episode): she has her friends. An intense bond between the four women is similarly implied in an episode of season 4.

¹²⁵ Mary McIntosh. “The Family In Socialist-Feminist Politics.”, p. 109-129. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 112; p. 109. The different arguments as McIntosh presents them are that as femininity is reproduced, girls/women learn how to become passive and submissive; that the drudgery of housework stupefies and humiliates women (Lenin); and that women’s ‘double burden’ disables them to take paid work outside the home (p. 112- 113).

¹²⁶ Adorno and Jameson would say that the social reality would never be addressed in the products of the culture industry, while Jameson would argue that the social reality of women would never be addressed *in such a way that it could actually threaten the system of mass culture and capitalism.*

Within one single episode (episode 11, titled “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda”), Charlotte, obsessed over having children, discovers that she is reproductively challenged, and Miranda, having no desire whatsoever to have children, discovers that she has accidentally gotten pregnant. As Charlotte walks into the room where the other three women are celebrating Miranda’s pregnancy (and the fact that Miranda decided against having the pregnancy aborted), the women visibly dread Charlotte’s reaction, expecting her to begrudge the woman who is able to have what she desires but cannot have (as Charlotte had done in the past). However, Charlotte’s distraught expression changes into an affectionate smile as she utters: “We’re having a baby?..” Instead of feeling competitive toward her as another woman, Charlotte views Miranda as a family member, allowing her to share in the joy of new life as though it were her own. Here, the notion of a female community replacing the more traditional family is explicitly brought up by Charlotte (‘*we’re* having a baby’).

What is key about this particular group of friends is that it is a community of *women*. The fact that they are female informs many aspects of their friendship, and often, the women form a substitution for a love-interest that is lacking in their lives. It is then the intimacy of being in the company of fellow (single) women which offers the friends consolation and support. This becomes apparent when Miranda’s mother dies in season 4 (in “My Motherboard, My Self”, episode 8). The only sibling without a ‘significant other’, Miranda is clearly devastated as she walks down the church-aisle by herself, crying, following her mother’s coffin.¹²⁷ Carrie, standing along the aisle, witnesses Miranda’s struggling and consequently steps into the aisle to embrace her friend, walking her further down the aisle while holding her hand and consoling her. Clearly, Carrie occupies the position of the lacking male companion here, both literally and figuratively.

Similarly, in “Luck Be an Old Lady” (season 5, episode 3) the women take a trip to Atlantic City to celebrate Charlotte’s ‘thirty-faux’ birthday.¹²⁸ The episode centers on the theme of aging (and singleness), as Carrie is stood up by a date at the

¹²⁷ Before the funeral, Miranda explains to her friends how her family members view Miranda’s singleness as a reason to pity her when she sarcastically says that: “I’m fine, but everybody else is very concerned about me, because I’m here alone. I didn’t realize I needed a date for my mother’s funeral. My sister and her husband want me to third-wheel with them down the aisle, ‘cause God forbid I should walk it alone. Because that would be the real tragedy, right? Ignore the coffin! There’s a single thirty-five-year-old woman walking behind it!” Matters turn even worse when, during the ceremony, Miranda is mistakenly announced as her brother’s wife.

¹²⁸ It is, in fact, Charlotte’s thirty-sixth birthday, but as this is a sensitive subject, the women decide to call it her ‘thirty-faux birthday’ instead. As Charlotte explains: “men are much more interested in meeting thirty-five-year-olds. So I’m sticking.”

beginning of the episode, resulting in Charlotte warning Carrie that if she renounces dating, she could “end up an old maid”. Carrie is initially unable to assemble her four over-occupied friends for the trip, leaving her worried about whether they will be able to maintain their friendship over time. She eventually succeeds however, and Carrie explains on the trip over that as men die before women do the four women are very likely to end up single together at old age. Just having confirmed their alliance, the women run into an unpleasant encounter in Atlantic City while at a blackjack table, as a rude male gambler impolitely yells at Miranda: “Hey red, move your fat ass!” Miranda, not yet ridden of her post-pregnancy-weight, is visibly embarrassed and tells her friends: “Guys, let’s go. It’s OK.” The three other women, clearly astounded and outraged by the man’s misogynistic comment, cry: “No! It is most certainly not OK!”, after which they continue to (verbally) attack the man, shouting at the man that Miranda has just given birth. Finally, the women sarcastically inquire: “What’s your excuse? Ya having triplets?!..”, and proudly walk away as they are applauded by onlookers.

Noticeable about the women’s bond is that it is often the disappointment in men that further unites them. After everyone fails to show up at Carrie’s thirty-fifth birthday party at a restaurant (season 4, episode 1, “The Agony and the ‘Ex’-tacy”), she ends up alone back at her apartment, crying in the shower. Later that night she tells her friends: “It felt really sad, not to have a man in my life who cares about me. No special guy to wish me happy birthday, no goddamn soul-mate. And I don’t even know if I believe in soul-mates.” Interestingly enough, it is when Carrie’s friends - her safety-net - are not there for her that she realizes that there is something lacking in her life. After this, Charlotte, in an attempts to console her friend, suggests that: “Maybe we could be each other’s soul-mates. And then we could let men just be these great, nice guys to have fun with.” Samantha replies: “Well, that sounds like a plan.” It is after they establish their inability to be fulfilled in their relationships with men that the women decide they can instead seek fulfillment in their friendship with each other.

When examining the friendship between the four women in *Sex and the City* and the emphasis on female community, Jameson’s notion of Utopia once again becomes relevant to take into account. As Jameson states:

the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated.¹²⁹

That is: in order for a mass cultural text to ideologically repress and render harmless “social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster”, it must also offer certain ‘wish-fulfilling’ (Utopian) components.¹³⁰ These desires are subsequently contained, as the mechanisms of repression “defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be laid to rest.”¹³¹

In *Sex and the City*, it is in the friendship between the four women that other aspects of their lives receive evaluation and acquire significance. It seems that any problem or worry, big or small, can be managed through discussing them among friends. Whenever the women feel let down or disappointed in life, they can rely on their camaraderie to make up for it. This is illustrated by the aforementioned resolution of the four women to regard each other as their soul mates, which is then supposed to consolidate the women with their disillusionment, caused by repeated failure of their relationships. Female community, then, can be seen as the Utopian element or fantasy message in *Sex and the City*, as it seems to resolve all other deficiencies in life. As this Utopian element is part of a mechanism of repression, we could also point out how this deflects attention from those elements in society that are causing the female characters to feel unfulfilled in the first place. Structural inequalities or a possible gap between society’s myth of heterosexual romance and reality are acquitted from scrutiny as the women’s friendship constructs a Utopian image of happiness.

3.3 Sex and the female body

A main focus of *Sex and the City* (as the title elucidates) is sex. While the show may resemble others in its focus on relationships in contemporary society, it is heralded as

¹²⁹ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979: p. 144.

¹³⁰ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979: p. 141; *ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

being unique in its candid depiction of female sexuality. The issue of the female body constitutes an important terrain within feminist theory, as it connects issues of sexuality, society, and power. As is explained in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*:

feminism is crucially concerned with the ways in which women's bodies are controlled within a **patriarchal** system, which regulates women's access to such services as **contraception** and **abortion**, while at the same time idealised forms of their bodies are **objectified**, by various means, for male consumption and sexual delectation. [emphases in original]¹³²

By focusing on sex and the female body, I will be able to address relevant questions such as: How is the female body presented and to what effect?; Is the right to sexual freedom presented as available to all women equally or is this license only available to certain women?; What role does beauty occupy in the representation of female sexuality? I will address these questions in the next two paragraphs, and also relate them to issues of consumption, before turning to the last chapter on *Sex and the City* as product and commercial.

3.3.1 Beauty, aging, and fashion

In the paragraph on the single woman, I already mentioned *Sex and the City's* emphasis on shopping, fashion, and appearance. I contested that *Sex and the City* (overall) shows consumption or fashion as a means of enhancing one's body for the opposite sex, and argued that the show presents fashion as personal style instead; as a form of self-expression. The shoe, being featured in the narrative (as the women often talk about footwear) and also visually on the DVD-box sets of the series, fulfills an important symbolic function, as it represents singleness and the independent woman.¹³³ Other aspects of the women's apparel and appearance, such as suits and hairstyle, can be seen to fulfill this same function, though perhaps not as convincingly as the shoe.

¹³² Fiona Carson, "Feminism and the Body", p. 117-128. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 117.

¹³³ Interestingly enough, the 6-season-DVD-box set of *Sex and the City* was named 'shoe-box'.

This symbolic value could be seen as 'sign-value' or secondary use-value, as Adorno also does (as cited by Featherstone): "Adorno [...] speaks of how, once the dominance of exchange-value has managed to obliterate the memory of the original use-value of goods, the commodity becomes free to take up a secondary or *ersatz* use-value" (emphasis in original).¹³⁴ He then continues to explain how: "[c]ommodities hence become free to take on a wide range of cultural associations and illusions", advertising being an example of the exploitation of this potential.¹³⁵ This explanation of sign-value can then clarify how and why the shoe can come to represent independence and self-sufficiency of the single woman. Although the high heel could be seen as highly impractical for a busy working woman, its symbolic value can be seen to point to the notion that the wearer takes pride in her appearance, celebrates her unique feminine beauty and sexuality, and will 'walk right over' those who hinder her. The fact that the shoes in question (most prominently, Manolo Blahniks) also have great exchange-value only increases their symbolic value, as it emphasizes just how economically empowered and independent the wearers are.

At the same time however, this celebration of commodities as an expression of one's independence brings our attention back to the role of consumption. As van Zoonen mentions, certain feminist approaches point out how femininity is distorted in media content, where: "submission, availability and compliance are characteristics held up as ideals, and consumption is presented as the road to self-fulfilment."¹³⁶ Although I would not immediately accede that *Sex and the City* presents submissiveness, availability and compliance as elemental to femininity, it could be questioned whether indeed, as I also suggested before, fashion and consumption are seen as an *expression of*, or as a *means toward* independence and empowerment for women.

Consumption being connected to independence and empowerment (in either of these two ways), although perhaps unproblematic for liberal feminists, would indeed be seen as problematic by Adorno and Horkheimer, and by most socialist feminists. While liberal feminists might view this type of consumption as a marker of

¹³⁴ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 1991: p. 14. Featherstone is citing G. Rose's 1978 work *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*.

¹³⁵ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 1991: p. 14. Featherstone explains how this potential for a secondary use-value is one tendency which defines the Frankfurt School's "emphasis upon the relentless logic of the commodity", reification and the "triumph of exchange-value" being the other (p. 15; p. 14). According to Featherstone, it is the "constant reworking of desires through images" in urban daily life which connects this secondary use-value to Baudrillard's concept of the commodity-sign (p. 68).

¹³⁶ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 30.

self-sufficiency, and emphasize that the women can consume luxury items because they are in high-income professions and are single women rather than family-women (which could limit their ability to consume according to their individual preferences and desires), Adorno and Horkheimer (among others) would suggest that consumption, as element of the culture industry and capitalism, is necessarily oppressive for its executors. The symbolic value of commodities could then be seen as a means to further manipulate consumers, and the label 'independent' would function as a mere product-differentiator, ensuring that there will be something to consume for everyone. This view is similar to that of (fellow Frankfurter) Herbert Marcuse, who, according to Mica Nava:

argues that liberal consumer societies control their populations by indoctrinating them with 'false needs' (analogous to false consciousness). People are manipulated through the media and advertising into believing that their identities will be enhanced by useless possessions.¹³⁷

Thus, where the women in *Sex and the City* may feel their identities as independent (single) women are enhanced by commodities, critics such as Marcuse would view their consumption as a function of their oppression as consumers. Others such as Betty Friedan would (as I brought up earlier) point out how the female characters are in addition oppressed and exploited as *female* consumers and as *women*.¹³⁸ Furthermore, it could be suggested that the show attempts to exploit its (female) *viewers*, as the emphasis on expensive consumer-items could encourage us to see *Sex and the City* as a commercial, sponsored and directly influenced by the fashion industry. I will return on this view in the next chapter.

Another perspective from which we could view the consumption of appearance-enhancing commodities (such as shoes) as related to the empowerment and independence of women is that of patriarchal society's pressure on women to be attractive. Although the differences in character and opinions between the four women are explicitly represented in *Sex and the City*, they are all noticeably alike in appearance. They may not have the same hair color or personal style, but they are all

¹³⁷ Nava, "Consumerism Reconsidered: Buying and Power", 1991: p. 160. Nava is citing Marcuse's 1964 *One Dimensional Man*.

¹³⁸ Nava also connects Marcuse and Friedan in her article.

four youthful-looking, thin, and conventionally attractive. Jameson argues that: “the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself.”¹³⁹ In this ‘instrumentalization of culture’, images, as the “instruments of commodity satisfaction”, must be easy to consume, and thus consumption of nice images becomes an end in itself.¹⁴⁰ For this reason, it would be relevant to notice the central role of fashion and appearance in *Sex and the City*, and it becomes questionable whether consuming the visual spectacle indeed becomes an end in itself and content becomes secondary.¹⁴¹

An account of fashion and the female body in *Sex and the City* cannot be complete without discussing the feminist concern with female objectification in media. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” laid the basis for psychoanalytic feminist film theory. Mulvey’s article, based on psychoanalytical work of Freud and Lacan, “examine[s] the pleasures of ‘scopophilia’ and ‘narcissistic identification’” in classical Hollywood cinema, by which women’s bodies are objectified and constructed “as a spectacle for voyeuristic [or fetishistic] pleasure” of men.¹⁴² Van Zoonen explains that: “[a] core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of woman as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience” (while having no possibility to return the gaze themselves).¹⁴³ The objectification of women was thus seen as also extending beyond media, as women internalized the ideological ‘idealized or denigrating’ constructions of femininity.¹⁴⁴ Hence, (second wave) feminists “critici[zed] a system that measured female value by appearance”, and some also attacked “the oppressive paraphernalia of femininity (such as bras, girdles, false eyelashes, curlers, wigs and fashion magazines)”, as they further aided in the objectification and fetishization of the female body.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979: p. 132. Jameson is citing Guy Debord’s book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

¹⁴⁰ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, 1979: p. 130; p. 131.

¹⁴¹ Arguably, much of the media-attention *Sex and the City* has received has focused on fashion in the series, rather than, for instance, on issues of female empowerment.

¹⁴² Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 88; p. 87.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Fiona Carson, “Feminism and the Body”, p. 117-128. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 118.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* As van Zoonen explains about Laura Mulvey’s conception of fetishization: “the castration of the woman can be denied by substituting her lack with a fetish object – high heels, long hair or earrings for instance – or turning her into a fetish object herself, exaggerating, stylizing and fragmenting female beauty into a reassuring object of the gaze” (Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 90). As Danae Clark states, the view of fashion as patriarchal and oppressive is no longer necessarily acknowledged among feminists: “a duality has been located in feminist responses to consumer culture and fashion culture in particular. As Gaines notes, the

In order to study *Sex and the City* in this light, it would become relevant to analyze how the female body is represented, and whether we can indeed speak of an objectifying male gaze. As *Sex and the City* is a show intended mainly (though not exclusively) for the female viewer, it would become questionable whether the female viewers could derive pleasure from watching 'themselves' (the female subject) be objectified. As Mulvey and others have argued, female spectatorship of these (female objectifying) media are very restricted, as it "will either entail a masochistic identification with the female object, or a 'transvestite' position [...] of masculinization."¹⁴⁶ Other theorists, however, do argue that there is a possibility for the female spectator to return the objectifying gaze in some way, and the question is whether this could be the case in *Sex and the City* as well, as it is often men that function as eye-candy. On the other hand, in view of visual pleasure and objectification, it is significant that all four women are (as I mentioned above) conventionally attractive, and also relatively young. Have the women internalized the idea that women must be visually pleasing/ attractive, and are they subjecting themselves to a system that 'measures female value by appearance'?¹⁴⁷ Additionally, the women are presented as being sexually liberated, and this begs the question whether the right to sexual freedom is limited to young, beautiful women only, and how the narrative would have progressed if we would have been able to follow the four women into their old age.

In this light, I would like to continue on the issue of aging and beauty in relation to sexuality, as I began discussing in the paragraph on the single woman vs. the family. A particularly relevant character to focus on more closely when investigating this issue is Samantha. As *the* example of a sexually empowered and also conventionally attractive single woman, Samantha's characters addresses many of these relevant questions. Kim Cattrall (the actress who plays Samantha), states in *Kiss and Tell*:

beginning of the Second Wave of feminist politics and scholarships was marked by a hostility toward fashion, perceiving it as a patriarchal codification and commodification of femininity that enslaved women and placed their bodies on display. But this "antifashion" position is now joined by a feminist perspective that sees fashion culture as a site of female resistance, masquerade, and self-representation. [...] At the heart of this "fabrication," says Gaines, is a gender confusion and ambiguity that disrupts and confounds patriarchal culture." (Danae Clark. "Commodity Lesbianism", 2001: p. 82). This view on fashion could be applied to *Sex and the City*, and particularly to Carrie, as her style could (arguably) be seen as playful and self-conscious (in the postmodern sense).

¹⁴⁶ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 93.

¹⁴⁷ A relevant detail is that in season 1, when Carrie passes gas in front of Mr. Big, she is worried that she is no longer desirable to him. Carrie may have internalized the construction of femininity that imposes women to be proper and demure, and additionally, the taboo of the unruly female body is addressed.

Women who have been “sexually free” or “promiscuous” have been punished through the ages. Whether it’s *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* or Mata Hari or Sappho, whatever the scenario has been about a woman being sexual and being up front about her sexuality, each time she was punished, killed, or abused for it-until recently.¹⁴⁸

Catrall addresses precisely what is the issue here: whether ideologically, *Sex and the City* allows women to be free sexually and elsewhere in their life, or whether there is only the *pretence* of freedom. I would deem it highly relevant that Samantha, indeed the most ‘sexually free’ and ‘promiscuous’ of the four characters, develops breast-cancer in season 6. Equally interesting is that Samantha discovers that she has cancer while at a doctor’s office, planning an operation for breast-augmentation (in episode 14 of season 6, “The Ick Factor”). Is this Samantha’s punishment for sleeping around? This question was also addressed in the third season, when in an episode titled “Are We Sluts?” (episode 6), Miranda catches Chlamydia, she wonders if she is a “big, dirty, diseased whore” and being punished for it. In that same episode, Samantha is scorned by her neighbors for being too promiscuous. Does the narrative thus present the viewers the message that it is morally wrong for a woman to have multiple bed partners? Or is Samantha perhaps being punished for wanting to fool nature and look younger than she is?

“The Ick Factor” does not present to us the first example of Samantha’s wanting to enhance her appearance by cosmetic or plastic surgery ending up somewhat badly. In episode 3 of season 2 (“The Freak Show”), Samantha gets ‘fat from her ass injected into her face’ to even out wrinkles, and subsequently feels worse about her appearance than before, and in episode 5 of season 5 (“Plus One is the Loneliest Number”), Samantha experiences the aftereffects of a bad chemical peeling. So, although several instances of ‘punishments’ being administered to the women could be found throughout *Sex and the City*, it is not immediately evident what exactly they are being punished for, and what ideological message is behind the instances. It is feasible that they are being punished for being single and sexually free, and indeed, the narrative occurrences in season 6 could be seen to function as a taming of Samantha’s sexuality. It is her encounter with cancer which allows Samantha’s character to soften and open up, and to finally consider a monogamous

¹⁴⁸ Sohn, Wildman, *Kiss and Tell*, 2004: p. 108.

relationship as a viable option. On the other hand, the fact that Samantha's transition is so closely linked to issues of appearance and attractiveness might suggest that the ideological emphasis lies not on promiscuity, but on aging. As Florence Keyworth states:

Women are conditioned to dread age, to look anxiously for the first wrinkle and grey hair in a way which would be considered neurotic in men. Their status is conferred on them by men. SO when attractiveness to men is at an end, they become non-persons.¹⁴⁹

For Samantha, 'becoming a non-person' may be ceasing to be sexually attractive, since sexual activity is the one thing that defines her life. The question then becomes whether Samantha is punished because she will not 'act her age' and become monogamous (as her youthful look and attractiveness enable her to stay sexually free and active) or because she is submitting herself to the myth that says only young and attractive women can be single and sexually free/active.

3.3.2 Lesbianism, bisexuality, and heteronormativity.

Along with the concern for control over one's own body in patriarchal society, "the right of all women to a self-defined sexuality", including (but not limited to) lesbianism, is also an important feminist issue.¹⁵⁰ This idea is also conveyed in *Sex and the City*, as the female characters can be seen to battle society's restricting constructions of female sexuality. And indeed: the women are shown to be sexually liberated in a number of ways, and few sexual topics remain taboo. However, as my analysis of the narrative around Samantha's character began to suggest, it is questionable precisely *how* uninhibited female sexuality is presented as/allowed to be.

The women in *Sex and the City* can be seen to challenge the traditional, patriarchal construction of (female) sexuality that is often still dominant in media

¹⁴⁹ Florence Keyworth. "Invisible Struggles: The Politics of Ageing", p. 131-142. In: Brunt, Rowan, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, 1982: p. 134.

¹⁵⁰ For an account of lesbianism in relation to patriarchy see Ann Ferguson, Jacquelyn N. Zita, and Kathryn Pyne Addelson, "On "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence": Defining the Issues", p. 147-188. In: Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi, eds, *Feminist Theory. A Critique of Ideology*, 1982 [Brighton: Harvester]).

texts, in a number of ways: they take the same liberties of New York-men in being sexually active with multiple persons, and stress the importance of the female orgasm and female sexual pleasure.¹⁵¹ Hence, they prove unwilling to accept the notion of traditional femininity that emphasizes submissiveness and (sexual) passivity. Similarly, the women do not (seem to) let themselves be restricted sexually by traditional heterosexual constructions.

When Samantha says that she is tri-sexual (she will *try* anything once), this does not exclude bisexual or homosexual experiences: in season 4, she enters a lesbian relationship with a Brazilian woman named Maria. An interesting detail is that her friends' initial surprise at her announcement that she 'has become a lesbian' results from the fact that Samantha is having a *relationship*, not from the fact that the relationship is with a *woman* (though they do also discuss that subject later on). Thus, lesbianism seems to fit right in with Samantha's adventurous sexual character, while a monogamous relationship does not. At an earlier point (in episode 3, "Defining Moments"), after the openly lesbian Maria had been flirting with Samantha, the two women discuss the possibility of them becoming involved romantically. Samantha then says: "I've done the girl-thing, once, twice, usually involving a guy and a couple of Quaaludes. And it was nice really, and really nice for the guy. But..I'm not a relationship person." Although Samantha thus declares to have had bisexual or lesbian experiences in the past, she describes it as a purely sexual (and drug-induced) one, and moreover, one that was "really nice for the guy": either defined by the presence of a male, or designed for the pleasure of a male completely.

Samantha eventually breaks off the (short-lived) relationship (in episode 4, "What's Sex Got to Do With It?"), because, as she explains: "the talking in our relationship has replaced the fucking in our fucking relationship!" Another reason for the break-up is because Samantha feels her relationship with Maria is interfering with her sex-life with men, as Maria is unenthusiastic to comply with the advances the couple receives from male hopefuls. So, lesbianism, although addressed in the mentioned episodes, is very narrowly presented: as one of many amusing *sexual* experiments for the adventurous heterosexual woman, something to be played with

¹⁵¹ An episode in season 4 even featured a female-ejaculation scene (though not explicitly shown) - something practically absent in mainstream media.

and discarded at will. Danae Clark discusses lesbianism in relation to consumerism in “Commodity Lesbianism”. She states:

Once stripped of its political underpinnings, lesbianism can be represented as a style of consumption linked to sexual preference. Lesbianism, in other words, is treated as merely a sexual style that can be chosen – or not chosen – just as one chooses a particular mode of fashion for self-expression.¹⁵²

Indeed, the logic of consumerism is, at times, even extended to sexuality in *Sex and the City*, and we might argue in this manner that the show occupies a particularly heterocentrist perspective on lesbianism.

Miranda, similarly has a taste of a lesbian experience in the first season (in episode 3, titled “Bay of Married Pigs”). At her firm’s annual soft-ball game, where “when a lawyer steals a base, he gets promoted”, Miranda, reluctant to spend “another firm-function labeled as a leper” (a single woman), agrees to be fixed up on a blind date. To her surprise, her date turns out to be a woman.¹⁵³ Miranda discloses (only) to her date and her matchmaker that she is not gay, but after the female team’s outstanding softball game draws the attention of the firm senior partner, and the two are subsequently invited to an important dinner party as a couple, Miranda decides to play along and accept. For Miranda’s career, it is apparently better to be in a lesbian couple than to be a single heterosexual. After Miranda finally discloses to the senior-partner that she is not really a lesbian, the man tells her: “My wife will be disappointed. She was looking to add a lesbian couple to our circle.” Miranda then even kisses her date in order to establish if she might be able to be attracted to a woman after all, but reluctantly concludes: “yep, definitely straight.”

Lesbianism is certainly not portrayed as something negative or deviating here. To the contrary: it is presented as being desirable for Miranda. Furthermore, lesbianism is presented as being ‘in vogue’ in the eyes of firm senior-partner and his wife, and as something they are eager to be associated with. Although Miranda is astounded by this fact and the peculiar attitude toward gayness is ascribed to her superior alone (and thus the attitude is ridiculed to some extent), we do see that

¹⁵² Danae Clark. “Commodity Lesbianism”, 2001: p. 88.

¹⁵³ The fact that Miranda had never been seen with a man by her colleague was apparently enough to verify her gayness.

lesbianism is once again constructed as somewhat of a 'plaything' for heterosexuals.¹⁵⁴

Bisexuality is treated similarly to lesbianism. An episode titled "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" (season 3, episode 4), centered around gender constructions and multiple sexualities, demonstrates this vividly. In this episode, Carrie dates a man who discloses to her that he is bisexual. Carrie is unsure whether or not she is bothered her new potential boyfriend's sexuality, and tells her friends: "I'm not even sure bisexuality exists. I think it's just a layover on the way to gay-town." She suggests that she may be an 'old fart' because she does not believe in bisexuality, while Samantha exclaims that she thinks it's 'hot'. Ultimately, Carrie is unable to deal with her date's ambiguous sexuality, and we hear her voice-over conclude: "I was too old to play this game".¹⁵⁵

Thus, though overall, lesbianism and bisexuality are addressed as issues and even placed in a positive light at times in *Sex and the City*, they are never really presented as a serious, viable option for the women. In fact, lesbianism and bisexuality are more than once presented as a fad or a game, and generally presented as an overall diverging or deviant sexuality.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, lesbianism and bisexuality are observed from a noticeably *heterosexist* or *heterocentrist* viewpoint, whereby heterosexuality always remains the norm for women. I explicitly say *for women* here, because it is also evident that gayness *is* indeed a serious option for men, as *Sex and the City* does feature several male gay couples that maintain longstanding, serious relationships.¹⁵⁷ It is also worth mentioning in this light that although two gay *men* are primary cast members, the same is not true for any gay woman. Thus, it seems that men are permitted greater sexual liberty than women in the series.

¹⁵⁴ Mandy Merck notes how the logic of consumerism and fashion is applied to this episode in her essay "Sexuality in the city". She states: "[t]he idea of homosexuality as erotically in fashion, but wrong for Miranda, is rammed home by Carrie's comparison, in the same episode, of a blind date of her own with a DKNY dress: 'You know it won't suit you, but it's there so you try it on anyway'." Mandy Merck, "Sexuality in the city", p. 48-62. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 53.

¹⁵⁵ By 'game' Carrie is referring to the *actual* game of spin the bottle. However, it is clear that 'game' is also a metaphor for bisexuality.

¹⁵⁶ Mandy Merck observes this contradiction between *Sex and the City*'s supposed homosexual-friendly content and its heterocentrism about a scene in which Carrie kisses a woman (episode 4 of season 3, "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl"): "Carrie agonises about the bisexuality of her youthful boyfriend and eventually attends a party of similarly eclectic young things. But when a game of spin the bottle results in a kiss from a woman, she hastily departs the party and the relationship. Carrie's wide-eyed horror at the kiss [...] underlines the series' abjection of female homoeroticism, even in an episode that opens with the photographer's assertion that 'gender is an illusion'." Mandy Merck, "Sexuality in the city", p. 48-62. In: Akass, McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*, 2004: p. 54.

¹⁵⁷ Although I must mention that gay men and their relationships are presented along stereotypical, arguably similarly heterocentrist lines.

Danae Clark describes how the heterosexual woman is the implied subject of feminist investigations of consumer culture, and how she is often also the assumed consumer of advertising and television.¹⁵⁸ In this vein, it could be suggested that *Sex and the City's* narrative does something similar, that is: establish the heterosexual woman as the intended or supposed viewing subject. This suggestion could be supported by Clark's assertion that lesbians have not been an attractive social group for the advertising industry, and the assertion that: "lesbians have a long tradition of resisting dominant cultural definitions of female beauty and fashion as a way of separating themselves from heterosexual culture politically and fashion as a way of signaling their lesbianism to other women in their subcultural group."¹⁵⁹

If we presume that *Sex and the City* (as I also do in the next chapter), as a product of commercial television, is a well-known platform for fashion-items and beauty-products, then this, in combination with Clark's suggestions, could explain why the producers of *Sex and the City* would have a possible interest in addressing heterosexual women, and in forming the narrative as primarily as from that particular perspective. I will continue on *Sex and the City* as a form of advertising in the next (final) chapter.

3.4 *Sex and the City* as product and commercial

As I mentioned in the introduction to my theoretical framework, and have been stressing throughout this essay, *Sex and the City*, as a product of a large media corporation, is inextricably tied up with business, commerce, and profit. I will therefore pay some attention to this aspect in this paragraph, and will examine the series as a product and as a commercial.

When I state that *Sex and the City* can be seen as a product and as a commercial, this can be seen to refer to a number of things. First of all, the show can be seen as a product in the sense that it was produced, distributed, and broadcast on

¹⁵⁸ Danae Clark. "Commodity Lesbianism", 2001: p. 80. Clark describes this phenomenon as existing in the past especially, as she says this may be changing.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* According to Clark, this is due to the fact that lesbians "as a social group have not been economically powerful" (p. 80), "lesbians have not been easily identifiable as a social group" (p. 80-81), and "most advertisers have had no desire to identify a viable lesbian consumer group" (p. 81), as: "[a]dvertisers fear that by openly appealing to a homosexual market their products will be negatively associated with homosexuality and will be avoided by heterosexual consumers" (p. 81); p. 82.

television, and additionally released on DVD, with the intention of engendering profit. In this manner, *Sex and the City* can be seen as a product of the culture industry along the lines of Adorno and Horkheimer's work.

Secondly, as a commercial, the show can be considered as directly advertising products displayed on the show and in other media where the cast appears. In this light, it is relevant to point out that brand names and designers are often explicitly showed and mentioned in the show, and the characters can often be witnessed shopping and eating at well-known (existing) stores and restaurants. Furthermore, on HBO's official *Sex and the City*-website, the following can be found: a *Sex and the City*-shop, in which you can purchase the show's official apparel, as well as a few books that have been mentioned on the show; a city-guide, where you can acquire exact information on all the (real) bars, restaurants, clubs and shops the characters have visited in New York; a style-guide, where you can look up the brand names and designers of particular garments; and a link to the website and online-store of well-known *Sex and the City*-stylist, Patricia Field.

The show can also be considered as a commercial in the sense that it advertises the culture industry/consumerism /capitalism, or its supporting ideology (for instance, that shopping will make you happy). If we look at the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer, and that of Jameson, this conception of the show also arises. Adorno and Horkheimer would consider *Sex and the City* as a mere product of the culture industry, ultimately characterized by uniformity. Though it might appear as unique in some way (in content, for instance), they would suggest that this is mere product-differentiation, meant to distract consumers from the fact that *Sex and the City is* indeed a product, and *is* in no significant way unique. Its purposes, in the eyes of Adorno and Horkheimer, are to ensure continuation of consumption of the product itself and other products, and to ensure that consumers will not come to realize that the show is 'nothing but business' and that they are marionettes to the culture industry ("never releasing its grip on the consumer, of not for a moment allowing him or her to suspect that resistance is possible").¹⁶⁰ As the authors state:

while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience

¹⁶⁰ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 113.

themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object.¹⁶¹

According to this logic, the idea offered by *Sex and the City* that empowerment is attainable through consumption would only be a means to reproduce viewers as consumers (and to reproduce the system).

By using the theories of Jameson, we could ascertain, firstly, how *Sex and the City* does contain valuable content and does address (women's) social problems and social hopes and dreams, but how, secondly, both the 'reality' content and the Utopic content function merely to manipulate the consumer/viewer even more thoroughly. Hence, *Sex and the City* could never contain any real critical feminist value if that would mean that consumption and capitalism would be significantly threatened by it. Because "the object of all production is consumption", viewers are only ever conceived as consumers and: "reception becomes dictated by exchange value as the higher purposes and values of culture succumb to the logic of the production process and the market."¹⁶²

Seeing *Sex and the City* as a product and commercial leads to the view of its female viewers as being manipulated and exploited. This returns us to the notion of consumerism as being based on false needs (Marcuse) and as reconciling women with their unsatisfactory lives (Friedan). Van Zoonen describes the type of thought exemplified by Adorno, Horkheimer and Jameson, and of certain feminist theorists:

Their fear is that the vicarious pleasures offered by popular culture, the compensatory experience, the fantasies that make life at present acceptable, as Ien Ang (1985) has phrased it, reconcile women with patriarchy and keep them from converting to the ideas of the women's movement.¹⁶³

In this sense, the 'backlash' of postfeminism against earlier forms of feminist thought and practice could be seen as a way in which women are manipulated to think feminism is no longer necessary, and to be reinstated as consumers. As I already mentioned in the introductory paragraph on feminism, Germaine Greer demonstrates this type of thought. As is stated in *The Routledge Companion*:

¹⁶¹ Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: p. 113.

¹⁶² Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 1991: p. 14; *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 151.

In her introduction [of her 1999 *The Whole Woman*], Greer makes it quite clear she has written this book as a reaction against postfeminist ideology: ‘The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should now eff off. [...]’ As Greer defines it, postfeminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon, for ‘the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but the multi-national corporations [of which HBO is a part] that see women as their territory’. Its assurance to women that they can ‘have it all’ – a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life – actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, **cosmetic surgery, fashion**, and convenience foods. [emphases in original]¹⁶⁴

Sex and the City, then, could be seen in this vein, as it stresses and brings about consumption rather than feminism.

In opposition to this conception of popular culture as mass culture, that is: as part of the culture industry, creating false needs, manipulating consumers and instilling certain ideologies in them, is the viewpoint of popular culture as active culture, as van Zoonen exemplifies. As she points out, by stressing ideology and manipulation in media texts, you run the risk of (wrongly) perceiving women as helpless, passive cultural dupes: as “passive individuals completely immersed in, incapable of and prevented from recognizing the ideological workings of patriarchal and capitalist hegemony.”¹⁶⁵ Such a view can thus be seen as “part of a wider misogynistic view of women’s reason and capabilities”, as Mica Nava explains, and also makes more general assumptions about the process of reception.¹⁶⁶ If manipulative ideological content is revealed in a media text, this does not automatically mean that this content is thus adopted by viewers. This restricts Jameson’s theory somewhat, as van Zoonen explains:

much media output – popular culture in particular – is not about reality but about collective dreams, fantasies and fears. The abundance of research on the reception of popular culture seems to show that audiences may be perfectly able to recognize these fantasies as such and to distinguish them from the realm of information or

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Gamble. “Postfeminism”, p. 43-54. In: Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 2001: p. 51. For another account of *Sex and the City* in relation to postfeminism and consumerism, see Jane Arthurs, “*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama”, p. 83-98. *Feminist Media Studies*, vol.3, no. 1 (2003).

¹⁶⁵ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 105-106.

¹⁶⁶ Nava, “Consumerism Reconsidered: Buying and Power”, 1991: p. 162.

confirmation on social affairs or even personal life. Hermes (1993), for instance, concludes that after numerous interviews with readers of women's magazines that the magazines' abundant messages on femininity (fashion, make-up, dieting) leave little impression.¹⁶⁷

As Featherstone states, in order to "understand postmodern culture, we need not just to read the signs but look at how the signs are used by configurations of people in their day-to-day practices."¹⁶⁸ By doing so, we can avoid economist readings whereby production straightforwardly determines reception.¹⁶⁹ A problem with theories that focus on ideology in media content, is (as van Zoonen explains) that: "audience pleasures are not taken seriously as worthwhile in themselves, but are seen as a form of false consciousness."¹⁷⁰ In this sense, theories like these leave little room for critique, as false consciousness becomes an all-encompassing ideology which cannot be escaped and outside of which cannot be theorized, not even by scholars. Conversely however, an assumption of the active female viewer cannot unproblematically lead to a conception of the process of meaning-making as completely free of, or unrestricted by, specific media content. Similarly it cannot simply be assumed that viewers will in no way be impacted by possible ideological content and consumerist pressures.

¹⁶⁷ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 152.

¹⁶⁸ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 1991: p. 63.

¹⁶⁹ Featherstone critiques Jameson when he states that: "The problem with Jameson's approach is that he moves from the economic to the cultural and misses out the mediating effect of the social" (p. 63).

¹⁷⁰ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 107.

4 Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to explore the relation between *Sex and the City* and a number of feminist issues. I have tried to connect these with consumerism and mass culture, in order to focus on questions such as: How are feminist issues addressed and represented?; What kind of solutions/ resolutions are offered by the series' narrative?; How do these solutions/resolutions, and the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer and Jameson affect the series' feminist potential?

I began my analysis with a description of the four main female characters of *Sex and the City*. Here, I found that many feminist issues are tackled in the show, such as gender-bias, limited constructions of femininity, dependency, and prejudice against single women. The fact that the women are wealthy is addressed in the series, and it is suggested that this is typical of New York- (or rather: *Manhattan*-) women. As it is stated that it is the economic power and financial self-sufficiency which distinguishes these women as empowered, I questioned what this meant in relation to their social position. By pointing to the perceptions of socialist feminists of capitalism as inherently oppressive to women, I suggested that this economic empowerment could be considered as a *false* form of empowerment. Furthermore, I questioned, if consumption is the act in which this financial 'empoweredness' is most vividly demonstrated, does this mean that empowerment is attainable through consumption? Adorno and Horkheimer would view this claim as part of the 'stultifying' aspects of the culture industry's products, which enable the consumer to be manipulated even further. An additional question I posed was where the assertion that New York-women are financially empowered leaves real women who do *not* live in New York and who are *not* economically empowered? What could feminism or empowerment be for *them*? Observing Jameson's theories of containment and repression, I was interested in how problems are solved by *Sex and the City's* narrative. If it is asserted that women feel unfulfilled in their lives, is this presented as a societal or as an individual problem, and what kind of solutions are offered to these problems?

These questions were addressed in the chapter on relationships. I established that a great portion of *Sex and the City* focuses on men, dating, relationships and marriage, that it is these topics on which most of the women's conversations center, and that even the larger narrative could be said to be driven by male characters.

Ideologically speaking, there seems to be a great emphasis on relationships as the main objective in the women's life. Though this suggestion is criticized by the characters themselves, and it is stated that women do not need men to fulfill their lives, I noted the series' final episodes, in which all four women find relational happiness, as an important narrative detail. Any problems the women face in their daily lives then risk becoming presented as *individual* problems, where finding the right man is presented as the solution to all problems. I also argued, however, that narrative examples could be cited which contradict the assessment of relational success as a false solution in *Sex and the City*, as it is suggested that there is a gap between the fairytale of the perfect (heterosexual) relationship and the reality of women's lives.

Another Utopian element which can be located in *Sex and the City* is the community of women which the four female characters form. The friendship between the women can be seen as the solution to, or compensation for, other deficiencies in life, and as part of Jameson's theory of repression, we could point out how this community of women then deflects attention from elements in society that are causing the female characters to feel unfulfilled in the first place. The single woman is an important theme both within feminist theory (as part of the right to self-definition and as part of the traditional view on the role of women) and in *Sex and the City*. The women are seen to fight the stigma attached to the single woman, and it is questioned throughout the series whether women are actually free in their lives, or whether they are conditioned by patriarchal society and the institution of family to aspire to a traditionally shaped lifestyle. The issue of abortion is also addressed, and rather than condemning the family as a site of women's oppression or as necessarily traditionalist and outdated, the emphasis lays on free choice and self-definition. A relevant detail I noted is that the opposition between single women and family women is often expressed through consumption in *Sex and the City*, as the single woman is shown as able to spend great sums of money on herself (and her appearance), while the family woman is not. While spending money on fashion is not presented as being meant to enhance one's appearance *for men* (but rather as an inherently gratifying act for single women), this does beg the question whether fashion and consumption are seen as an *expression of*, or as a *means toward* independence and empowerment for women. Moreover, several instances could suggest that the women in *Sex and the City* do feel societal pressure to be physically attractive, and in this sense the

consumption of appearance-enhancing commodities could be connected to patriarchal society's pressure on women to be attractive. This brings us to the question, similar to my earlier question (of whether women are really free to make the choices they want in life), whether women can be sexually liberated in contemporary society or whether they are (still) confined to traditional constructions of female sexuality. For instance, while the single life is celebrated in *Sex and the City* overall, it is questioned whether the single life as an option is available only to women who are young and conventionally attractive, as the characters often face the prejudices against single women of a certain age. Although this possible inequality (between older men and older women) is heavily criticized in the show, once again, the narrative fact that remarkably, none of the four women end up single by the final season of the series might suggest that this myth is confirmed rather than refuted. I also noted that several narrative examples could be cited where some kind of punishment seems to be administered to the sexually free, but that it is not immediately clear precisely what the ideological message behind these instances is. As I argued, lesbianism and bisexuality, although regularly addressed by the series' narrative, are very narrowly presented (often as a plaything or a game for heterosexual women to temporarily indulge in), and are altogether observed from a noticeably *heterosexist* or *heterocentrist* viewpoint. Though few sexual topics remain taboo, the question thus remains whether *Sex and the City* succeeds at disregarding society's limited constructions of female sexuality, and whether its characters are really sexually free.

In the final chapter of my analysis, I examined *Sex and the City* as a product and as a commercial. I argued that the series can be seen as a product of the culture industry, as advertising products displayed on (and endorsed by) the show, and as advertising consumerism in general (and its potential accompanying ideology). By pointing out to a postfeminist backlash, I stated that *Sex and the City* could be seen as part of a cultural tendency that sees feminism as outdated and redundant, whereby women are led to believe there are no oppressive forces left in society to challenge, and are subsequently reinstated as consumers. In opposition to this view of women potentially being manipulated and exploited by (the products of) the culture industry, I cited the view of popular culture as active culture, whereby meaning is a process rather than a unidirectional, unambiguous and uncontradictory message (or ideology). Exemplified by Liesbet van Zoonen, this perspective on popular culture

emphasizes that manipulative content need not necessarily be adopted by consumers, and that it may be a grave underestimation of women's rational capabilities to assume they will simply let themselves become manipulated by media texts, and positioned as puppets of consumer culture. Though I acceded to these arguments, I similarly contended that the process of meaning-making is not completely free of, or unrestricted by, specific media content, and that it cannot simply be assumed that viewers will in no way be impacted by possible ideological content and consumerist pressures. It is relevant to take this aspect of modern media into account, as business may have a considerable impact on text and reception.

I have found that *Sex and the City*, when reviewing its feminist content, is indeed an ambiguous text. While there are many aspects of the show that demonstrate great consciousness of women's issues, and we could see how the series attempts to combat narrow constructions of femininity and female sexuality, we must also observe that its feminist potential is severely problematized and limited by a number of elements: its sometimes traditional, conservative perspective on marriage and relationships; its narrowly defined class and race positions; its heterocentrism; and importantly: its consumerist tendencies. Perhaps this ambiguity coincides with the unpopularity of explicit feminism in contemporary (pop)culture. Conversely, we might say that its claims of female empowerment (for instance through consumption) but lack of *explicit* feminist content is what allows *Sex and the City* to be extremely popular, and successful (profitable) as a mainstream media product.

I have found that the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Jameson can provide a challenge for 'objective' academic work, as they necessitate us to view every aspect of culture/media in terms of ideology and manipulation. In this sense, theories like these may leave little room for critique, as false consciousness becomes an all-encompassing ideology which cannot be escaped and outside of which cannot be theorized, not even by scholars. However, I have demonstrated that applying these theories can be very useful in a critical analysis of media texts and their content, as it allows us, for example, to examine "how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content" (as van Zoonen says).¹⁷¹ By using these theories then, I hope I have demonstrated that *Sex and the City* can indeed be seen as a polysemous and often contradictory text, but that it is also a text

¹⁷¹ Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 1994: p. 24.

in which women's empowerment is often produced in the context of capitalist consumerism and *material* or *financial* empowerment.

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