

## **TALKING DIRTY ON SEX AND THE CITY: ROMANCE, INTIMACY, FRIENDSHIP**

Beatriz Oria

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*Sex and the City* was first broadcast on HBO in 1998 and it became not only an immediate mainstream success but also the object of many academic studies of the popular media. More than ten years after the series ended, Beatriz Oria has made a brilliant, thought-provoking study of this cultural phenomenon that eventually made its way onto the big screen in two film sequels in her monograph *Talking Dirty On Sex and the City: Romance, Intimacy, Friendship*, a valuable addition to recent postfeminist criticism on romantic comedy by film scholars such as Hilary Radner, Diane Negra, Ana Moya and Michele Schreiber, all of them deeply concerned with exploring the position of the neoliberal female subject in today's examples of romantic comedy. This genre, according to Oria, provides the essential structural and narrative context for *Sex and the City* (*SATC*), and as a generic framework, it has continued to hold its appeal for mass audiences not just in film but also on television. Frequently dismissed by critics as a popular product of low artistic interest, romantic comedy has nevertheless proved successful in eliciting from audiences a variety of intense emotions ranging from laughter to tears, deep responses that account for the genuine narrative tone characteristic of the genre (Deleyto 2009). In Oria's view, it is precisely through the generic conventions of romantic comedy articulated by *SATC* that this cultural text can be said to have contributed to contemporary debates on intimacy, sexuality and subjectivity from a fresh perspective that benefits from its crossing of media boundaries.

The specific core themes selected by Oria for her analysis of the cultural relevance and ideological scope of *SATC*, including the notion of performativity applied to the contemporary concept of love, the definition of emotions as constructed by cultural and economic conditions and the contradictory nature of (female) subjectivity in the postfeminist era, allow her to present her insights on the series in a well-structured episodic fashion that resembles the very structural model of the series itself, characterised by controversial questions or topics which are summarised in the very titles of individual episodes. Starting with a thoroughly documented introduction on the US television context in the 1990s known as the “second golden age of quality TV”, followed by a panoramic view of the genre of romantic comedy from the ‘nervous romances’ cycle of the seventies up to the emerging trends of the present time, Oria’s book might be seen as standing at an intersection between media and film studies, on the one hand, and sociological and cultural debates, on the other.

Divided into five chapters in which a limited number of episodes are analysed in further detail, Oria’s thesis of how *SATC* deals with intimate matters both in narrative and generic terms starts by focusing on the connections between romance and consumption and on the duality of democratic love versus romantic love before the representation of female sexuality in the media and the definitions of new family models are explored in the two final chapters of the book. All these topics are simultaneously theorised and discussed by the author against the fictional background of the intimate vicissitudes of *SATC*’s independent, neoliberal, glamorous female protagonists. Oria’s textual approach to the popular HBO television series may, in fact, be considered one of the major achievements of her research because of its originality and attention to detail. In this sense, Oria’s reading of the series as an interdisciplinary, hybrid cultural product drawing on the alluring visual universe of the fashion world, on the cinematic tradition of romantic comedy as well as on the rhetoric of women’s magazines and literary texts like the so-called *chick-lit* fiction cycle and, finally, on the narrative patterns of the familiar television sitcoms, renders particularly appropriate her choice of a methodology and theoretical framework. This allows her to integrate her research on television and film within a range of debates belonging to the scope of sociology, psychology and gender studies. The potential difficulties of engaging with knowledge and insights from scientific fields *a priori* unfamiliar to a film studies scholar have not prevented the author from bringing into her discussion of *SATC* a remarkable sociological corpus together with a comprehensive updated selection of scholarship which can be classified under the label of television and film studies.

Specifically regarding the book’s contribution to film studies, Oria’s generic approach to *SATC* is certainly original and hints at interesting unexplored interdisciplinary territory in genre theory, even though the generic territory she

deals with might well have been expanded. For instance, her focus on the interaction between the serial structure of the series and the film genre of romantic comedy would have also benefited, in my view, from a consideration of the relevance of the genre of melodrama as an additional relevant intertext of the series. In this respect, it might be argued that the interest of *SATC* in emphasising the difficulty, almost the impossibility of keeping romantic relationships at the turn of the millennium seems to be very much in tune with the uncertainty and mixed feelings of desire and frustration, expectations and deception typical of the melodramatic plot lines and endings. By focusing on the relevance of the conventions of melodrama in the series, the notion of generic hybridity that Oria briefly discusses mostly in connection with other television genres such as soap opera and talk shows might have been better supported and illustrated.

Melodrama is not the only intertextual reference that I have missed in an otherwise well-articulated study of the generic context underlying the series. Oria's identification of the cycle of nervous romances produced in the seventies and the recent 'confessional comedy' genre as the main filmic tradition on which *SATC* is grounded is convincingly explained. Nevertheless, her insights into the connections between the HBO series and romantic comedy could have included a dialogue with film texts from the classical period which had explicitly meditated on the same issues as *SATC* would do a few decades later. Well-known Hollywood fifties comedies like *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *Pillow Talk* (1959) or *That Touch of Mink* (1962) and their discourses on the contradictions in the definition of female identity and the meanings attached to female sexual codes, courtship protocols and intimate matters might easily have been listed in Oria's corpus of specific generic predecessors of the successful television series under consideration. The potential time and space limitations of any academic work notwithstanding, it seems to me that the connections that might have been established between these classical comedies and *SATC* on the matters posed by these texts concerning female subjectivity and women's dilemmas in western societies are so relevant that it would have been worth referring to this cycle as yet one more layer in the generic context on which *SATC* is said to be grounded.

This having been said, I share Oria's central tenets concerning the resilience and flexibility of romantic comedy and, in her own terms, "its innate capability to evolve with the times and establish a rich, complex dialogue with its social context" (12). The role that successful cultural products such as *SATC* have actually played in the generic evolution of romantic comedy, as Oria has argued, cannot be denied even if the diversification of topics she refers to was already in progress in filmic examples of the genre (Deleyto 2009). Already present in the agenda of romantic comedy, this array of cultural issues that the genre is likely to explore in the future

was certainly brought to the foreground by *SATC*, which, Oria claims, has thereby helped to “rewrite the scripts of romantic comedy for the twenty-first century in a significant way” (18). The list of emerging topics increasingly congenial to romantic comedy would include “friendship as a viable alternative to heterosexual love”, “the difficulty of sustaining a satisfying relationship nowadays”, “the problems of adaptation both sexes experience as a consequence of the postfeminist ethos” and the increasing social and cultural relevance of interracial, interethnic and transnational romance (18).

In a clear, fluid style, Beatriz Oria engages readers in a lively debate on the connections between visual culture and the construction of identity, and the performative nature of gender and its impact on romantic protocols, friendship patterns and family issues. How the sphere of intimacy may be transformed by the contemporary mobile, global, consumerist society we live in, as Oria suggests, is only ambiguously defined by *SATC* from beginning to end, just as it is also humorously reflected by the multiprotagonist storylines of the series. Even if the intimate matters agenda of the new millennium still remains unpredictable and open to discussion both in Oria’s object of study and in real life, *Talking Dirty on Sex and The City* certainly allows readers to catch a provisional glimpse of the array of possibilities they might be faced with in the vast territory of interpersonal relationships, which is what the cultural product analysed seems to have intended in the first place. Regardless of our potential interest in the series itself, Oria’s monograph, I would conclude, proves to be stimulating reading not only for its scholarly rigour and diversity of approaches to its object of study but also because it leads us to reflect on the same controversial issues as the protagonists of *Sex and the City*, —Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte— endlessly do and from an equally ambivalent perspective.

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## Works cited

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