

Sex and the City – the secret of “her” success



© Alexander Trost M.A.

atrost@atrost.de
www.atrost.de
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- the secret of 'her' success.

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Outline

This following analysis serves the purpose to make the success of "Sex and the City" understandable. It is based on my experiences as an editor for TV and on my research on emotional impact, comedy, sitcom and plot dramaturgy.

Speaking from an editor's, writer's and researcher's point of view, this analysis will enable you to understand the success and to draw conclusions for forthcoming sitcoms successes.

Contact me for individual consultation, lectures and workshops at atrost@atrost.de.

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This seems to be the first publication on concert dramaturgy as far as my research has shown.

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Alexander Trost.

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Sex and the City – “The secret of 'her' success”

The HBO-sitcom / dramedy "Sex and the City" has been a huge success. What made this series such a world-wide success?

The answer is simple and it is one that you get when people ask you how to create a modern-day sitcom: They mixed new concepts innovatively and added new components, while – at the same time – remodeling outdated genre conventions.

In “Sex and the City” we find:

- modern, emancipated women,
- manifold innovations of the genre by using voice-over, losing the canned laughter and studio audiences, creating stories which span for several episodes and seasons, and the creation of a “history” for the characters which adds depth them,
- a new and innovative sitcom premise: “women and sex” and
- a smart combination of girlfriends who act as a replacement for “family”.

The topics

At the core of "Sex and the City" are modern women and their view of the world. Unlike 1970s sitcom "Maude" which was mainly focused on the emancipated business-woman and her role in the business world, "Sex and the City" focuses also and dominantly on the private lives of these women who have found their place in society – but society has changed. Now women have a place in society, but men struggle, the role of the sexes is in question and so is sex itself. The battle of the sexes is one of new territories and new insights.

In this series we are faced with a positive view on the emancipation of four women which deal with various topics that they solve according to their character with a special female and according to each character unique point of view. These characters offer the audience at least four (female) perspectives on various problems and themes (sometimes added by the male and / or gay point of view.)

The topics predominately deal with sex and its manifold variations, relationship problems, women facing life at various stages, their attitudes towards life and - annoying but adding to the fun - men.

Sitcoms of the 1990s

This series is in accordance to the sitcom trend of the 1990s: The old sitcom family structures have been replaced by an extended family of family-semblance friends (cf. my magister thesis on "Friends") This makes it possible to have a mix of contrastive characters that in a narrow family structure might have never stuck together. At the same time these friends are a lot more like a family than the "business family", as these friends stick together in spite of all their differences.

How does the narrative keep up with various points of views?

These twenty-five minute episodes show the voyeuristic (sex) diaries of the four characters which are all linked by the funny distanced and emphatic voice-over commentary spoken by the main protagonist: Carrie Bradshaw.

Her voice-overs reflect her daily work, her weekly column "Sex and the City". This column style is supported by "surveys" amongst the general population and these help to gain new insights, as well as to raise viewer's expectations. We learn about the possible outcome right before the characters have to deal with them in their daily lives.

And yes, there are people claiming that "Sex and the City" is not a sitcom, but "highly educated drama". I disagree with that hairsplitting, it is well-made entertainment, it has drama elements (but so does "Friends") and it uses different production techniques (so does the sitcom "Nikola" or "The Office") but it is still a sitcom as the light-hearted manner as the plotting inside each episode proves. This is not the dramaturgy of a fictional drama, it is the dramaturgy of comedy and since typical sitcom character are added it is a sitcom.

The evolution of a genre

The sitcom genre has undergone dramatic changes ever since the first sitcoms were aired in the 1950s. The most significant changes have happened in the past 10 years, roughly starting with "Ally McBeal"'s influence, moving on to "Sex and the City", an ending in the UK version of "The Office".

Traditional formats have disappeared and they have been replaced by the quasi-documentary style of formats like "The Office". "Sex and the City", it seems today, has been a stepping stone in this development.

This new kind of sitcom has pushed the nomenclature, from sitcom to dramedy. Ever since its most prominent dramedy success "Ally McBeal" have the limits of drama has been tested. "Sex and the City" decided to test the limits of sitcom and got rid of the three to four sets and the studio audiences.

While "Ally McBeal" uses the subjective point of view by showing fantasies like dancing babies and still relying on a 45 minute drama style, "Sex and the City" uses the intimate style of voice-overs and sticks to the twenty-five minute sequence.

Although there have been sitcoms with longer plot lines (cf. "Cheers"), it was "Friends" that has introduced significant changes to plots spanning a season (cf. my magister thesis on 'Friends'), giving the characters more than just a limited depth, but also increased emotions through a series historicity.

"Sex and the City" goes a step further, changes lasted. The average sitcom resets the story line after each episode to its initial premise. The series develops in the course of time. Of course, that is dangerous for comic characters but it works in "Sex and the City" quite well. The characters gain tragic depth. It even goes that far that Samantha has to deal with cancer.

Sex as a topic

Thanks to HBO, sex has finally become a topic for sitcoms. A concept like this would have been unthinkable for the traditional American networks – until then. HBO is a pay TV channel with an extraordinary courage to go beyond conventions. One can only applaud their braveness.

The topic has always been close by. The easiest jokes are jokes about sex. Everybody does it, nobody talks about it (well, times change), some recognize themselves, others laugh about others, some are terrified, others are simply shocked. Flushed heads and chuckle are guaranteed. It's a great topic for a sitcom that wants to address the mid-30s peak-performance viewers.

Character contrasts

Let's take a closer look at the most important character contrasts. Humour is a result of contrasts, the stronger the contrasts, the greater the humorous effect, which explains why there are extremes in the characters of "Sex and the City".

Theoretically extreme characters could lead flat and stereotypical characters, but these extreme positions have been extended by an apparent-realistic character depth (cf. Samantha). The characters as such are sitcom characters with an extreme POV but they have been made "rounder" by a character historicity.

These contrasts and the manifold varieties of plot interactions enable the viewer to identify – to a certain extent – with these distancing sitcom-characters. (Without distance there is only empathic laughter, which does not reflect the humour most dominantly used in this series.)

The characters create contrasts on various levels of their relationship and everyday life. There is no need to find a contrast for every position in every character. These possibilities of extreme and centered characters create an interesting opportunity for writers and viewers alike: Within this group of friends there is the possibility of varying alliances and antipodes which are not necessarily focused on one topic alone. Apart from the extremes in some topics there are characters which focus at the center and serve as a mediator between the conflicts.

Let's talk about characters

Carrie is a free columnist, with a distanced-empathic curiosity about sex and relationship problems which she wants to solve or at least analyze. Her focus is the self-reliance and self-empowerment of the modern day woman which she represents, however this sense of freedom is inseparably connected to her wish of a working relationship which does make her dependant on men.

Of all the characters Carrie is the most moderate one. She is (at times) part Samantha, part Miranda and part Charlotte. She is the only one of the characters which leads a successful and promising relationship over an extended period of time (even in the movie) with the character of Mr. Big. She is also the buffer between the extremes of Samantha and Charlotte and her decisions are just as moderate as her lifestyle.

Her humor results from situations in which she has - by feelings of hurt and/or impulse - unwillingly maneuvered herself in. Humor is also created by her distancing observations as an all-knowing narrator in her voice-overs. Her main function is one of a mediator between her extreme friends and as a commentator for the "modern woman".

Samantha is sexually the most power-hungry extreme in the group. She is „Alexis“ (Dynasty) in „Sex and the City“. As a PR-agent, she knows her strength as a woman. Her life is hers alone. She is the personified independence, the most liberated woman in the series. Status and reputation are her main interests, all that's left she dismisses with an "I-don't-care"-attitude. Her frankness is one that can be compared to "Phoebe"'s ('Friends'). She cannot handle conflicts, at times she doesn't seem to have a conscience. But she gains (tragic) depth through her all-too-human vulnerability when she is being denied.

Her life is about sex and acknowledgment – or in lack thereof - the controlled ending of a "relationship". She needs to be in control.

She loves and hates from a dominant I-centered point of view. She knows about her power as a woman and she needs sex (no matter how), to prove her power and her attractiveness. For her man is an object. Her function is the "empowerment of womanhood" and she is an extreme supporter for sex as a means of control. She wants to stay in power and she doesn't care how she gets it. **As such she has traits that resemble "Blanche" from the "Golden Girls". Her function in the group is one of power and motivation, she is the impersonated possibility-maker.**

Miranda is a lawyer. Her life is one of never-ending personal attacks which she defends with a sharp tongue. When love fails, the job must do the job (and sometimes it doesn't.) Life is her's alone, no matter how hard reality is. Her snappy, ironic reactions are a means of self-defense.

She is part "Dorothy" and "Sofia" ("Golden Girls"). But at the same time she represents the liberal woman, which is open-minded. But as a woman, **grounded in a real-life job**, she feels the pressure of her biological clock and the pressures that (male) society imposes on her. She tries to avoid it through irony, but she is still caught in the system. **Her function in the group is one of a realistic-pessimist, she is the reality-check with a tendency to see the worst in other people.**

Charlotte is a passionate art dealer. She is the classic naïve (part-Rose, part-Phoebe). She represents innocence which is looking for her idealized love of her life. While she does that, she's not ignoring what comes along (although some of the things she does not want to understand).

To Charlotte life is a fairy-tale and a dream. Once somebody awakens her, she's sad and escapes into another dream as quickly as possible. She imagines her life as a devoted wife to her husband (although that changes). Her attitudes are conservative and she is a contrast character to Samantha and Miranda. Her function in the group is to serve as conscience, but she also serves as someone who believes in the positive in other people.

I cannot go into further details, but it is obvious how the characters contrast each other. They contrast each other. But not in everything, as there are manifold connections which bind them together: **Men, sex, and personal self-fulfillment.**

High-Concept

"Sex and the City" is a "high-concept" par excellence. Every story can be seen through the eyes of four perspectives from a liberal to a conservative, from an aggressive to a reluctant point of view.

Additions to this group are being made by male point of views through the gay character Stanford and the relationship-reluctant but not unattractive and as such "husband-material" Mr. Big. However, both characters are being filtered through a female point of view. There is no male point of view per se.

Female Viewership

What makes the success of "Sex and the City"? In short: Sex, love, friendship and a lot to laugh through contrasting multi-perspectives in an excellently constructed character-quintet which is focused in a close-to-life but still bizarre reality with a main focus on women.

But it was also the right sitcom at the right time: a bit provocative, but not too provocative and a necessary revitalization for a format which has turned fifty.

However, the audience is not served in its entirety. The focus is on a female audience and as such the impact has been more than impressive. There are only a few series ("Desperate Housewives") which can attract this many women at the same time, as there's "something for everyone".

For male viewers, however, the experience is limited as their expectations of a) sex and b) humor are not met. There are no sexual acts which this audience favors and at the same time the humor is directed against them. Male viewers which have enough distance to deal with this topic without being threatened will be well-entertained all the others will probably switch off.

The female viewership is probably a lot higher than in other series which could make a case for gender-specific programming. As TV is more and more focusing on specializing, a counter-programming could serve the needs of the ignored focus group.

Sitcom-Crisis

At the moment – 2008 – the sitcom is facing its biggest crisis, yet. While the audience is always hungry for new formats ("The Office", "My name is Earl"), there is – I believe - enough potential for a traditional sitcom with modern themes but specialized focus groups. However, networks ignore the main market and the possibilities of specialized programming. Not able to withstand the pressure of advertisers, promising new series are being cancelled mid-season. Mind you, it took 'Friends' an entire season to gain a momentum and "Sex and the City" had the focus entirely on women who were happy to have their views (finally) on screen at prime-time.

Pay-TV networks dare to cover new grounds as they do not need these big viewing number, they focus on smaller groups. Is a large viewership still possible in the 2000s? I doubt it.

The sitcom concept is not dead, but it is becoming more diverse in nature. The times of an all-audience sitcoms are probably history, but for special focus groups the sitcom still opens up a lot of possibilities – and successes as "Sex and the City" show that.

At the same time innovation can only go that far. Hybrid series still need major resemblances rooted in sitcoms, otherwise comedy will become tragedy or romance and it I doubt that there is no need for comedy anymore.

The grimmer the situation, the more comedy is needed. The sitcom is not dead, but it is undergoing changes – especially in the human resources departments of major networks where change takes a lot longer.

If you want to consult my magister thesis, please contact the head of American Studies at the University of Tuebingen, Germany.

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Ideas, Suggestions, Contact?

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Contact me for individual consultation, lectures and workshops and
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Best wishes!

Alexander Trost M.A.