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MEDC 5310 A1 – Media & Culture

Feb 18, 2009

Paper #3

### A Cultural Studies Analysis of “Sex and the City: The Movie”

Hollywood, as a “culture industry” in the words of Douglas Kellner, has taken over family, religion, and other stalwarts of traditional society as the one major culture-creator in today’s world, and an “important agent of socialization” if not *the* most important (“Overcoming” 3). To quote Kellner, “Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture” (“Media Culture” 1). According to him, such cultural forms can usually be categorized into two: those that further social domination or enable people to fight against it (“Overcoming” 4). When it comes to blockbuster movie “Sex and the City: The Movie,” a cultural analysis of the movie reveals that while it may not always accurately reflect current day society or encourage women to fight against the injustices within our global society, it succeeds in attempting to portray a new and idealized culture.

In an era and culture where sex definitely sells—anything from GoDaddy.com domains to Arby’s hamburgers—there is no doubt that the producers were well aware that a television series and movie with ‘sex’ as the first word of its title and one of the main themes of its content would certainly sell too. “Sex and the City: The Movie” was a widely popular movie, playing to sell-out crowds when it first opened in May 2008 and grossing \$152,647,258 nationwide (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=sexandthecity.htm>). Part of the appeal was due to the fact that it was welcomed by many women, especially postfeminists or “third-wave” feminists, as a cultural symbol of female liberation from sexism, and from the typical view portrayed by the media that women are not supposed to express their sexuality, and that if they do, they are either evil or damaged. In his book *Media Literacy*, Art Silverblatt noted that “independent female characters are often cast as villains, or as characters whose ‘femininity’ has been compromised by their assertiveness” (103), and this is firmly debunked by this movie’s positive portrayal of confident female sexuality as the lead characters take full advantage of the sexual freedoms once reserved only for males. Georgina Isbister points out in her paper, “Sex and the City: a postfeminist fairy tale,” that this movie embodies the postfeminist trend towards traditional femininity. She writes,

a prevailing characteristic of popular postfeminism is a trend towards women reclaiming traditional ideals of femininity, following a presumption that the ideals of feminist politics have now been met, opening up a perceived flexibility of subject positioning as a matter of individual choice rather than political necessity... [they reap] the

rewards of feminist struggles, even as they pander to traditional images of feminine beauty. (7,8)

In this movie, lifestyle commodities such as fashion and romance appeal to the viewer as, in the words of Tarja Laine, an “identity building block,” and this also partially forms the basis of the movie’s popularity. According to Kellner, ethnographic cultural studies reveal how audiences use texts to empower themselves (“Media Culture” 8), and one can see how a viewer of how “Sex and the City: The Movie” is empowered as he or she is taken into a whole new dream world of big city New York, where the four above-forty lead characters—Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte—live as attractive, economically independent career women, seeking their fulfillment in romantic relationships while unconstrained by family or finances. It allows them to vicariously live out their fantasies, sexual and otherwise, through these four different characters, without fear of judgment. As quoted in Kellner, just as how Janice Radway’s study of women’s use of Harlequin romance novels reveal how these books provide escapism for women, so does this movie take viewers away from the realities of mundane jobs (in contrast with Carrie’s modeling for *Vogue* magazine), fussing children (as compared to mother Charlotte who is able to up and leave her four-year-old daughter at a moment’s notice to go vacationing with her friends to Mexico), expanding waistlines (disparate from these actresses), and meager bank accounts (unlike Samantha, who bids \$50,000 for a brooch, and the others who all seem to be able to afford brand-name outfits). Radway discovered that the reading of romance “provided an outlet from the demands of women’s roles as wives and mothers, a ‘declaration of independence’ and privacy to escape into a world of strong independent heroines in control of their destiny” (“Media Studies” 8).

However, it must be noted that these postfeminism accomplishments are from the limited view of four white, heterosexual, middle-class female characters living in the capitalist hub of Manhattan. For instance, liberal views presented such as the acceptability of sex outside of marriage is not a cultural norm for many societies, and in fact, as Kellner observes, only gained its current level of acceptability largely in part due to the lowering of traditionally conservative television standards to attract declining audiences following increased competition from ever-proliferating cable channels and new technologies (“Missed Articulation” 20). Moreover, the movie also does not necessarily reflect the challenges still faced by women elsewhere, many of whom bear the brunt of homemaking and child-rearing duties, are financially dependent on their husbands, are wage-workers, or are earning less than their male counterparts. Virginia Brown, in her journal article, “Sex and the City: a sign of women’s liberation?”, gives the example of the struggles faced by 25,000 female textile workers in Bangladesh in 2008, who, earning US\$16 per month for 12-14 hours’ daily work making the kind of fabric that clothed these four iconic fashionistas, “defied the army, a ban on protests and police violence in emergency-ruled Bangladesh to demand back pay and bonuses, shutting down most of the factories in the capital, Dhaka.” Clearly, in extreme cases like these and even ones closer to home, the liberated lifestyle portrayed in “Sex and the City: The Movie” is more often that not more of a cultural fantasy than a cultural reality.

Furthermore, just as Kellner points out the link between political economy and media in his cultural studies papers, Laine notes that while the concept of lifestyle propaganda is usually associated with the cinema of Nazi Germany, “contemporary media is still very much

underpinned by lifestyle propaganda and consumerism, even though the political ideologies behind them have changed.” Brown echoes this when she writes,

the capitalist class, through its mass media, sets the standards of what “beauty” is, and the need of the “beauty” industries to maximize their profits has seen them appeal to the conscious or unconscious feminist sensibilities of women by selling dreams of attaining “beauty” as a means to gaining personal self-confidence.

While it is easy to get caught up in the flashy outfits and brand name attires the attractive lead characters flaunt as they slide into their cultural stereotype of a woman obsessed with appearance, “the commodification of women’s bodies under capitalism is just that, rather than a celebration of womanhood.” In addition,

The movie does not simply market products, but also the idea that women partially achieve empowerment through what is portrayed as a natural female preoccupation with appearance. While empowerment never receives a direct mention, the characters clearly believe that they need to be thin, “beautiful” and stylishly attired in order to be happy. (Brown)

As Kellner muses, cultural studies reveal how media culture manipulates and indoctrinates the masses, but also empowers them to resist the dominant meanings in media cultural products and to produce their own meanings (“Media Culture” 4). While “Sex and the City: The Movie” communicates a particular view of culture, one can also use their current culture to mediate that message, and note that while this view may not be their current culture, they are free to leave out the negative and take in the positive as they work towards creating their ideal culture.

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