

“Just Say Yes”: the Romanticisation of Love in *Sex and the City*

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Abstract: *Sex and the City* is well-known for its uninhibited approach to female sexuality and its cynical view of contemporary relationships. While the former is undeniable, the show’s skepticism in matters of the heart is not so straightforward. This article argues that the show’s apparently cynical view of love actually betrays a deep wish to believe in the possibility of old-fashioned, unrestrained romance. This essay uses Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s sociological theories on contemporary individualisation processes and the tendency towards the romanticisation of love to explore *Sex and the City’s* representation of romance. The analysis reveals how the series deploys the conventions of the romantic comedy genre in order to create a romantic fantasy whose “happily ever after” is ultimately tied to an overall consumerist philosophy, whether that happy ending plays out in the context of a heterosexual couple or a broader circle of female friends.

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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 7:00 a. m . . . 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? (“*Sex and the City*” 1: 1).

Taken from Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996), this short passage is featured at the

beginning of the pilot episode of its successful eponymous series, thus announcing its ironic tone and detached attitude towards love. It is precisely this self-conscious pride in its cynical view of romance that makes SATC's [\[1\]](#) contradictions the more paradoxical: the show is fully aware of the impossibility of belief in fairy tale endings at the turn of the millennium, but its narrative premise is largely based on its protagonists' tireless search for the "One" and the elusive "happily ever after."

SATC is not alone in this contradiction. Many contemporary romantic popular culture texts aimed at women are caught in this double bind. The recurrence of this pattern prompts a variety of questions. In a moment in which there is an unprecedented number of options at our disposal for the organisation of our intimate lives, why this vehement insistence on pursuing old blueprints for romance? In a time in which women are presumably freed from conventional gender roles, what is still so compelling about the most "traditional" model of heterosexual coupling? What is so fetching about romantic love in a society which systematically scorns clichéd romantic notions? How can our postmodern self-awareness and romantic cynicism be compatible with the desire for a "happily ever after"?

All these questions are routinely tackled by SATC, a show aired between 1998 and 2004, which earned a remarkable popularity and cultural influence at the turn of the millennium. The show appeared on HBO, a subscription-only cable channel free from the pressure of satisfying advertisers and mainstream audiences' tastes, and the cable network's brand identity—it was and remains associated with quality, cutting-edge products often featuring sex, violence and profanity (*Leverette*; *McCabe and Akass*)—also contributed to SATC's freedom to address "thorny" subjects, especially in terms of sex. However, despite the centrality and explicitness with which sex is shown and discussed in the series, a closer look reveals that SATC's real preoccupations are more far-reaching. Rather than focusing primarily on sex, as its title seems to announce, SATC is more prone to dissect the vicissitudes of contemporary romantic relationships, posing such questions as: can women aspire to "have it all", or should they settle for what they can get before it is too late? How much of oneself is it acceptable to sacrifice in a relationship? Is the One just a harmful myth? What are the deal breakers in contemporary relationships? Have men really accepted the new roles played by women? Deep down, do women just want to be "rescued" by Prince Charming? When it comes to relationships, is it smarter to follow your head or your heart?

Some of these questions have been addressed in the extensive scholarship that exists on the show. Much of this work attends to the treatment of sex on SATC (Markle; Henry; Ross; Comella; Arthurs; Akass and McCabe). Critics have also debated the series' progressive or conservative attitude in terms of gender, class and race representations (Hanks; Nelson; Siegel; Odendhal; Arthurs, 2003; Merck; Greven; Gerhard; Gill; Baird; Jermyn; Escudero-Alías). Most of all, though, SATC scholarship has wrestled with the show's stance towards feminism, an issue which provokes a striking degree of disagreement. On the one hand, there are those who, broadly speaking, regard the show as anti-feminist (Raven; Bignell; D'Erasmus; Coren; Roberts; Gill), describing it with terms which range from "feminism lite" (Bunting) to "surprisingly retrograde" (Orenstein). Many other scholars, however, praise what they see as the show's feminist commitment to empowering female viewers and to supporting a model of female friendship which not only presents singleness as a legitimate way of life for women, but also contributes to the

development of an alternative vision of the contemporary family (Wolf; Sayeau; Jermyn; Nelson; Gerhard; Henry; Kohli).

This heated debate on SATC's status as "feminist" or "antifeminist" may stem from the fact that this series cannot be easily classified as either one. A product of the postfeminist zeitgeist in which it is inscribed, SATC—like postfeminism itself—features highly contradictory (and even antithetical) discourses, which render it a more complex text than some critics are willing to concede.^[2] Although the term postfeminism sometimes refers to the backlash that took place against feminist achievements in the 1980s (Faludi; Modleski; Greer), when referring to contemporary media texts the term has come primarily to signify a mixture of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, continuity and rupture, an updating of the movement, and a return to pre-feminist values. This is not surprising, as one of postfeminism's main objectives is a realignment between feminism and femininity (Brunsdon; McRobbie; Hollows). This "realignment" is commonly perceived as a kind of "schizophrenia" when consuming postfeminist texts, either in written form, like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding) and Marian Keyes's "chick-lit" novels, or in their visual counterparts (SATC and *Ally McBeal* on TV and most romantic comedies made today for the big screen). These texts present conflicting attitudes towards traditionally feminist preoccupations such as women's sexuality, marriage, or the family, reflecting what Angela McRobbie has termed the "double entanglement" of postfeminism, which "comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life [. . .] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations" (255-256). Thus, for example, postfeminist heroines may use their empowered positions to choose apparently anti-feminist options. For some, such choices represent the healthy "return" of a kind of femininity repressed by second-wave feminism, which is said to have dismissed the pleasures connected to the most "traditional" values associated to femininity. For others, of course, the same decisions are more plausibly read as the distressing re-packaging of pre-feminist ideas as postfeminist freedoms (Gill 269-270), a step backwards in the feminist struggle cloaked in the rhetoric of liberal market values.

A paradigmatic postfeminist text, SATC lends itself to either reading, even within individual episodes: at one moment, the show is reassuring women of the pleasure of being able to buy one's own apartment, while the next it is panicking at its protagonists' singleness ("Four Women and a Funeral" 2: 5). The show's postfeminist contradictions are particularly visible when we consider the show's ambivalent take on the issue of romance. Torn between the potentially emancipatory power of love and the limitations that love imposes on the self, the show portrays contemporary women as torn between a longing for intimacy and their wish to preserve their autonomous subjectivity, often framing the latter in contractual, even consumerist terms. Rather than attempt to analyze SATC's approach to the issue of romance in the series as a whole—ninety-four episodes of ambivalence and conflicted discourses, spread across six different seasons—this essay will focus on a single exemplary episode: "Just Say Yes" (4: 12) Using sociological theories on contemporary individualisation processes (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the tendency towards the romanticisation of love (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004), I will argue that the show's apparently cynical view of love actually betrays a deep wish to believe in the possibility of old-fashioned, unrestrained romance. The tension between love as a matter of "closing the deal" and love as Cupid's return to the co-op, to paraphrase the voice-over quoted above,

might well have left the show, in Carrie's terms, a "mess." The "mess" is managed, however, through SATC's deployment and revision of conventions from the romantic comedy genre.

Wrong Ring, Wrong Guy

The central plot of "Just Say Yes" concerns Aidan's (John Corbett) marriage proposal to Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker). It starts with "ominous" words: "My building is going cop!" Carrie announces to Aidan as she walks into her apartment. This means that she either has to move, or buy the place, which she cannot afford. Aidan offers to buy both her apartment and the one next door, so that they can tear down the wall and live together. This is Carrie's and Aidan's second attempt at their relationship after Carrie's infidelity with Big (Chris Noth). However, this time everything seems to be going smoothly, so Aidan's offer is tempting. She does not say "yes," but this does not stop him from unofficially moving in, leaving his stuff all over the place and upsetting Carrie. In the next scene we see Carrie cleaning up while he is having a shower. While tidying his bag she accidentally finds an engagement ring. She looks at it in astonishment for some seconds, after which she runs to the sink to throw up. This is followed by a quick cut to Charlotte's (Kristen Davis) reaction to the news: "You're getting engaged!" she gurgles, excitedly. Evidently, her interpretation of the event is very different from Carrie's. As usual, the girls have gotten together for lunch and they are discussing the issue.

The episode's premise hinges on the many possibilities regarding coupling in contemporary America (and elsewhere). Coupled life may be accessed through marriage, through cohabitation or simply through "interpersonal exchanges and cognitive mobilization and affective exchanges," as Bernadette Bawin-Legros points out (243). However, statistical research carried out by sociologists confirms that people do not regard "living together" as implying the same level of commitment as marriage. The idea of "forever" is still firmly attached to wedlock, as opposed to cohabitation. Thus, there is still a clear boundary in the collective mind distinguishing the life project of those couples who decide to marry and those who remain legally unbound (243). Carrie's strong reaction to the thought of marriage attests to this assumption, since she seems more or less ready to live under the same roof as Aidan, but not for the firm attachment marriage implies.

In order to convey this idea, the text also brings into play the audience's familiarity with romantic comedy's conventions. Fans of the genre know that the marriage proposal usually constitutes the climactic moment in the couple's narrative, and all the paraphernalia surrounding this moment is perceived as holding a quasi-magical value. Thus, Carrie's prosaic discovery of her engagement ring—in her boyfriend's sports bag, among his dirty clothes—and her "atypical" reaction to the prop which has traditionally elicited the greatest amount of tears in the genre is not accidental. Traditional approaches to genre criticism would say that this can be read as a clear subversion of romantic comedy's conventions. However, according to less taxonomical views, genres are not fixed categories that can be simply subverted, but a fluid set of conventions (Altman; Neale; Deleyto 2009). Genres find themselves in a constant state of flux, constantly in tune with the cultural context in which they are inscribed. With its repeated "challenges" to romantic comedy's best-known conventions, for example, SATC might be said simply to be reflecting

the changing romantic milieu which frames its characters' love lives: Carrie's reaction to the discovery of the ring is a sign of the volatile intimate panorama of turn-of-the-century New York City, a context which fosters (in this show, at least) a pathological fear of deep attachments in general, and of marriage in particular. [3]

Alongside this contextual understanding, Carrie's vomiting at the sight of the ring might also be read as an internal shift within the conventions of romantic comedy. Carrie's exaggerated reaction is not only "troubling," but also comic. In romantic comedy, humor often plays a paramount role in the path towards romantic transformation; in the case of SATC, it also plays an important role in its protagonists' occasional *rejection* of this transformation. That is, SATC stretches the boundaries of the genre by using humour not only as enabler of romance but, sometimes more importantly, as a tool to surmount the disappointments love repeatedly brings our protagonists. Since SATC's lead women find themselves in a constant turmoil of relationships, the latter function of humour often proves to be more useful than the one it has traditionally served, at once marking and normalizing the women's unsuitability for coupled life.

In either case, it is no accident that this scene's humor—and its emotional conflict—centers on an engagement ring. The ring is a significant prop within romantic comedy's iconography, and its importance here is foregrounded by the lunchtime discussion after Carrie's reaction, since what seems at first to be a conversation about Carrie's decision whether to get married or not ends up revolving entirely around the ring itself. It turns out it is a disappointment: "It was a pear-shaped diamond with a gold band," which apparently is a bad thing. Carrie justifies her dislike for the ring because "it is not her"—that is, she takes Aidan's mistaken choice as a sign that he does not really know her and they are not meant for each other: "How can I marry a guy who doesn't know which ring is me?" she demands. The conversation thus reveals the importance that Carrie bestows on material objects, which points towards her association between (luxury) consumer goods and happiness and romance. It is the ring that makes her throw up—presumably because she does not like it—making her think the marriage is doomed to failure because of its unsuitability. Tellingly, she will be happy to accept Aidan's proposal later on in the episode, when she is presented with a "good" ring. Of course, this connection between consumption and happiness does not only concern Carrie; it extends to the other characters, who also endorse the show's consumerist spirit, extending the equation of ring and person first made by Carrie (for whom the right ring "is me") to Aidan as well. "Wrong ring, wrong guy," Samantha (Kim Cattrall) thus declares, underscoring the series' strong link between consumer goods and relationships.

When It's Right, You Know

With all the ring talk, Carrie's conversation with her friends does not help her solve her actual dilemma: whether or not to marry Aidan. Once alone at home, she starts to think about something Charlotte said: "When it's right, you know." This is a commonplace that fans of romantic comedy are familiar with: love takes over you when it comes, leaving no doubt about its truthfulness. However, faithful to SATC's mission to interrogate every single romantic cliché, Carrie wonders:

Do you really know when it's right? And how do you know? Are there signs? Fireworks? Is it right when it feels comfortable or is that a sign that there aren't any fireworks? Is hesitation a sign that it's not right or a sign that you're not ready? In matters of love, how do you know when it's right?

To know when it is "right" is another way of phrasing a concern that has been repeatedly addressed in the show: the concept of the "One" or the soul mate. The roots of this idea might be traced back as far as Aristophanes's famous account of love in Plato's *Symposium*, but it has grown pervasive in late-20th / early 21st-century American popular culture: for example, a 2001 national Gallup Poll carried out in the US showed that 94 percent of surveyed people (single women and men between twenty and twenty-nine) were seeking a soul mate to marry and 87 percent were confident they would find it (Trimberger, 2005: 1). Their confidence is remarkable: this idealizing account of love as a quasi-demiurgic process implies that we will recognise the "one"; that we will be recognised in return; and that the relationship between "soul mates" will be flawlessly harmonious, a completion of each self by the other. No wonder, then, that the idea of "soul mates" depends on supernatural discourse, the discourse of miracles, rather than on the liberal discourse of "closing the deal" or consumer choice. Thomas Moore, for example, thus says that a soul mate is "someone to whom we feel profoundly connected, as though the communicating that takes place between us were not the product of intentional efforts, but rather a divine grace" (xvii).

The problems with this "divine grace" version of love are manifold: what if we never meet our twin soul, or meet him / her and are not recognised as "the One"? If total harmonious fusion proves impossible—if "the One" leaves us, say as a consequence of some misunderstanding, or if we have to inject our "intentional efforts" (Moore, 1994: xvii) into the relationship to make it succeed—does that mean we were mistaken? Will we never, now, be "complete"? The "soul mate" model of love puts extraordinary pressure on the individual's actual romantic relationships, potentially spoiling them as they fall short of this ideal; at the same time, this model implies that "only through coupled love can one be truly fulfilled" (Trimberger 4), thus devaluing one's network of friends and other non-romantic partnerships.

Given the popularity of this myth of love, and the ambivalence it might provoke, it is no wonder that the writers of SATC were fond of the topic. In "The Agony and the 'Ex'-tacy" (4: 1)—an episode which ponders the question: "Soul mates – reality or torture device?"—the protagonists discuss the different aspects of this myth. Charlotte believes in it blindly, while the rest are skeptical:

- Miranda: Soul mates only exist in the Hallmark aisle of Duane Reade Drugs.
- Charlotte: I disagree. I believe there's one perfect person out there to complete you.
- Miranda: And, if you don't find him, what? you're incomplete? It's so dangerous!
- Carrie: Alright, first of all, the idea that there's only one out there? I mean, why don't I just shoot myself right now? I like to think people have more than one soul mate.

- Samantha: I agree! I've had hundreds!
- Carrie: Yeah, and if you miss one, along comes another, like cabs.
- Charlotte: No, that is not how it works.
- (...)
- Samantha: The bad thing about the one perfect soul mate is that it's so unattainable. You're being set up to fail.
- Miranda: Exactly, and you feel bad about yourself!
- Samantha: Yeah, it makes the gap between the Holy Grail and the assholes even bigger.

This short dialogue touches on three main doubts about the twin soul ideology: whether the twin soul actually exists, whether there might be more than one "One," and whether the ideology itself might be a harmful construction. Notably, however, the exchange also contains hints of another, contrasting ideology of love: one based on consumer choice among multiple options. "If you miss one, another comes along, like cabs," Carrie quips, and her joke underscores the power that the consumer of love might have in an ideal romantic marketplace, one in which the possibilities of romantic transport are multiple and available to anyone with sufficient funds. Carrie's relentless self-questioning about Aidan's suitability—and basically about the suitability of every partner she has—shows her acting like a wary consumer, evaluating each "cab" as it comes into view, but her wariness would surely not be so intense if it were not for the high expectations this kind of myth has created in her. Indeed, we might say that on some level, conscious or unconscious, Carrie is turning twin soul ideology against itself, using it to justify the actual (consumerist) choice she has already made. Carrie's fondness for the single life, that is to say, is the main reason behind her doubts about Aidan, and all this talk of the One essentially helps her rationalize her unwillingness to marry. She would hardly be alone in this self-justification: in fact, Trimberger connects the pervasiveness of the twin-soul myth with many contemporary women's single status (17), while other authors warn women that they will have to forsake this myth and "settle for Mr. Good Enough" if they want to settle down (Gottlieb; Lipka).

However we interpret Carrie's motivations, SATC's treatment of the topic makes clear that the twin soul ideal forms an important part of the contemporary "resuscitation" of romantic love. Such quasi-religious faith in love as the path towards personal fulfillment has largely replaced other reasons for long-term partnership and/or marriage (Trimberger 1). This is reflected in the episode under analysis, since Carrie's dilemma about marrying Aidan or not is entirely concerned with whether he is "right"—that is, whether he is the One for her or not—and it glosses over other factors which have traditionally played a paramount role in the decision to get married: economics, friendship, sexual attraction, communal / family approval, and so on, all of which are nascent in its plot. This tendency towards the idealization and romanticisation of love, the preoccupation with that "special someone" able to cater to the individual's every need, is particularly in tune with romantic comedy's ethos, since the genre has always been based on the wish to believe in the possibility of the perfect romantic communion. However, we cannot overlook the way that "perfect romantic communion" in this show puts a distinctive twist on this enduring wish. Love here entails a reconciliation or perfect accord between spiritual ideals and their material instantiation, the right guy with the right ring. As Carrie says in the opening episode of this fourth season, "The Agony and the 'Ex'-tacy," the soul mate ideal consists in

the “belief that someone, somewhere, is holding the key to your heart *and your dream house*. All you have to do is find them” [my emphasis]. One key for both: otherwise, the search goes on.

Why Hasn't He Asked Me Yet?

Let us return, now, to “Just Say Yes.” As I mentioned earlier, Carrie discovers Aidan's ring shortly after he offers to buy both her apartment and the one next door, so that they can tear down the wall and live together: a gesture that would suggest he sees himself as the “someone” who holds the key to her heart and her dream house (or at least her co-op). Carrie's initial reaction to the offer is lighthearted and flirtatious:

- Carrie: Would that make you my landlord or my roommate?
- Aidan: A little of both.
- Carrie: What would the rent be like?
- Aidan: Like . . . this? (Kissing her)

Behind the flirtation, however, lies a serious problem. If the modern couple is supposed to be a democratic, freely-chosen contract between equals (Giddens 192), where does this agreement leave Carrie? Will she live in the apartment in exchange for sexual and emotional gratification for Aidan? His gesture looks romantic and disinterested, but it actually gives him the upper hand in the relationship. As is always the case in the series, SATC refuses to acknowledge explicitly the important role played by class and economic issues in its romantic dynamics, even as it implicitly returns, again and again, to precisely those factors.

The truth is that Carrie never falls for “poor” men. Even though she has dated men who were not particularly well-off, the three men she has had serious relationships with (Big, Aidan, and Petrovsky) were far above her on the economic and social ladder, and Carrie's conception of her partners' suitability seems deeply shaped by their “provider” status. She is not the only woman in the show to behave this way; in fact, the series follows remarkably traditional patterns when it comes to the definition of gender roles within the couple.^[4] In theories of democratic love, relationships are presented as negotiated contracts entered by mutual agreement (Giddens 3, 63). However, as Wendy Langford argues, mutual agreement does not automatically imply equality. The democratic contract between the couple does not mean the end of domination; rather, it is “an effective means by which consent of the subordinate is at once secured and made hidden” (12). The fact that Carrie is attracted to wealthier men and seems happy with this situation, that she *chooses* her wealthy partners, does not diminish the economic inequality that underlies her relationships; it simply conceals it. Carrie's agreement to be supported by Aidan, paying her rent in kisses, thus does not lessen her economic dependence on him, but it does suggest that kisses are the way that this inequality might be masked, at least for a while, by the discourse of romance. In particular, the soul mate version of love does not stoop to consider such “prosaic” questions as material conditions, thus conveniently overlooking the practical aspects of the union; conversely, the more that material conditions reassert

themselves, the less wholeheartedly one can embrace or espouse this romanticised version of love.

Carrie herself seems conscious, on some level, of this tension between love as a contract between equal subjects and love as the “divine grace” that merges true soul mates. Immediately after the scene where Carrie and her friends discuss Aidan’s ring, we see Carrie and Aidan having dinner together at a posh restaurant. She has not yet decided whether to *marry* him or not, a decision which would be made on the basis of romantic love or twin-soul ideology, of “knowing that it’s right.” Instead, she accepts his proposal of living together, a more rational, contractual domestic arrangement in which it seems that economic and political factors can be acknowledged. “So . . . yes,” she tells Aidan. “I say yes to living together. I think we’re ready for that step. Yes, we still have to work out the money, ‘cause I don’t want a free ride. We’re still individuals, but we’ll be sharing a life and an apartment.” The episode never clarifies what kind of financial arrangement their new life plan is going to follow, but even this brief nod to financial reality shows how an economic understanding of relationships (“we still have to work out the money”) entails a sense that the two members of the couple remain distinct “individuals,” a version of romance that stands in sharp contrast with the idea of “completion” found in twin-soul ideology.

Even as Carrie accepts cohabitation, however, a second sharp contrast undermines the scene. Carrie’s rational, qualified “yes” to living together takes place in a *mise-en-scène* that invokes neither reason nor egalitarian contracts, but rather the emotional and erotic extravagance of romance. The restaurant in which they are having dinner is elegant, they are dressed in formal clothes: in sum, all the “signs of romance” are “activated” in this scene (Illouz 125-132). In accordance with capitalist society’s scripts of romance and with romantic comedy’s conventions, everything around them indicates—both to Carrie and to the viewer—that this is the moment in which Aidan is going to make his proposal. The scene’s editing increases her and our suspense by having Aidan reach for his pocket in slow-motion. However, our expectations are disrupted when it turns out it is his wallet that he was reaching for, not the ring. Romantic comedy’s *mise-en-scène* has tricked both Carrie and the viewer, and paradoxically, she feels both relieved and puzzled. “Why hasn’t he asked me yet? What if he realised I’m not the One?” she wonders in a phone call to Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) the following day. It is as though Carrie were untroubled by her own willingness to think rationally and economically about the relationship, but the suggestion that Aidan is likewise thinking about it in any terms other than twin-soul ideology—reaching for his wallet, not a ring—fills her with self-doubt. She is not sure she wants to marry Aidan, but she wants to be asked.

Carrie’s ambivalence and anxiety are typical for her character, but they are not reducible to individual psychology. Rather, they illustrate the difficulties faced by lovers in a particular institutional context: one that we can understand through the individualisation theory of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). As the sociologists explain, in wealthy Western industrialised countries previously stable institutions of family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality, and love are no longer fixed or secure, and must therefore be negotiated by individuals on a case by case, couple by couple basis (2004: 3-5). The disappearance of traditional points of reference puts pressure on individuals to supply their own guidelines for living, and the dissolution of traditional blueprints of action forces us to make choices, not in a vacuum, but in a context that is cluttered with competing, often contradictory value

systems and life narratives. This freedom of choice appears to open the door to the possibility of happiness, but the constant need to decide every aspect of life also creates anxiety, irritation, and never-ending questions, whose answers provide only “precarious freedoms”:

pacification is achieved temporarily, provisionally; it is permeated with questions that can burst out again at any time. Think, calculate, plan, adjust, negotiate, define, revoke (with everything constantly starting again from the beginning): these are the imperatives of the ‘precarious freedoms’ that are taking hold of life as modernity advances (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 6).

In pre-industrial societies, marriage’s purpose was to contribute to the family’s prosperity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004: 79). Today, it is not stability that is sought after, but freedom, love and self-realisation, but there are no clear-cut, uncontested guidelines to follow in order to reach these. The disintegration of traditional certainties and institutions opens a sea of possibilities, condemning us to design our own biography in accordance with the dictates of an ostensibly “true” self that turns out to be as elusive as any soul mate. Indeed, there’s a link between these two searches. In these times of uncertainty, the individual’s romantic life gains unprecedented significance, as s/he turns to love in search of answers, idealising it as a source of security and self-identity. Decisions about love, sex, romance, marriage, even erotic lifestyle are therefore elevated to more-than-practical importance, since only in these decisions can the true self be made securely visible and knowable. In the theorists’ terms, these decisions are “deified,” even as “[e]very day life is being post-religiously ‘theologised’” in what is otherwise an increasingly secular world (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 7).

In this sense, SATC in general and this episode in particular, constitutes a faithful reflection of the contemporary individual’s constant state of self-scrutiny, especially in the romantic realm. It could even be argued that a TV series like SATC is better equipped than cinema to reflect accurately the maze of introspection in which the individual is today immersed. Unlike film, which due to time constraints is usually forced to offer less nuanced readings of its characters’ existential and romantic fates, television can portray the uncertainty and volatility which characterises the contemporary intimate panorama, as well as the psychological unrest produced by individualisation processes. SATC captures this spirit of uncertainty and self-questioning, not just in any given episode, but in its formal structure *as a series*, since the answers it provides by the end of each episode are merely provisional, the cycle of self-interrogation bound to repeat again and again with a different romantic ideology—twin soul, consumerist, or something else—being embraced and contested by turns.

Maybe You Just Have to Say What’s In Your Heart

The uncertainty, ambivalence, and multiplicity of discourses surrounding contemporary love are summed up quite memorably in the actual proposal scene of “Just

Say Yes.” It is late at night, and Aidan has tricked Carrie into walking his dog with him. At one given moment, he kneels down to pick up the dog’s excrement and surprises Carrie by putting a ring box in her hand while she is not looking. She is clearly struck, but her face lights up when she opens the box and sees the ring: it is not the one she had seen the previous day in his sports bag. Overcome by emotion, she accepts his proposal. How are we viewers meant to take this scene?



On the one hand, Aidan’s proposal demonstrates the series’ endorsement of a particular ideal of democratized romance: one in which simplicity and lack of artifice are the hallmarks of true love. Having pulled out the conventional stops of romantic luxury in the earlier dinner scene—the false or feigned proposal, which ended with Aidan reaching for his wallet—the episode now stages a self-conscious intervention in the conventions of romantic comedy by having a marriage proposal, traditionally the genre’s climactic moment, play out in the middle of the street, in pajama-like clothes and while taking the dog out for a pee. The romanticism of the scene is heightened precisely because of its quotidian staging, as well as its unexpectedness; it is as though, in order to create an atmosphere of believable romance in the postmodern era, conventions have to be inverted or reworked. The show thus seems to be in agreement with those who think that the sphere of consumption has “undermined the capacity of people to engage in an authentic experience of romance” (Illouz 112), since in order to reach an authentic moment, Carrie and Aidan have to leave the world of consumption behind. They are not the only couple to do so: some of the most self-consciously “romantic” moments in SATC often take place in non-consumerist situations, as is the case with Miranda’s low-key wedding with Steve and later in the series, Carrie’s preference for dinner at McDonald’s with Petrovsky (Mikhail Baryshnikov) to a night in the opera (“The Ick Factor”, 6: 14). “Authentic” love would thus seem to demand a retreat from or rejection of consumerist romantic scenarios, as though freedom from the world of money and things were needed in order certify the truth of the feelings involved.

However, SATC’s apparent embrace of this “non-consumerist” ethos is deceptive, and the romantic utopia proposed by the show remains, just below the surface, powerfully determined by economic factors—or, to be more precise, consumption remains the arena in which the truth of love is proved. When Aidan kneels down, Carrie’s face transmits her unease with what is to come. However, her expression changes completely when she sees the new ring. Nothing in the emotional or interpersonal situation has changed—Aidan is

still proposing marriage, as she feared he would—but the material object that embodies and enacts his proposal *has* changed, such that the first thing Carrie says when she opens the box is “Oh, my God. It’s not . . . It’s such a beautiful ring!” Just as in the brunch scene, then, the real issue here is not the serious consideration of whether to spend her life with Aidan or not, but the virtues of the ring in itself, that is, the ritual of consumption enacted in the marriage proposal. Helped by the endorphin-fueled high of Aidan’s consumerist gesture, Carrie lets herself get carried away and agrees to marry him, rationalising her decision with these words: “Maybe there are no right moments, right guys, right answers. Maybe you just have to say what’s in your heart.” Implicitly admitting that she has not really worked out whether Aidan is her soul mate or not, she lets herself be taken in by the magic of romance anyway—and, the skeptical viewer notes, by the rightness of the ring. Despite the series’ habitual cynicism, in this scene, everything works in order to create a climactic romantic moment. The full power of romantic comedy is summoned with no hint of irony, resorting to one of its most reliable clichés: in matters of love, follow your heart, not your head. To use Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s term, Aidan’s choice of the right, beautiful ring allows Carrie to “theologise” her decision to “just say yes” to marriage.

We are not finished, however, with unpacking the complexity of the scene. It may well be true that Carrie’s momentary impulse to “say yes” to romantic love illustrates the temptation of deracinated, well-off urban lovers—even the most cynical among them—to idealise love as a source of “salvation” because it offers what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe as “person-related stability” (2004: 32-33). “The more other reference points have slipped away,” they explain, “the more we direct our craving to give our lives meaning and security towards those we love” (50). In this context, marriage takes a new meaning. It does not just provide a social structure for the individual’s life, it becomes a matter of identity, as we seek ourselves in the other (51). Aidan’s choice of the “right ring” may not prove that he is the “right guy”—the “someone, somewhere” who “is holding the key to your heart and your dream house,” as Carrie mused at the start of season four—but it does suggest that he knows and ratifies Carrie’s identity in the way she (and perhaps the viewer) secretly craves.

Who, though, really chose that “right ring,” enacting this intimate knowledge? Rather than having the happy couple kiss to seal their engagement while the closing credits unfold, this episode ends with a coda devoted, not to Aidan and Carrie, but to Carrie and Samantha. Carrie knows that Samantha dislikes the idea of her marriage and thinks she is not going to take it well. They meet in a bar and she tells her the news. Once again, they talk about the ring, not the engagement in itself, and it turns out Samantha helped Aidan pick the new, “right” ring, just as Miranda had previously helped him pick the “wrong” one. In effect, Carrie’s circle of female friends are shown to be the ones who give her “person-related stability,” functioning simultaneously as a pre-modern social network that must give a suitor their approval and as modern (or postmodern) lovers and love-objects in their own right. Despite her misgivings, that is to say, Samantha gives Carrie her “blessing,” much as a parent would, even as she demonstrates that it’s she, not Aidan, who knows what ring “is” Carrie, and thus who recognises Carrie’s true self. Once Samantha gives Carrie “consent” to Carrie’s marriage, they embrace, and one cannot help but feel that this constitutes the episode’s true happy ending, reminding us that, underneath the apparently “regressive” obsession of the show with the search for Mr. Right, its heart lies with an apolitical version of female sisterhood. By having the girls close the episode rather than the

heterosexual couple, the show seems to imply that their relationship is more important, and, certainly, more lasting.



Conclusion

Beneath the glossy, comforting surface of its Hollywood-like happy ending, “Just Say Yes” is thus marked by remarkable tensions and paradoxes, an exemplary instance of the mix of romantic ideals and discourses in SATC as a whole. On the one hand, the episode illustrates SATC’s secret longing to believe in the possibility of true romance—or, as we might now put it, the episode demonstrates that Carrie, too, is subject to the contemporary tendency towards the romanticisation of love brought about by individualisation processes characteristic of modern liberal capitalism. In a world devoid of the old certainties which gave a sense of security to the individual, she—and some of her viewers—take refuge in romantic love as the one context in which market values are suspended, rational choice is set aside, our elusive “true selves” can be known. At the same time, the episode undercuts or unmasks this “theologising” longing, revealing how deeply it remains embedded in a neoconservative nostalgia for financial inequality between the sexes and in the consumer culture that twin-soul ideologies of love purport to escape. In a final twist, the episode offers an alternative context in which affection, consumerism, and a “person-related stability” seem to coexist quite amicably: that is, the world of female friendships, in which the fraught search for the One who will perfectly complete a partial self is replaced by an ineluctably multiple, deliciously imperfect exchange of affirmation, critique, communication, misunderstanding, forgiveness, recognition, and more.

If the episode finally immerses the viewer in the utopian world of romantic comedy, appealing to one of its basic tenets—just do what your heart tells you—it offers two competing sites for that “happily ever after.” The first is in Carrie and Aidan’s romance, but as viewers know, this does not last; they break their engagement only three episodes later, keeping the series in motion. The second, of course, is in the circle of friends who know and appreciate one another as much as they know and appreciate luxury culture: the right shoes, the right dress, the right ring, the right spot for lunch. Focused on women and meant for a female audience, the show might well be said to romanticise, or even “theologise,” female friendship, deploying it in service of consumer culture and various forms of racial and class privilege—but that is the subject of another essay. For now, suffice it to say that if

diamonds are a girl's best friend in the postfeminist fantasy of SATC, that's because a girl's best friends are, like diamonds, in this fantasy, forever.^[5]

[1] From now on, *Sex and the City* will be referred to as SATC.

[2] This complexity is, however, acknowledged by authors such as Amanda Lotz, (2006), Angela Chiang (2007), Astrid Henry (2004), Stephen Gennaro (2007) and Jane Arthurs (2004), who argue that the contradictions exposed in texts like SATC serve the function of interrogating the culture in which they are produced, thus encouraging us to "question the costs as well as the benefits of living in a postfeminist consumer culture" (2004: 142)

[3] SATC's conflictual approach to marriage is mainly reflected in its protagonists' different attitudes towards it: Charlotte and Samantha represent diametrically opposed views, while Miranda and, especially, Carrie stand in an ambiguous middle ground. Despite her willingness to marry Big in the SATC film, Carrie seems to reject the idea of marriage throughout the series, as becomes obvious when she gets a rash from trying on a wedding dress ("Change of a Dress", 4: 15).

[4] The series offers numerous examples of how a well-off economic position is always implicitly presented as men's prerequisite to be considered for the "title" of Mr. Right. The girls sleep around with all kinds of men, but their serious suitors are always wealthy: that is Charlotte's case with her two husbands, and Samantha's with her boss Richard Wright (James Remar). When the men are not richer or occupy a higher social position than the girls, relationships tend to go astray. In the last season, for instance, Carrie dates Jack Berger (Ron Livingston), a writer who seems to meet all her expectations. However, the relationship fails because he is not at the same professional level as she is. Samantha's relationship with the young waiter Smith (Jason Lewis) is not taken seriously until he becomes a famous model/actor. A similar thing happens with Miranda's husband-to-be, Steve (David Eigenberg). Their relationship is problematic because he feels inferior to her, which largely motivates their break-up. However, when they come together for the second time, he has been magically "upgraded" by the series from bartender to bar owner, which seems to greenlight the relationship. Nevertheless, the clearest sign of SATC's soft spot for Darcy-like male characters is Big: very much like Austen's hero, he is the wealthiest character in the show, and he is consistently presented as Carrie's knight in shining armour.

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