

SEX AND THE CITY TEN YEARS ON: LANDMARK TELEVISION AND ITS
LEGACY report by Hannah Hamad

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Springtime in London [it's not New York but...]. It's the tenth anniversary of the broadcast of the final season of Sex and the City (1998-2004), I'm gathered with a group of scholars for a conference exploring its cultural afterlife, and I can't help but wonder... Have scholars said everything there is to say about Sex and the City? [not at all] What is its legacy for television and the cultural landscape [complex and multi-faceted] And will every paper be full of rhetorical questions and delivered in the style of one of Carrie Bradshaw's ponderous columns? [mercifully not]

The conference, which was sponsored by the Women's Media Studies Network at MeCCSA and the Centre for Research in Film and Audiovisual Cultures at the University of Roehampton, commenced with an introduction by organiser Deborah Jermyn and plenary presentations by eminent SATC scholars Kim Akass, Janet McCabe and Beatriz Oria on why the series mattered during its original broadcast run, and why it continues to matter now. This revealed both the depth of the impact made at the time through, for example, the “revolutionary” nature of its representations, as well as the lasting effects of this impact via the ongoing engagement with the series by new generations of women and the legacy it left on US television.

The most currently visible examples of the series' cultural afterlife are of course Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-) which as Akass observed filled the “woman sized hole” that

SATC left in HBO's lineup, and *SATC* prequel *The Carrie Diaries*, adapted from Candace Bushnell's origin story book series that narrates the life of her avatar/alter ego "before there was sex" and "before there was a city." But papers by Helen Warner, Joanne Knowles and Julia Scanlon, respectively covering contemporary 'fashion television', British 'chick narratives' and TV's 'postfeminist lesbians' demonstrated that the legacy of *SATC* extends far beyond these more obvious generational successors, manifesting in discursive emphasis on fashion and women's sexualities across post-*SATC* woman-centred television ranging from *Ugly Betty* (2006-10) to *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (2007-11) and *Lip Service* (2010-12), and many more examples besides.

Nonetheless the focus of the conference discussion understandably returned to *Girls* and *The Carrie Diaries* with justified regularity. Rona Murray's paper skillfully unpicked some of the many complexities that characterize the relationship between *SATC* and *Girls*, as well as those of the dialogue between Sarah Jessica Parker's celebrity and Dunham's and the extent to which the latter as Hannah Horvath is constructed as "monstrous other" to SJP's Carrie. While Susan Berridge presented *The Carrie Diaries* as a "generic paradox" in its attempt to have its cake and eat it too as a high school teen drama on the one hand, and an urban adult comedy on the other, in her engaging discussion of its negotiations of age, gender and sexuality.

For the most part, speakers were reflective and self-aware about the pleasures and potential pitfalls of their respective practices of 'aca-fandom' of *SATC*, and interrogated some of the tensions inherent to the necessary subjection of a beloved object to critical scrutiny - what Jermyn described as the "impossibility" of

disentangling her affection for the series from her scholarly engagement with it. But a point of contention between some delegates that muddied the waters in this regard was the place of the 2008 and 2010 feature films in *SATC*'s cultural narrative, and what the different terms by which they are understood to have succeeded or failed means, both for the afterlife of the series, and for audiences' relationship to the franchise. There was the occasional instance where the aforementioned impossibility of disentanglement manifested as reluctance, conscious or not, to move the critical conversation we had about the films beyond the limiting bounds of how "bad" they are, and to engage with the conference's remit to investigate what "mattered" about them. And irrespective of the dramatically different affective investments we may have made with them as individual members of a large audience base, the films were manifestly more than just footnotes or afterwords in the story of the impact of *SATC* on the millennial pop culture landscape. And as scholars, we cannot afford to brush them aside or omit them from our interrogation of what continues to be at stake in the striking prominence of this franchise within female oriented popular culture by playing the fan card. They too "mattered" like the originary texts before them.

This was made abundantly clear by Jermyn's fascinating exploration of the films' reception, which highlighted, among other things, the staggering levels of openly misogynistic film criticism they garnered. As well as by Eylem Atakav, whose illuminating study of critical reviews of *Sex and the City 2* in the middle east revealed a range of complex cultural encounters, including a focus on what Carrie et al, as ostensible ambassadors of western postfeminist womanhood, had to offer rather than on the problematic depictions of the middle east understood elsewhere as "condescending" and "anti-muslim." These papers, alongside remarks made about

the films by the plenary speakers, brought into startlingly clear view some of the cultural double standards to which differently gendered forms and genres are respectively held, as well as the industrial and cultural complexity of negotiating the afterlife and post-run franchising of a series with a fiercely dedicated audience base.

The conference also provided an opportunity to take stock of existing academic work on the series, and to reflect on the interventions made by landmark publications like Akass and McCabe's collection *Reading Sex and the City*, Jermyn's monograph on the show as a 'TV Milestone', and Diane Negra's foundational 2004 article "'Quality Postfeminism?': Sex and the Single Girl on HBO." This brought into view not only the ongoing influence of this first wave of *SATC* scholarship, but also some of the new interventions being made by Theodora Thomadaki's psychoanalytic readings of the series, Karishma Gaur's take on its treatment of female friendship, and Lingling Miao's revelatory ethnographic study of Chinese fandom of *SATC* by users of the website Douban.com. Just as McCabe observed that far from liberating women, *SATC* showed us how far we have left to travel, so '*Sex and the City Ten Years On*' showed us how much there is left to stay about this abidingly impactful cultural text.

So I sat on the bed, opened my laptop, and waited for the theme music...