

Chapter 48: Sex and the City: The Finales

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The ending of Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) came at a time of peak popularity for the series. Our girls, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Charlotte York (Kirstin Davies), Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) got the endings they deserved. Carrie found love with Mr Big (Chris Noth), Miranda and Steve Brady (David Eigenberg) moved to Brooklyn, Charlotte and Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler) were finally approved for adoption, and Sam rediscovered her orgasm after treatment for breast cancer. Whether fans liked their finales or not (and many didn't), their stories were over, and the loose ends had been tied up ("end of season 6," 2008). Two years later, amid rumors of a film, and three alternative endings appeared on YouTube. Ostensibly filmed to forestall leaks in the lead-up to the finale, each plays out a different scenario: in one, Carrie marries the Russian ("Alternative ending (2)," 2006); in another, she breaks up with Big ("Alternative ending (3)," 2006); and, in a third, she announces that she and Big are staying together in unwedded bliss ("Alternative ending (1)," 2006). Two years later and the first of the Sex and the City films was released (2008) and then a second, Sex and the City: 2 (2010), two years after that. In the space of six years, Sex and the City enjoyed six finales. How then can we talk about the ending of a television series that has never truly ended? And how can we consider a finale that continues to resist full closure?

When Sex and the City first appeared on our television screens, it met mixed reviews. Charlotte Raven famously declared that she "couldn't bear the idea of anyone believing (or affecting to believe) that this worthless pile of swill was in any sense culturally relevant" (1999). And yet the series went on to hit a cultural nerve. Representative of a certain time and place (New York's Manhattan, the millennium years), during a particular ideological shift (pre- to post-9/11) and privileging a certain class of women (white, liberal, single, and mostly heterosexual), the show seemed to speak only to a limited audience. By the end of its six-year run, however, the

series was considered one of US TV's highest-rated sitcoms, was listed as one of Time's "All-TIME 100 TV Shows" (Poniewozik 2007), and was nominated for over fifty Emmy Awards and twenty-four Golden Globes (winning seven and eight respectively); not so shabby for a series that had been, for Lee Siegel at least, "the biggest hoax perpetrated on straight single women in the history of entertainment" (2002: 32).

Central to critical and scholarly responses was the question of whether the series was feminist or not. For many, our Sex and the City women could never be considered feminist. Obsessed with shoes, sex, and shopping, by the beginning of Season Two, even Miranda remarked: 'All we talk about anymore is Big, or balls, or small dicks. How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends? It's like seventh grade with bank accounts' ("Take Me Out to the Ball Game," 2:1). And despite regularly failing the Bechdel test, the friends spent a good part of every episode gathered round a table, kvetching about their lives in a show of solidarity not seen since series like The Golden Girls. While they were never overtly feminist, and the series was often criticized for its lack of black or working class representation, the Sex and the City women showed just how fun our female friendships were, with or without a man.

Sex and the City fits into a tradition of television series characterized by their long, open-ended, circular narratives. Like the soap opera, the sitcom emerges from a radio, then TV, tradition. Defined by their need for a continually evolving narrative, long arc series are designed to keep stories alive, endings at bay, and thrive on deferred gratification. Sex and the City, at the same time, owed a debt to its filmic forbear – the romantic comedy – a genre dependant on delayed consummation. This need to delay the final union, however, should not be taken literally here as the twenty-first-century television narrative had to work overtime to keep the lovers apart. With Carrie and Big signposted as "the right couple" from the very beginning ("Sex and the City," 1:1), their relationship proved unworkable for many reasons, Big's commitment-phobia, his marriage to Natasha ("Ex and the City," 2:18) and his move to Napa ("I Heart NY,"

4:18), all worked against their eventual union. This “on-off” relationship allowed Carrie to enjoy other romantic relationships, but, lost in the romantic fiction narrative, our heroine was enthralled by the idea of her “big love,” always longing for the unobtainable Mr Big.

Little wonder then that, when the finale aired, on February 22, 2004, it got such mixed reactions. Played over a montage of vignettes of her friends, Carrie’s final voiceover tells us that the most “significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself,” she takes a call; revealed, at last, as “John,” Big has put his house up for sale and is coming back to New York. Carrie tells us: “If you can find someone to love the ‘you’ you love, well, that’s just fabulous....” For many, after six long years of tumultuous ups and downs, Carrie and Big’s ending seemed a little too pat, too trite, too perfect, and the fans couldn’t help but wonder - had Carrie and her friends “sold out”?

Rumors of a follow-up film began almost immediately, and, after various delays, Sex and the City began filming in September 2007, premiering in London’s Leicester Square in May 2008. Still riding the success of the television series, which by now had been syndicated globally, Sex and the City met with lukewarm critical responses. The transition from small to big screen was never going to be easy, particularly for the fans that had lived with the SATC women weekly. For some, 145 minutes was too long: “a vulgar, shrill, deeply shallow —... overlong — addendum to a show that had, over the years, evolved and expanded in surprising ways” (Dargis 2008). Still, the box office success was considerable with the film recording the biggest ever opening for an R-rated comedy, a romantic comedy (Friedman 2008), and for a film starring women (Setoodeh 2008), grossing \$415.2m globally (“Box Office,” 2010). There seemed no reason not to make a second sequel and filming started in September 2009.

If critical responses to the first film had been muted, the media response to Sex and the City: 2 was unprecedented. Of the first film Newsweek had asked whether “it’s not a case of ‘Sexism in the City.’” Men hated the movie before it even opened [and] ... gave it such a nasty tongue lashing you would have thought they were talking about an ex-girlfriend” (Setoodeh

2008). By the time Sex and the City: 2 was released, the knives were well and truly out and, before the film even premiered, it had received savage reviews.

Central to the criticism was the setting of the film in the Middle East. While the Sex and the City women were never avowedly feminist, placing them into an intensely patriarchal world where women have little freedom is provocative to say the least. Added to the overconsumption of designer labels and the sumptuous luxury of an all-expenses paid trip to Abu Dhabi, the film seemed ostentatious and at odds with the recession-hit culture of 2008. Critics certainly hated the film. And this time it was not just male reporters and journalists that savaged it. For Lindy West, “SATC2 takes everything that I hold dear as a woman and as a human — working hard, contributing to society, not being an entitled cunt like it's my job — and rapes it to death with a stiletto that costs more than my car” (2010).

But the worst criticism was saved for the women. For Sukhdev Sandhu, the women's crime was “getting older,” aiming his most vitriolic attack on Sarah Jessica Parker for “looking, if you happen to go for human pipe-cleaners, absolutely fabulous ... like a cross between Wurzel Gummidge and Bride of Chucky” (2010). Andrew O'Hagan in London Evening Standard went one further by describing the women as “greedy, faithless, spoiled, patronising ... morons,” calling Samantha a “blond slut” whose inner life “stops at her labia” and possessing “the desperate mentality of the School Bike” (2010). It seemed that we had gone full circle and were again back in 1998, reading the reviews of the first few episodes of the television series, only this time the criticism was overtly and savagely misogynist. Bidisha, writing in the Guardian, wonders whether the critics used the film as an excuse to “spew out a sexist torrent completely out of proportion to what they were reviewing,” which may have had something to do with “the spectacle of a lot of grown women together” that “apparently fills them, bafflingly, with contempt” (2010).

Part of the problem for this Sex and the City film was in how it revealed the truth behind that “happy-ever-after” narrative. While the first film had focused entirely on the wedding, the

second had no such romantic notions. Sam's sexual adventures had again been curtailed, this time through menopause, Carrie's big romance had settled into nights in front of the TV, and motherhood, for Charlotte, was not at all what she had imagined. The truth behind the fiction had never been laid so bare and the uncomfortable revelations contained in this, perhaps their final film, were almost too much for reviewers who were faced with the not-so-happy ending lurking beneath the series finale. Still, the film did well, despite the critical mauling, grossing a worldwide total of nearly \$3m and being 2010's highest-grossing romantic comedy (Box Office Mojo, 2016).

For me, Sex and the City's latest finale spoke directly to their legions of loyal fans. Always famed for their honest, forthright, depiction of women, sex and the single girl, Sex and the City: 2, while flawed, delivered on its original promise. For the Hollywood Reporter, the women had never seemed so "profoundly feminist" as they were in Sex and the City: 2 (Farber 2010), and, even if for many, they were also "blatantly anti-Muslim," the sheerchutzpah of their last outing was in the open criticism of a patriarchal ideology that oppresses women. In this film, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha offered an antidote to the neat, closed ending of the television series, spoke to and of women's lives and were critically denigrated for doing so.

The original series finale, with its traditional happy ending, could only ever be unpicked by the film versions. Women's journeys, through friendships, boyfriends, marriage, children, and menopause, are so rarely celebrated that Sex and the City, the television series and the films, should go down in history as an ever so brief moment that allowed women a voice. If, as Laura Mulvey tells us: "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road" (1977-78, 54), the Sex and the City films gave us a chance to see how the "over-determined irreconcilables" played out for our girls. And, despite what critics would have us believe, Sex and the City delivered on its initial promise back in 1998, even if it "put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (Mulvey 1977-78, 54).

In the end, I can't help but wonder whether we have seen the last of Sex and the City. Rumors regularly surface about a third film and legions of fans patiently wait for the final instalment of the story. Sarah Jessica Parker has confirmed that another outing (either Season Seven or film number three) could be in the cards; even the show's creator, Darren Star, is on record as saying that the finale "ultimately betrayed" the group's stories by undermining the fact that "women don't ultimately find happiness from marriage" (Shepherd 2016) and suggesting there could be a another chapter. Maybe our girls will be back: older and wiser, still friends and embracing the resolution of their stories. We can only wait and hope for that final Finale.

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