

Constructions of Active Womanhood and New Femininities: From a Feminist Linguistic Perspective, is *Sex and the City* a Modernist or a Post-Modernist TV Text?

Judith Baxter

Abstract: *Sex and the City* has been the subject of close scrutiny within feminist scholarship in terms of whether it is considered to be a reactionary or progressive text. While this debate is valuable within a modernist feminist paradigm, it makes less sense from a post-modernist feminist perspective. Using both semiotic and feminist post-structuralist methods of textual analysis, this paper shows that *Sex and the City* can be viewed as reactionary according to a modernist reading, but as altogether more challenging and complex according to a post-modernist reading.

Introduction

*Sex and the City*¹ was a phenomenally successful TV series which ran for six seasons from 1997 to 2005, and released a movie of the same title in May 2008. Its central focus, the lives of four white, middle class, thirty-something, female friends negotiating the consumer and mating culture of New York, challenged former media representations of femininities. The characters were shown as agentic controllers of their own destinies, searching for a life of their own, professionally powerful, financially independent, exulting in consumerism, sexually active and yet apparently free from moral judgement.

Given its worldwide exposure, it is hardly surprising that *Sex and the City* became the subject of close scrutiny within feminist scholarship. The extent to which the series is a celebration of young women's proactive engagement with consumer and sexual culture, or alternatively a representation of a new form of patriarchal oppression filtered through the regulatory frames of fashion, spending and dating, continues to be debated (Arthurs, 2004; Hermes, 2006; McRobbie, 2004; Nayak and Kehily, 2008). To date, much of the scrutiny has been from scholars of cultural or media studies who have assessed the text from a range of cultural materialist perspectives, focusing on such matters as the 'commodification of feminism as a white, middle class affair' (Zeigler, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to explore how the constructions of feminine identities in the TV version of *Sex and the City* can be theorised and therefore, conceptualised and understood. By asking whether the text makes better sense if it is read from a modernist or a post-modernist perspective, we can perhaps learn whether *Sex and the City* constructs its femininities in terms of 'second-wave' feminist understandings of identities, or whether these are better understood in terms of 'third-wave', post-feminist conceptualisations (Mills, 2002). A modernist or second-wave feminist reading would tend to evaluate representations of feminine identities in terms of

how reactionary or progressive their actions appear in relation to feminist goals such as personal and political liberation from male patriarchy (de Beauvoir, 1949/1972; Daly, 1978; Irigary, 1985; Millett, 1977); whilst a post-modernist or 'third wave' reading might wish to emphasise the extent to which identities feature principles of complexity, multiplicity, richness of experience, connections with others, and the expediency and action-based nature of modern life (Baxter, 2003; Butler, 2006; Mills, 2002; Weedon, 1997). The paper will draw upon methods of multi-modal textual analysis associated with the field of feminist linguistics (a.k.a. 'language and gender'), in order to understand the ways in which identities are both constituted and represented, and help us to answer the question 'Is *Sex and the City* a modernist or a post-modernist TV text?' While the focus of the analysis is upon a *single*, significant, closing scene from the TV programme, the selection of appropriate methods to conduct the analysis are drawn inductively from a viewing of the *entire* series (see Method of Analysis below), in order to combine depth of study with breadth.

Previous research: feminine or feminist?

Sociologists Nayak and Kehily (2008: 59) suggest that *Sex and the City* slides somewhat uneasily between the feminine and the feminist, in its exploration of the multi-faceted relationship between female sexuality and consumer culture, in which contradictions are inherent. In this paper, the term 'feminine' is taken to be constructions of how females are supposed to speak and behave within western culture, whereas 'feminist' is taken to be the set of views associated with feminism: clearly, the 20th century political movement challenging male patriarchy through three 'waves' (Mills, 2002). Certainly on first impression, the fanzine website's description of the film is one of unreconstructed femininity in its use of glamour magazine discourse:

Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha are back – and boy, have they got news! Don't miss the movie debut of Manhattan's fabulous foursome as they continue their quest for true love, hot sex and the perfect pair of slingbacks.

Within the programme, there is a clear 'return' to the stereotypical feminine pleasures of dress, fashion, cosmetics, sexiness and visual display. This is signified forcefully through the associated pleasure of conspicuous consumerism through 'shopping' as a female friendship activity. It is also signified by the programme's endorsement of luxury fashion houses, as the four actresses get to wear and effectively, to market the industry's most coveted clothes in a 'circuit of cultural

production' (Hall, 1997). There is also a return to heteronormative assumptions about emotional and sexual relationships in the four women's relentless pursuit of men, which appears to be conventionally resolved through commitment and 'settling down' in the closing episodes of the series.

However, there are also ways in which the programme significantly challenges traditional definitions of femininity, moving into the realm of the feminist. While details are backgrounded, three of the female characters, Carrie, Samantha and Miranda have careers and therefore independent means of financial support, while the fourth character, Charlotte has an on-off career in the art world. Carrie's role as a freelance, well-paid columnist is fore-grounded as a narrative framing device in that her pseudo-philosophical question posed at some point in each episode (for example, in Episode 1 of the first season: 'why are there so many great unmarried women, and no great unmarried men?') acts as the thematic link for the four characters' interwoven plotlines. Although often marginalised or manipulated as a plot/thematic device, Carrie's profession is occasionally invoked as an aspect of her identity, as in the final episode of the sixth season, 'American Girl in Paris 2':

(Carrie is sitting in a Parisian cafe with Juliet, the ex-wife of her fiancé, Alek Petrovsky.)

Juliet: so Chloe tells me you were a writer in New York?

Carrie: I am a writer (.) until recently I had a weekly column in New York (.) it became a book and it's even been published here

Her fiancé's lack of recognition of her profession as a writer is one reason why Carrie chooses to end her relationship with him and shortly after, to resume her relationship with the enigmatic Mr Big.

Nayak and Kehily (2008: 59) have argued that gender in post-modernity is characterised by a 'blurring of the boundaries between feminine and feminist'. The female characters are apparently constructed as agentic controllers of their own identity in that they are professionally powerful, but their careers are represented as subordinate to leisure, sex, friendship and 'getting their man'. The characters have serious spending power and take delight in their positions as shopping citizens who primarily dress for themselves, but they are also revel in the gaze of the other, whether an admiring male or an envious female. They talk about how they cherish the security and solidarity of their female friendships, but the dominant relationship in each of their lives is with a man. They are hedonistic, in pursuit of pleasure and sexual fulfilment without the concomitant of emotional

commitment with a male partner, or of facing moral censure from the cultural environment in which they move. Yet Carrie, in particular, states that she is 'looking for love' and demonstrates an almost infantile neediness in the presence of all her male sexual partners (McRobbie, 2004). Usually through the mouthpiece of Samantha, the characters use sexually explicit swear words, making *Sex and the City* one of the first prime time TV programmes to represent white middle class women as publicly bawdy and vulgar. As Hermes (2006) has argued, the tendency to 'talk dirty' may be the only transgressive feature of the series, although even that is open to patriarchal recuperation in the unfolding of the series. Above all, the female characters do not espouse feminist principles, but rather, express the dilemmas of post-feminist living. This, McRobbie (2004) suggests is the legacy of modernist feminism. For many young women, the less than glamorous figure of the 'angry feminist' is to be both feared and reviled, particularly for its anti-male and anti-heterosexual sentiment. In *Sex and the City*, feminism appears to have been reworked as 'girl power' which embraces a 'pick and mix' of feminine and feminist values and practices. In order to gain an answer to this paper's question, we shall now consider the text from two perspectives: modernist and post-modernist.

Modernist and post-modernist perspectives

It is beyond the remit of this paper to give an extensive review of the vast literature on the distinctions between modernist and post-modernist perspectives. However, the move from a modernist to a post-modernist perspective in recent years has been a well-documented, if not a necessarily welcome feature of the field of feminist linguistics, as one of its doyennes testifies:

Beginning shortly after 1990, the consensus among language and gender scholars began to shift in favour of what I am calling a 'postmodern' view of gender; by the end of the decade this had become the dominant position....in acknowledging what [post-modernists] take to be the real complexity and variability of the relationships between language, gender and sexuality, contemporary feminist researchers have become increasingly remote from the common sense understandings with which most people operate.

(Cameron, 2005)

The following chart characterises how prominent feminist linguists have characterised some of the key differences between the two perspectives:

A modernist perspective of feminism e.g. de Beauvoir, 1972; Daly, 1978; Irigary, 1985; Millett, 1977, Steinem, 1984	A post-modernist perspective of feminism e.g. Baxter, 2003; Bucholtz and Hall, 1995; Butler, 2006; Mills, 2002; Weedon, 1997
Individuals have consistent, uniform selves and an authentic, coherent identity.	Individuals have multiple selves and identities some of which appear to be competing or contradictory.
Individuals have an innate personality or character, which is reflected in their speech and actions. The female nature has certain known properties.	Identities are constructed or performed through actions, appearances, behaviour and particularly through linguistic interactions and discourses (Foucault, 1980).
There is a clear distinction between mind and body, inner and outer selves, between an individual's 'core' and surface appearance.	There is no distinction between inner and outer selves, between surface appearance and deeper realities. The two interpenetrate each other (Cooper, 1989).
Individuals evolve through a dialectical interaction with the world, a combination of nature and nurture.	Individuals are largely constituted by and through cultural discourses, or in philosophical terms, the eyes of the Other.
Females are consistently positioned as victims within the patriarchal order.	Females are rarely uniformly powerless or indeed, powerful but are constantly shifting their subject positions within different contexts which involve varying sets of power relations.
They are therefore bound by a common cause against various forms of male oppression. It is possible to generalise about the universal condition of women.	There are always differences <i>within</i> women as well as <i>between</i> women. In other words, it is rarely possible to generalise about the universal condition of women.
There is a fixity of subject positioning caused by women's place in the patriarchal order, but there is room to challenge this through various 'emancipatory' means: consciousness-raising, collective action, and other forms of political struggle.	Women are 'interpellated' (Althusser, 1971) into different discourses which can produce a sense of fixity or pervasiveness of subject positioning. However, individuals have 'agency' and therefore the potential for resistance, often achieved through playfulness, irony, parody and subversion.
Modernist goals tend to be for progression, liberation, personal and political freedom for all, distinguishing between appearances and 'reality', learning the 'truth', and ultimately achieving closure and resolution.	The post-modernist quest in life is for open-endedness, a range of possibilities, heightened knowingness, self-reflexivity, connection with others, mutual understanding, engagement, having a voice and hearing/responding to the voices of others (Bakhtin, 1981).
Modernist readings are stand-alone and do not incorporate other readings. This is because they view themselves as producing an ordering of a potentially chaotic reality (Cooper, 1989).	Above all, post-modernist readings can <i>incorporate</i> modernist readings as legitimate, as long as these are viewed as provisional and subject to overturning by other readings.

Method of Analysis

I shall draw upon *two* supplementary methods of multi-modal text analysis in order to yield different readings (one modernist, the other postmodernist), which will both be applied to a significant scene from *Sex and the City*. The first method is broadly that of semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1973; Baudrillard, 1994; Pierce, 1958; Saussure, 1974), which is routinely used in linguistic and visual analysis of multi-modal texts. This considers that meaning in the media is communicated by signs, which determine how this meaning is received and understood. These signs are understood only in relation to other signs and other texts in a given social and cultural context. Texts tend to position their readers in particular ways according to how the signs are selected and combined. Analysing the ways linguistic and visual signs are used on both the obvious, surface denotative level, in order to

guide the reader to an understanding of the culturally-governed, connotative level, enables a rigorous understanding of how media texts generate meanings (Bignell, 2002). The semiotic approach used here will be to describe the scene sequentially on the denotative level, but deducing from this the way signs are used to produce meanings on a connotative level. While a 'structuralist semiotic' approach tends to emphasise the *production* of text, a 'social semiotic' approach emphasises reader agency and inevitable variability in the *interpretation* of text (Barthes, 1973). On the grounds that, as a mere analyst, I cannot ever guarantee to give a 'correct' reading of what the producers of *Sex and the City* may have intended, my analysis takes the social semiotic approach, deducing from the semiotic evidence what *appears* to be the case.

Secondly, I will draw upon a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis or FPDA (Baxter, 2003),

alternatively known as positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990). This looks at the way language users are constantly negotiating between different sets of power relations, determined by the range of 'discourses' to which they have access, or within which they are positioned. I take 'discourses' in this context to be cultural 'practices that systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). Hitherto, this relatively new method of textual analysis has been applied to 'real life' contexts (Baxter, 2003; Castaneda, 2008; Kamada, 2008). In the fictional world of *Sex and the City*, the notion of a powerful or powerless subject positioning must be interpreted somewhat differently. Characters will be indexed as variously powerful or powerless in terms of the way their identities are constructed by the signs systems within the media text, which are in turn shaped by dominant cultural discourses. In inductive spirit (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), I watched each season of 20 episodes in turn and recorded my impressions of which discourses seemed to be particularly implicated in the construction of 'character' identities, and drew out the most pervasive. The following three discourses stood out as operating both separately and intertextually (Baxter, 2003) throughout the series:

The first is a set of 'gendered discourses' (Sunderland, 2004), which seem to thrive on the notion of distinction, difference and at times, polarisation. These discourses of *gender (and sexual) differentiation* appear to inform the common sense thinking and day-to-day conversation of characters as well as to drive broader themes and plot development. They often present competing messages through the characterisations and storylines: at times, male and female characters are starkly polarised in terms of their representations of stereotypical femininity and masculinity; at other times, multiple versions of gender and sexuality are variously celebrated and problematised.

The second discourse I noted is one of *consumerist culture*. Throughout the series, the identity construction of the four characters is negotiated and regulated by regimes of consumerism (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). The characters define themselves and are defined by the consumerist 'exchange' value placed on culturally approved signifiers of their identities. This might be in terms of owning multiple sets of cult designer shoes; having 'fabulous' looks; being able to produce witty, aphoristic or bawdy talk that amuses friends; taking a string of attractive sexual partners; or having a culturally valued job such as fashion buyer, columnist, artist, model or actor. The characters show a parodic self-awareness that their identities have been commoditised by the consumerist discourses of their culture, and that, in order to be recognised as the 'right' type of New York citizen, they must constantly reproduce a self – or a coherent set of multiple selves, with a culturally-approved, consumer value. These selves are for show and for possible exchange; they are neither fake nor real, simply part of the must-have identity of a consumerised citizen. This insight accords with notions of 'lifestyle identities' and

'branding the self' explored by Machin and van Leeuwen (2008) among others. It also accords with the views of the hyper-realist, Baudrillard (1994: 2) when he describes post-modern life as 'an era of simulation' which involves 'substituting the signs of the real for the real'. His argument that there is no longer any distinction between signifiers and the signified in the post-modern era is conjured up by the character, Samantha when she says in 'American Girl in Paris 2', 'I need to look like myself at my most fabulous'.

The third discourse I noted across the series was one of *life as a journey* – on the surface, a classic realist narrative strategy (Eagleton, 1983) that frames the series both symbolically and structurally. While this would appear to be a modernist discourse, a post-structuralist reading of the journey motif would question whether it is used in a *diachronic* sense to suggest a liberal-humanist passage to enlightenment and ultimately, closure, or alternatively, whether it is used in a *synchronic* sense to capture the moment-by-moment richness and connectivity of life. Certainly, *Sex and the City* is no different from many classic realist fiction series in that it evokes the metaphorical journeys of four characters searching for different forms of fulfilment in their lives. Along the way there are evident changes in character relationships and circumstances, occasional insights gained and lessons learnt, but the question is whether there is any contesting of dominant discourses in relation to the construction of gendered or other forms of identities?

The following analysis will look at a scene from the final episode ('American Girl in Paris, 2'²), selected because it represents a defining moment of the episode, the season, and indeed the series. Each season comprised 20 individual episodes and was screened in English and in translation to many parts of the globe. In the selected scene, Carrie, the principal character, confronts her fiancé, a Russian émigré sculptor, about not considering her needs as 'a person'. It is to lead to the end of their affair, and to the resolution of the series. The analysis of this scene leads with a semiotics approach to the text, and is followed by a FPDA approach. In my view, a semiotics approach might lend itself more to enabling a modernist reading of the text, while an FPDA approach might tend to enable a post-modernist reading. (Please see Appendix 1 for the transcript, which gives a brief description of the context of the scene.)

Scene analysis: American Girl in Paris (2); see Appendix 1

In the opening of this scene, Alek is sitting on a luxury hotel room bed, hastily finishing a phone conversation, which can be read as indexical of his obsession with his work world. Carrie enters the room and quickly confronts her fiancé for apparently deserting her at the opening of his sculpture exhibition. By line 7, she accuses him of 'abandon[ing] me...when I gave up my party to be with you'. The clear implication of her accusation is that she has made a personal sacrifice to

support him, and he has failed to repay her by making her feel included in the event. His reaction is to close off the possibility of further discussion ('let's not do this now (. . . I'm tired)'). However, Carrie persists with a series of assertions, each starting with the first person pronoun 'I', and each signifying a feeling, a state of mind, or a request to her interlocutor to visualise a scenario. Her purpose seems to be to invite Alek to share her perspective, and to understand why she is feeling hurt. Alek responds by paralleling the syntactical and semantic structure of her assertions. He too makes a series of assertions, starting with the pronoun, 'I'. This seems to reflect his parallel and perhaps separate concern with his own world and a corresponding refusal to enter Carrie's world or to engage with her concerns. By line 18, he attempts again to close down the discussion ('Okay, I'm taking a shower and (. . . I'm going to bed...'). As he walks away, he appears to catch her face with his hand, and this action breaks the diamond necklace he has given her as an engagement gift. At line 21, the viewer is shown Carrie's shocked expression, which indicates that she has read his action as a violent gesture. She clutches her broken necklace to her chest in a protective way, which is indexical and indeed, symbolic of a now failing relationship.

In the final section of the scene, Carrie again makes a series of personalised assertions, at first echoing the egoism and self-referentiality of Alek's words, 'I thought I was clear all along about who I am?' Perhaps for the first time in the 120-episode series, Carrie resolves her position about her goals in life in an impassioned declaration. This is signified by an emphatic yet hesitant prosodic speech rhythm and the use of a series of qualitative adjectives 'real love (. . .) ridiculous (. . .) inconvenient (. . .) consuming'. She closes the conversation by accepting the blame for the breakdown of their affair and by somewhat ambivalently giving him a kiss before she leaves. This could be indexical of her feelings for him, and wanting to leave on a positive note, but it could also connote 'having the last word'.

Arguably, a modernist feminist reading of this scene would view Carrie as a wronged woman who has made a personal and professional sacrifice to support her lover, and who is perhaps, typically betrayed by a misogynist male who fails to recognise her as 'a person', by assuming that his career is far more important than hers. While she might be seen as 'unreconstructed' insofar as she adopts a sacrificial 'little woman' persona, her move to express her inner feelings and to assert her sense of self at the ultimate cost of ending the relationship might be read as an act of personal liberation. If the series had ended there, it could be argued that this would have been a progressive resolution for the series in modernist feminist terms. Carrie would have recognised and re-evaluated her sense of self, and her preference to live 'authentically' on her own rather than 'non-authentically' with a man who values his own life and work above hers. However, the series ends a few scenes later with her being 'rescued by a prince', in the shape of Mr Big, and the identity and indeed, fate of the character is once again

reconfigured in relation to a man. From a modernist feminist perspective, therefore, *Sex and the City* achieves closure as a reactionary rather than a progressive text.

A post-modernist or FPDA reading of this scene would alternatively suggest that the character of Carrie is ambiguously positioned throughout this scene, revealing multiple selves and shifting positions of power. In relation to a discourse of *gender differentiation*, Carrie seems to resist her subordinate positioning in a hetero-normative relationship:

I'm in this relationship too:: (. . .) I'm a person (. . .) in this relationship (. . .) have you any idea what it's like for me here (. . .) eating alone and waiting for my boyfriend...

While Carrie characterises herself here as relatively powerless, dependent on the more powerful male to whom she has been obliged to express her needs in order to seek recognition for them, she is actually rather powerfully positioned in this scene. Her repeated use of the first person pronoun (emphasising her sense of self), her use of self-referential assertion with its illocutionary force of complaint and accusation, and her dominance of the scene's linguistic space (Julé, 2004), reinforce the character's need to reassert her sense of identity not just as a woman but also as 'a person'. Alek in comparison speaks only briefly, uses several politeness tokens, listens, and avoids responding to her claims. However, Alek's subject positioning as relatively 'silent' is ambiguous; it could equally be argued within a discourse of gender differentiation, that he reaffirms his dominant position as a male in his use of silence, lack of response and closing-down statements (Defrancisco, 1991), signifying his refusal to validate Carrie's request to be recognised. Towards the end of the scene, however, Carrie resumes some agency by being the one to end the relationship, but also more ambiguously, taking the blame. From a post-modernist perspective, we see both characters as variously powerful and powerless; there is no simple equation in this scene between gender and power relations.

In terms of a discourse of *consumer citizenship*, which works intertextually in this scene with gender differentiation, the two characters are variously positioned in relation to the diamond necklace. As purchaser of the necklace which is indexical of his status as a wealthy man, Alek occupies a more dominant position than Carrie in their gendered consumer relationship. Indeed, in an earlier scene, his gift has an exchange value in that it almost literally 'buys' Carrie's agreement to sacrifice her own book launch party to attend his exhibition. However, the idea that Carrie has been 'bought' by her fiancé has been challenged in previous episodes where she has been shown as deeply upset by the apparent loss of a much cheaper necklace that she was given by her friends. A modernist reading would suggest that the two necklaces have come to represent the movement between the genuine feelings symbolised by the cheap necklace and the fake feelings represented by the diamond necklace.

This seems to be reinforced by Carrie's own words when she says in 1.31:

'I don't think (.) this love is here in (.) this expensive suite in (.) this lovely hotel in Paris...'

However, a post-modernist reading would argue that when Alek turns round and breaks the necklace with a swing of his arm (line 21), this action is intended to be dramatically ambiguous. Carrie reacts to the incident as if Alek has physically struck her, but it is also clear to the viewer that it is probably an accident. This use of visual signifiers *could* be read in modernist terms as Carrie's moment of realisation that a relationship based on consumerist values is fake. But equally, it could be read as the loss of a lifestyle that Carrie has prized, valued and yearned for throughout the series. In short, a post-modernist reading thrives on the ambiguity and complexity of the scene: the end of the affair is simultaneously a fake and a real loss in a world where the distinction between fake and real is never finally resolvable.

Finally, in terms of a discourse of *life as a journey*, we have seen that a modernist feminist reading is likely to view *Sex and the City* as a reactionary text. From a post-modernist perspective, the journey motif would be viewed in its synchronic sense of capturing the moment-by-moment richness and connectivity of life. This motif must also capture the contingency and expediency of life rather than one driven by absolute principles or ideals. Towards the end of this scene, Carrie is ambiguously positioned as powerful insofar as she assumes agency in ending the relationship with Alek, but also in accepting the blame and leaving him with a kiss. However this might be read, Carrie is in control of the signifiers that mark the end of the relationship. In the closing few scenes, Carrie fortuitously meets up with Mr Big in the hotel lobby and almost instantly re-establishes her relationship with him. In modernist terms, Carrie has reached a moment of epiphany and thereafter, the 'false' love can be replaced by the 'true' love. In post-modernist terms however, there is no deep realisation that one relationship is inherently better than the other, that one is more or less oppressive. Rather, the character of Carrie has recognised that, for reasons of expediency, her relationship with Mr Big suits her better, and furthermore, it solves her immediate problems of loss and disappointment. Mr Big is an American citizen not a Russian-Parisian; this means she can return with him to her home in New York and resume her old career and friendships. Mr Big is equally rich, and helpfully, taller, darker, more humorous and more handsome. In all respects, Mr Big is the more informed choice, sexually and commercially. By making this choice, Carrie positions herself as powerful within an intersection of the three discourses of gender differentiation, consumer exchange and life as a journey. She exploits her agency as a gendered being to select the more sexually attractive mate; she uses her agency as a consumer to select the mate with the higher exchange

value, and she takes advantage of the moment to transform a potentially disastrous loss into a life-reversing gain.

Conclusion

Is it possible to say whether one reading is 'better' or more justifiable than the other? Does the text lend itself to both modernist and post-modernist readings, in that such each type of reading seeks and usually finds evidence for its own stance? Certainly, from the evidence of this single scene, it is difficult to make generalisations about whether the series as a whole embraces 'second-wave' feminist understandings of identities, or whether these are better understood in terms of 'third-wave', post-feminist conceptualisations. What might be concluded with greater certainty is that a post-modernist understanding of how identities are constructed in today's world, makes far better sense. Arguably, the analysis has uncovered a form of 'identity trouble' (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2008: 2), that emerges from the contradiction between the text's desire for certainty, stability, continuity and closure, and the opportunity, possibility and at times requirement for it to reinvent identities to suit the emerging complexity of different scenes, and hence, social contexts. The 'trouble' at issue in *Sex and the City* as a fictionalised text is perhaps not to decide whether it represents 'new femininities' as lying on either side of, or between, or across the boundaries of feminine and feminist. It is whether this media text can accommodate the double sense that the characters must sustain reader engagement as conventional, definable selves, but yet reflect the fluid, fragmented and 'branded' sense of identities required by fast-paced, globalised lifestyles. From a post-modernist perspective, this is not simply a form of identity 'trouble', but much more positively, a form of identity *potential*. In other words, can characters be represented simultaneously as women but as multiply constructed and changing? From the evidence of this analysis at least, it seems that the answer is 'yes'. In short, a post-modernist rather than a modernist reading of *Sex and the City* (both in its TV and movie versions³) makes far better sense in that a post-modernist reading can *incorporate* a modernist reading as legitimate, as long as this is viewed as provisional and subject to overturning by other readings. More aptly, it can embrace the ambiguities and complexities of a text that interweaves both feminine and feminist worldviews.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Dr Allyson Jule for giving me the Nayak and Kehily (2008) article to read, which inspired the present paper. Since submitting this paper to *Women and Language*, I have co-written a second paper with Allyson on a related topic which was presented at IGALA5 in New Zealand.
- 2 This scene has an inter-textual allusion to the original movie *American in Paris* (1951), featuring a young, male painter, Jerry. There are a number of fascinating textual parallels with the *Sex and the City* scene, which it has not been possible to explore in this paper. For example, both rely on stock-comedy conventions such

as implausible events coinciding to reach closure and a happy ending.

- 3 The 2008 movie offers a more problematic storyline both challenging and confirming the resolution of the TV series. The 'happy ever after' ending of the TV programme is contested in the movie in various ways, for example, by exposing the potential 'fakeness' of the fairytale wedding and the need for the Carrie/Big marriage to be based on more 'authentic' feelings and values. However, the final low-key wedding merely confirms the modernist notion of 'life as a journey' where significant lessons must be learnt before closure can be accomplished.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books.
- Arthurs, J. (2004) *Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays*. Texas: University of Texas.
- Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*. trans A. Laver. London: Granada.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. S.F. Glaser. The University of Michigan Press.
- Baxter, J. (2003) *Positioning Gender in Discourse: A Feminist Methodology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bignell, J. (2002) *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*. Manchester University Press.
- Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. (1995) M. Bucholtz, A.C. Liang, & Sutton, L. (eds.) *Reinventing Identities: the Gendered Self in Discourse*. New York: OUP.
- Butler, J. (1990/2006) *Gender Trouble*. 3rdedn. London: Routledge.
- Caldas-Coulthard, C.R., and Iedema, R. (2008) (eds.) *Identity Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contested Identities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cameron, D. (2005) 'Identity crisis?' *Language and Communication* 25 (2): 107 – 125.
- Castaneda, H. (2008) 'Interwoven and competing gendered discourses in a pre-school EFL lesson.' In K. Harrington et al (eds.), *Gender and Language Research Methodologies*. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Cooper, R. (1989) Modernism, post-modernism and organisational analysis 3: The contribution of Jacques Derrida. *Organisation Studies*, 10 (4), pp. 479-502.
- Daly, M. (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: the Meta-ethics of Radical Feminism*. London: The Women's Press.
- Davies, B., and Harré, R. (1990) 'Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves.' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20 (1), 43–63.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949/1972) *The Second Sex*. London: Cape.
- de Francisco, V. (1991) 'The sounds of silence: how men silence women in marital relations. *Discourse & Society* 2 (4): 413–23.
- Eagleton, T. (1983) *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography*. 2ndedn. London: Routledge.
- HBC (2004) 'An American Girl in Paris'. *Sex and the City*. Season 6, Episode 20.
- Hermes, J. (2006) 'Ally McBeal, Sex and the City and the tragic success of feminism. In J. Hollows and R. Moseley (eds.) *Feminism in Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Irigary, L. (1985) *This Sex which is not One*. Trans C. Porter with C. Burke. Cornell University Press.
- Julé, A. (2004) *Gender, Participation and Silence in the Language Classroom: Shush-shushing the Girls*. Basingstoke UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kamada, L. (2008) 'Discursive embodied 'half' girls in Japan: a multi-perspective approach within FPDA. In K. Harrington et al (eds.), *Gender and Language Research Methodologies*. Palgrave: Macmillan. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- King, M. and Bushnell, C. (2008) *Sex and the City the Movie*. New Line Cinema.
- Machin, D., and van Leeuwen, T. (2008) 'Branding the self.' In Caldas-Coulthard, C.R., and Iedema, R. (eds.) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McRobbie, (2004) 'Reflections on Young Women and Consumer Culture.' Paper presented at HM Treasury, London, as part of the AHRC Cultures of Consumption programme.
- Millett, K. (1977) *Sexual Politics*. London: Doubleday.
- Mills, S. (2002) *Third Wave Feminism Linguistics and the Analysis of Sexism and Naming Practices*. Plenary lecture at IGALA 2, University of Lancaster, UK.
- Nayak, A. and Kehily, M.J., (2008) *Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peirce, C.S. (1958) *Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*. Ed. P. Weiner. New York: Dover Press.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, EA, and Jefferson, G. (1974) 'A simplest systematic for the organisation of turn-taking in conversation.' *Language* 50: 696–735.
- Saussure, F. De (1974) *Course in General Linguistics*. In C. Bally, A. Sechehaye and A. Riedlinger (eds.), Trans. W. Baskin. London: Fontana.
- Steinem, G. (1984) *Outrageous Acts and Everyday rebellion*. London: Fontana
- Sunderland, J. (2004) *Gendered Discourses*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Weedon, C. (1997) *Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory*. 2ndedn. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zeigler, S. (2004) 'Sex and the Citizen in *Sex and the City's* New York.' In K. Akass and J. McCabe (eds.) *Reading Sex and the City*. London: IB Tauris.

Appendix 1: American Girl in Paris 2

Context: In this scene, Carrie has just returned to the Parisian hotel where her fiancé, Alek is waiting for her. It has been a frustrating evening because she was asked by Alek to attend the grand opening of an exhibition of his 'light installations', but this happens to clash with a bookshop party arranged to celebrate the publication of her book. Carrie agrees to attend her fiancé's exhibition in order to demonstrate her love for him (he has previously given her a very expensive necklace). However, shortly after they arrive at the exhibition, Alek leaves her to her own devices in order to meet and greet clients. There is a camera shot of her sitting alone on a stone seat. Some time later, Carrie leaves the exhibition without being noticed, races across Paris to the bookshop party, only to find that the book launch has long finished.

- 1 **Alek:** Hey? where did you go? [He is sitting on the bed, just switching off his mobile phone having just taken a call]
- 3 **Carrie:** I went to my party
- 4 **Alek:** I thought as much (.) how was it?
- 5 **Carrie:** (2) over (.) it was over
- 6 **Alek:** I'm sorry
- 7 **Carrie:** (2) how could you just abandon me like that when I gave up my party to be with you
- 9 **Alek:** (2) I didn't abandon you
- 10 **Carrie:** I sat on a bench alone in a museum
- 11 **Alek:** Let's not do this now (.) I'm tired (.) I've had a stressful day
- 12 **Carrie:** I'm in this relationship too:: (.) I'm a person (.) in this relationship (.) have you any idea what it's been like for me here (.) eating alone and waiting for my boyfriend who would rather spend time with a light installation?
- 15 **Alek:** that's what I do (.) that's who I am (.) you always knew this
- 16 **Carrie:** (2) I had a life in New York (.) I had a job (.) and friends (.) and I didn't give all that up to come here and wander the streets of Paris alone
- 18 **Alek:** Okay (.) I'm taking a shower and (.) I'm going to bed as soon as you er
- 19 **Carrie:** (1) no not as soon as [he walks away and she tries to turn him around]
- 20 **Alek:** please::
- 21 [As he turns back to her he accidentally catches her face and breaks the diamond necklace he gave her as an engagement

present; it falls into her dress. Carrie looks shocked as if he has struck her.]

24 **Carrie:** uhhh (Carrie holds the side of her face)

25 **Alek:** it was an accident (1) I didn't mean to

26 **Carrie:** uhhh [tries to recover her broken necklace but is unable to]

27 **Alek:** I'm so sorry (.) I thought I was clear all along about who I am?

28 **Carrie:** (2) well (2) maybe it's time to be clear about who I am (2) I am someone (.) who is looking for love (.) real love (.) ridiculous (.) inconvenient (.) consuming (.) can't live without each other love (.) and I don't think (.) this love is here in (.) this expensive suite in (.) this lovely hotel in Paris (.) it's not your fault (1) it's my fault (1) I shouldn't have come here

33 **Alek:** Carrie

34 **Carrie:** please don't (.) I'm fine (.) thank you

[She leaves the room, then returns almost immediately to kiss him on the cheek before leaving again.]

Key:

The transcription system follows that developed by Gail Jefferson (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974).

- (.) micropause
- (1) length of pause measured in seconds
- emphasis
- ? rising intonation
- :: drawn out speech
- [] descriptions of body language and movements

Judith Baxter lectures at the University of Reading UK in Applied Linguistics. She specialises in the fields of feminist linguistics, poststructuralist theory and workplace discourse. She has just completed a book on the language of female leadership.

Copyright of *Women & Language* is the property of Organization for the Study of Communication, Language & Gender and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.