"When Life imitates Bart." Newsweek 23 July 1990.

**READING**

**WRITING**

**This Text: Reading**
1. What scholarly contexts does Parisi use in the article? How might these be useful for other phenomena?
2. Can you think of another phenomena that audiences have altered to make them reflect their interests?

**Your Text: Writing**
1. Find another T-shirt that's commonly worn and read it as a cultural text.
2. Go to a toystore and look at the toys related to TV shows or movies. What relationship between audience and show or movie does the related toy assume? In what ways does the toy reinterpret the show or movie?

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**Sex Sells: A Marxist Criticism of Sex and the City**

**Dave Rinehart**

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**Student Essay**

Dave Rinehart wrote this essay in 2006 while a student at the University of San Francisco. Rinehart’s essay stands as a good example of reading a television text through a lens—in this case, the lens of Marxism. Rinehart recently graduated from USF and is teaching English in Japan.

**Introduction**

Arthur Asa Berger, in his book Media Analysis Techniques, writes: “The bourgeoisie try to convince everyone that capitalism is natural and therefore eternal, but this idea, say the Marxists, is patentilly false, and it is the duty of Marxist analysts to demonstrate this” (51). It will be my duty over the course of this paper to expose and explicate the capitalist, consumerist,
and classist aspects of the TV show *Sex and the City* using Marxist criticism.

*Sex and the City* aired its final episode in spring 2004, concluding a massively successful six-season run on the HBO network. The series, created by Darren Star, is based on the sex advice columns of Candace Bushnell. The fictionalized TV version re-imagines Bushnell as Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), a young, single New York woman who narrates the show and serves as its primary focus. Each episode is based around her weekly column, with the topic typically regarding relationship dynamics between men and women. Over the course of an episode, Carrie will write on her laptop (with accompanying narrative voiceover), wine and dine with her group of closest friends Charlotte, Samantha, and Miranda, and carousel with her boyfriends, who come and go in and out of her life through various episode arcs. This essay will analyze, using Marxist techniques, Carrie's role as the "bourgeois hero," the show's capitalist and consumerist aspects, the ways in which its characters and viewers may engage in commodity fetishism, and the show's representation of classism.

**Carrie Bradshaw as the "Bourgeois Hero"**

Karl Marx wrote, "The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force" (78). Throughout history, the ruling class has been responsible for the production of the most popular culture industry texts. It makes sense, then, that the ruling class would utilize the media to glorify and promote themselves, producing texts that celebrate the bourgeoisie lifestyle. The main characters that populate these texts, then, often function as "bourgeois heroes," who "maintain the status quo by 'peddling' capitalist ideology in disguised form and by helping keep consumer lust at a high pitch" (60). (To clarify, Berger separates "bourgeois heroes" and "bourgeois heroines," but I have made the term gender-neutral.

As the show’s main character and narrator, Carrie functions as *Sex and the City’s* bourgeois hero. The series details her many travails through high society New York, mingling with wealthy socialites and dating powerful investment bankers and corporate executives—and then getting paid well to detail said interactions in her newspaper column. In a typical episode, Carrie will shop at upscale boutiques, dine in fancy restaurants, sip expensive wines, and/or receive dazzling gifts. While in the first two seasons she is seen wearing rather generic (though good-looking) clothing and flat-soled shoes, from season three on she seemingly only wears designer clothing and stilettos.

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**Commodity**

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The show's producers, however, do attempt to portray Carrie as down-to-earth: she chain-smokes cigarettes, gets hangovers, cries, and ends up in many embarrassing situations. These situations make her relatable to the show's majority female viewership, while simultaneously placing her on a pedestal of bourgeois taste and lifestyle. While many female viewers might see themselves in Carrie's various character nuances, they will also be envious of her abundance of expensive possessions. To use an example from the opposite gender: male comic book readers see a little or a lot of themselves in gawky teen Peter Parker, but dream of rising beyond their real-life state and taking to the skyscrapers as Spider-Man.

**Capitalism and Consumerism**

In pretty much any episode, it is difficult to find scenes where characters are interacting without simultaneously consuming. Carrie is nearly always smoking a cigarette while writing, she talks to her friends over meals at nice restaurants, and she goes to bars and clubs with her beaux. Even while walking and talking, the friends will also be sipping lattes or have the obnoxious neon ads of Times Square as a backdrop.

One could argue that these types of scene setup are merely a reflection of the kind of interactions people have on a daily basis. I would argue, however, like Berger did in his quotation that introduced this paper, that this is just an example of the bourgeoisie trying “to convince everyone that capitalism is natural and therefore eternal” (51). Sex and the City is a celebration of capitalism, as its characters drift in and out of various capitalist outposts, finding new and exciting ways to consume. It is amazing, then, how rarely we see them actually in the act of spending money, but this is, again, Berger's argument of natural capitalism. Drinks are poured, food served, and pedicures administered as if this was the way of the world.

This style of episode structure fosters in its audience a false consciousness, “in leading people to believe that ‘whatever is, is right’” (Berger 49). After being beaten over the head with images of the program's characters interacting and consuming, viewers may be led to believe that the one cannot happen without the other. In order to talk with friends about serious, thought-provoking matters, the characters must do it over drinks or dinner.

**Commodity Fetishism**

Operating at peak popularity with virtually no slowdown for the past several years, Sex and the City has, therefore, been a prominent trendsetter in the world of fashion. Many of the main characters' clothing, shoes, and various accessories have exploded in real-life as hot commodities among upper-class women. Specific examples include Carrie's "Carrie" necklace, which inspired women to get their own personalized necklace, and her distinctive Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo stilettos. The show has functioned as a go-to source for fashion tips among the viewers who can afford to, both financially and physically, wear the same items.

But the commodity fetishism Sex and the City inspires in its audience would be nothing if not practiced by its own characters. Indeed, characters will often spend an entire episode wanting a particular commodity, and the majority of their dialogue will even focus around it. As a grand example of irony, one of the last episodes in season six had Charlotte, the naive do-gooder of the group, indulging a salesman's shoe fetish in return for free high heels, so long as she let him fit her. She returns again and again, unwilling to let her personal shoe fetish go and simultaneously satisfying his, far more sexual one.

Regarding Samantha, the group's vivacious, it is important to bring in the concept of hegemony. The basest definition of the word is provided by Berger as "that which goes without saying," and in television it regards the different standards of conduct between the genders,
races, ages, etc. that are taken for granted. John Fiske, in his essay “British Cultural Studies,” writes: “women, so the hegemonic reading would go, are rewarded for their ability to use their beauty and talents to give pleasure to men” (303).

Sex and the City can easily be typified as antithetical to typical TV gender hegemony. While regular programming may portray men going through a series of female partners, Sex reverses this notion by portraying a group of independent, feethinking women who keep men at their mercy. But ultimately, the show’s progressive feminism is canceled out by commodity fetishism, a condition which makes the women vulnerable and willing to lower their typically high standards.

For example, Samantha uses sex as a way to satisfy her expensive tastes. Until the final season, she exclusively dates exceedingly wealthy men who pay for her every indulgence. In season two, she even leads on a mid-30s executive-type man, remaining in bed with him so long as he whispers fantasies of dream vacations in her ear. Although Carrie chastises her for this decision, Samantha remains on, dreaming of happiness based on material wealth.

**Classism**

Class is an issue that is addressed on both latent and manifest levels in Sex and the City. Latently, differences can be shown with the four main women interacting with a dichotomy of workers: newspaper or hot dog vendors are usually Hispanic males and beauty salon workers Asian females, while employees of the upscale restaurants and shops are usually white men and women. Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, and Miranda live life in a vacuum, staying on a narrow track that leads them from event to event with similar working, acting, and looking people.

Class differences are made manifest in episodes like one from season two where Miranda, a self-made millionaire, struggles with dating a blue-collar bartender, Steve, who in subsequent seasons becomes her husband and the father of her child. Unlike other TV programs, class is certainly not ignored or overlooked in Sex and the City but, as Berger states, it acts as an apologist “for the ruling class in an effort to avert class conflict and prevent changes in the political order” (51). Sex and the City portrays ethnic men and women doing the “dirty work” and white people enjoying the comforts of the bourgeois lifestyle as the natural, unbreakable order of the American class system.

**Marxist Criticism**

Marxist criticism seems to be the most heavily criticized of the five primary media analysis techniques. Berger has quibbles with Marxists in that they are “prisoners of the categories of their thought, and the questions they ask of a work of popular art carried by the media are often rather limited” (66). Similarly, Theodor Adorno writes: “[I]t is fundamentally rooted in the very being that must be changed and which it merely pretends to criticize” (Jay 116). Since the analysts are so firmly imbedded in the culture they are attempting to critique, their results cannot be trusted for objectivity and truth. I think that Mimi White says it best, however, in her essay “Ideological Analysis and Television.” She writes:

> [T]he classical Marxist approach is limited by its inability to account for the fact that . . .

most people watch television, most of the time, because they find it enjoyable. In this sense, classical Marxism does not provide sufficiently subtle critical and theoretical perspectives for dealing with the pleasures of contemporary culture, including watching TV. (166)

My Marxist criticism of Sex and the City is perhaps marred by my personal enjoyment of the show. It is difficult for me to abandon my appreciation of the show’s sharp writing and clever scenarios to systematically tear down its capitalist overtones. Like White says, my critiques fail to take in the aforementioned ways in which fellow viewers could also enjoy the show, even ignoring its consump
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ignoring its consumerist celebration and commodity fetishism. (For instance, fetishisms for expensive high heels and personalized necklaces are completely lost on me, a straight male viewer.)

Methods such as content analysis and semiotic analysis are more conducive to studying television. A content analysis of *Sex and the City* could count the frequency of scenes where characters are interacting and simultaneously consuming, and compare it to the amount of times they converse without the burden of consumerism. Semioticians could have a field day with the series, analyzing the signs and signifiers in its main title sequence, analyzing its characters’ evolution over the six seasons using a diachronic perspective, and even applying Byington’s dramatistic parse to the main characters and revolving door of supporting characters. These are merely methods of analysis, however. In my opinion, Marxist criticism is best suited as a method for breaking down the series’ most contemptible elements; those rooted in capitalism and consumerism.

**Works Cited**


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**Reading/Writing**

**This Text: Reading**

1. Rinehart does a nice job of using Marxism as a lens for reading *Sex and the City*. How does he explain how he will use the concepts of Marxism?
2. Does this essay make you see *Sex and the City* through a different light? Why or why not?
3. Although both authors like *Sex and the City*, it tends to be a show that appeals primarily to women. Do you think Rinehart’s opinion of the show is affected by his gender? Is there evidence in his essay that he reads the show from a male perspective?

**Your Text: Writing**

1. Using a major concept as a lens for reading a text is a classic approach to an essay. Write an essay in which you read a television program through a particular ideological lens, like Democracy, Christianity, Capitalism, or Feminism.
2. Write an essay in which you compare the major themes of *Sex and the City* with *The L-Word*. How are they similar? Different? Or, write an essay comparing *Sex and the City* with *Entourage* (what some have called men’s *Sex and the City*).

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**Student Essay**

Maribeth Theroux wrote this essay for Dr. Patricia Pender’s class at Pace University in 2007. For more information about the assignment, please see the “Third-Wave Feminism Suit” in Chapter B, “Reading and Writing about Gender.”

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**The NEXT Plague: MTV’s Sexual Objectification of Girls and Why It Must Be Stopped**

Maribeth Theroux