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Sex, confession and witness

JONATHAN BIGNELL

The TV sitcom *Sex and the City* derives from Candace Bushnell's confessional-style newspaper columns about sex, relationships and the dating game in Manhattan. First published in the *New York Observer* in 1994, these front-line accounts that bear witness to modern sexual etiquette and the trials and tribulations of contemporary courtship were collected together in the 1997 bestseller *Sex and the City*. It was in this print context that Bushnell's apparently autobiographical alter ego, the central character of the sitcom, Carrie, was developed. Bushnell initially wrote about the New York party-going elite for *Beat*, before writing freelance for *Self*, *Mademoiselle* and other magazines. So the written discourses that paved the way for *Sex and the City* were variants of fictionalised autobiography, newspaper feature columns and lifestyle magazine writing. This chapter argues that when *Sex and the City* was developed for TV, the discourses about gender and identity in the mixed modes of factual and fictional writing that preceded it left their mark on the TV sitcom's tone, style and mode of address. The issue here is not simply that the series inherited the forms and assumptions of a written discourse about femininity, sexuality and selfhood, but how this discourse crosses the boundaries of medium and genre. Further, this chapter will demonstrate the links between *Sex and the City*, the confessional discourse of women's magazines, and the factual and specifically televisual form of the talk show, which aims to bear witness to the tribulations of the (feminine) self through confession.

The mixing of discourses and modes of address in *Sex and the City* raises theoretical questions about identifying the specificity of genres and texts in contemporary TV, and how TV engages in a constant process of adapting itself to the changing needs and desires it imagines in its audiences.

Sitcom is relatively under-researched as compared to TV drama in general. This lack of sustained attention is the case not only in comparison to 'quality' genres such as the literary adaptation but also to popular genres such as police drama and some science fiction. As Brett Mills (2001: 61–62) has noted, the field of TV comedy is difficult to address because of its range and internal variation. The TV genres of sitcom, sketch shows, stand-up comedy and animation are supplemented by the appearance of comic elements in drama, chat shows and the various forms of light entertainment. Jim Cook's (1982) work on sitcom, and that of Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990) on film and TV comedy, share a British Cultural Studies focus on the ideological roles of the form, and similarly in the US, Darrell Hamamoto (1991) and David Marc (1989) attend to the hegemonic and unifying properties of comedy to constitute audiences as homogeneous addressees. While the politics of comedy have been a focus of academic interest, what makes comedy funny has proved elusive for theoretical approaches, and instead studies focus largely on issues such as the ideological significance of particular sitcoms, or typological and structural work on its generic forms. The mixed form of *Sex and the City* makes it difficult to place generically. It is a series with serial elements, and a comedy with strong dramatic and character components that differentiate it from the gag-based or sketch-like forms of other sitcoms (like *Cheers* or *Seinfeld*). Despite the recognition given to its four main actresses, *Sex and the City* does not feature performers with existing reputations from stand-up comedy (as *Seinfeld* and *Roseanne* do), and it does not foreground the film-star recognition that Kim Cattrall or Sarah Jessica Parker might elicit on the basis of previous film roles (whereas *Cybill* depends heavily on Cybill Shepherd's star persona, for example). This argues both for its uniqueness and for its relationships with a wide range of other TV forms.

As well as considering the textual form of *Sex and the City*, this chapter emphasises the institutional contexts of the programme in terms of its origins, and its place in American broadcasting cultures.

The assumption underlying this chapter is that understanding TV depends on the multi-focused study of texts, institutions, production cultures and reception contexts. Sitcom is a form particularly suited to the segmented flow of prime-time commercial TV, and offers a site for analysis that can lead outwards to consideration of TV as a medium. The formats of sitcoms are easily definable and stable, because they depend on elements that are themselves stable. These include the regular settings which require small numbers of sets, and the small group of central characters with established back-stories and personalities whose structure of relationships underlie much of the humour. Furthermore, the form of episodes divided into 'acts' can easily accommodate division into the 12 minutes or so of programming between commercial breaks on US TV. This stability enables the industrial production practices adopted by TV studios, in which a group of episodes can be shot together in front of a live audience, involving economies of staff and resources, and the employment of writing teams producing agreed numbers of scripts to order. *Sex and the City* adopts some of these practices, particularly in its internal segmentation within episodes and the continuity of format and characters. But its relatively high production values, lack of a live audience laughter track and relative frequency of filmed exterior inserts both lend it an aura of 'quality' in relation to other programmes in the genre, and connect it with other genres, in particular the drama series. I return later to generic boundaries in relation to *Sex and the City*, but begin with the issue of boundaries between TV and other media, and the relationships between this programme and the print medium of women's magazines.

The women's world

Sex and the City draws on concerns with the components of feminine identity that are found in the discourse of women's magazines, and such details from the production context of the programme as that Carrie's sometime boyfriend Mr Big is based on Ron Galotti, publisher of US *Vogue*, lend support to this connection. Feminist media critics writing about women's magazines have argued that *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire* and other glossies define the concerns of what Janice Winship (1987) calls a 'women's world'. This world is

composed of representations that present a set of interests, problems and desires that may sometimes be incoherent and contradictory but nevertheless construct an identity for the feminine for the women who 'buy into' it. The turn of phrase 'buy into' is appropriate here because of the links established by feminist critical discourse between the textual production in magazines and the consumption practices of their readership. Magazines are themselves commodities, whose costs are covered not simply by their purchase price but also by the advertisements in them. For Winship and others, magazines sell a representation of femininity that shapes women's social place as consumers. Ellen McCracken (1993: 3) argues, 'women's magazines exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalise social relations of power'. The pleasure of reading glossy women's magazines, like the pleasure of watching *Sex and the City*, is the medium through which these ideological meanings of femininity are passed on.

Magazines provide a location in which a sense of community among women can be established, and where certain pleasures are attributed to feminine identity. These pleasures include self-adornment (using cosmetics, adopting a personal style, being fashionable), self-improvement (how to have better sex, better hair, healthier food), and sharing a collective feminine identity. But as McCracken (1993: 136) also argues, 'within this discursive structure, to be beautiful, one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure'. Feminists have argued that the pleasures offered by women's magazines rest on the assumption that women's lives offer relatively few pleasures, and that the aspirations addressed in magazines demonstrate the need for political intervention at the level of feminist struggle rather than a temporary amelioration offered by the short-term enjoyment of reading magazines which perpetuate the terms of commodity consumption.

The three aspects of *Sex and the City* that it shares with women's-magazine discourse are the trope of confession, the centrality of sexuality as the key to the expression of identity, and commodity fetishism. Episodes always contain voiceover narration in which Carrie presents her self-doubt about her attractiveness, the state of her relationships with friends and lovers, her future, and the morality of her behaviour, for example. The role of the narration within

episodes as a meta-discourse aiming at a perpetually deferred attainment of a better self is extended at the higher syntagmatic level of the series as a whole. For the serial elements of *Sex and the City* also suggest the process of learning and self-improvement that is important to women's-magazine discourse. Within episodes, the series elements in which a new matter of concern is raised in each episode (often as the subject that Carrie is writing about for her column) are similar to the 'problems of the month' in women's magazines. But perhaps most significantly for a feminist critique of *Sex and the City*, the discourses of confession and self-doubt that occupy so much of Carrie's voiceover and the conversations among the group of her friends perpetuate the assumption that feminine identity is a perpetual struggle with dissatisfaction about oneself. As feminist critics have argued in relation to women's magazines, feminine identity is represented as centred on lack and potential disappointment.

The issue of the main characters' happiness in sexual relationships is a central motor of dialogue, action and the structural possibilities of shifting or returning to the initial situation of the series in which all four women are living single lives in different ways. The prospects of sexual pleasure, or worry over the unavailability of sex, are themes that consistently recur, and the assumption that identities of characters are expressed through their sexuality is fundamental to the four women's sense of themselves. The trailer for the very first episode, 'Sex and the City' (1:1), began with Carrie Bradshaw addressing the camera and asking 'Are women in New York giving up on love... throttling up on power and having sex like men?' Between these phrases, brief extracts from the opening episode show the four main characters rebuffing unwanted contact, considering sex without feelings, and in clinches with various partners. But tellingly, the final extract features Carrie riding in a limousine with the prospective partner introduced in the episode, who concludes: 'Oh I get it, you've never been in love'. Carrie's interested look back at his body and her question, 'Oh yeah?' leave the discourse of sexual empowerment open, but also introduce codes of romance in monogamous and settled partnerships. This discourse extends outside the series itself to some of the products associated with it. For example, Kim Cattrall (Samantha) and her husband Mark Levinson co-wrote the book *Satisfaction: The Art of the Female Orgasm*, whose public-relations effort has benefited from the

sexual frankness of the character that Cattrall plays. The stage show *The Vagina Monologues* has also provided occasions for the actresses in *Sex and the City*, including Cattrall, to build on their fictional personas and acquire theatrical cachet. The stage show disseminates a superficially radical sexual openness drawing on a model of female empowerment that has some similarities with the agenda of *Sex and the City*.

Although the programme deploys the discourses around femininity that feminist critics have deplored in women's magazines, it also adopts some of the reflexiveness and irony about them that has been described as 'post-feminist'. *Sex and the City's* commodity fetishism, for instance, is not presented without irony, and can be a topic for self-deprecating humour, especially for Carrie. But the awareness of a vaguely outlined Marxian discourse that might analyse capitalist consumer society is not offered as a critical tool so much as a component of the characters' self-questioning, anxiety and quest for self-definition. The examples of fetishised commodities in *Sex and the City* include designer shoes and clothes. The central characters' fascination with clothes, shoes, hair and personal style is a focus on relatively trivial aspects of women's lives, in contrast to questions of gender equality and the difficulty women face in employment and opportunity, according to the critical work I have cited on women's magazines. But rather than exploring this as a debate over the competing discourses of the programme as a text, I would like to begin to see it as a strategy to enable a multi-accentual address to the audience, and, connected with this, as a matter of generic negotiation with other TV forms.

Sex and the City began its fifth season on Sunday 21 July 2002. At this point, both Sarah Jessica Parker and Cynthia Nixon (Miranda) were pregnant, and Miranda began the season coping with her new baby. Jay Bobbin's (2002: 3) syndicated feature previewing the new season in the listings publication *TV Week* focused on the significance of motherhood in the season's storylines, the production difficulties caused by the actresses' pregnancies, and speculations over the audience's response to motherhood within the fictional world. As is common in non-academic writing and talk about TV, boundaries blur between actor and role. As a producer of the series, Sarah Jessica Parker had some control over the ways she was represented, and is quoted in Bobbin's article discussing the difficulties presented

to the costume department in concealing her own pregnancy. But perhaps the most significant part of Bobbin's article for my analysis is the awareness that the imagined community of single women linked by a bond of common concerns is the main plank of *Sex and the City's* format, and the basis of its link with its audience. Kim Cattrall reports that the unmarried status of the four characters and the continuing emphasis on a friendship group represent the maintenance of the format: 'At the first read-through, we all felt this was the right place to be at the start of this season, with the four women still single and the friendship as strong as ever' (Bobbin 2002: 3). The represented community of the main characters and the imagined community offered to the programme's audiences through their relationship with *Sex and the City* is parallel to the community of femininity created and maintained by the discourse of women's magazines. It is this bond with the audience and the opening up of different possibilities of interaction with it that I now consider, in relation to the TV factual genre of the talk show.

TV confessional and audience value

Sex and the City establishes a 'structure of feeling' in which the TV audience is invited to participate. It draws on modes of confession found in talk shows in which individuals perform their identity by means of confessional discourse, and by bearing witness to the tribulations of others. *Sex and the City* uses TV forms that are already significant in programmes like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in which the audience is invited to identify with 'problems' and share in discussion of how to improve the lot of participants and themselves. The sitcom transfers these worries about the self to an elite social group, and places them in comic fictional narrative. What marks out *Sex and the City* from this context is its focus on a social elite, rather than the lower-middle-class or working-class participants in the majority of TV confessional. The TV series features millionaires, wealthy men who date models, and the fine-art scene, and is peopled by characters who are rich, attractive and well connected. This similarity and difference between *Sex and the City* and the talk-show genre is part of the programme's play with TV forms, and its negotiation of positions for its audiences.

Confessional talk shows rose to prominence in the US from the early 1980s. As Jane Shattuc (1997) has discussed, they adopt the feminist position that the personal is political, and adapt this in ways appropriate to the institutional forms of popular TV. Private, personal and domestic issues are at once subjected to a relatively unsophisticated and politically conservative treatment as occasions for spectacle and voyeurism, yet are also discussed and debated in a public forum and addressed to an audience predominantly of women. Like the discourse of women's magazines, the confessional talk show has a persistent interest in personal issues with a public dimension, particularly associated with sexual politics. The genre depends on the dissemination of expertise and the offer of self-improvement. But the distinguishing characteristics of TV broadcasting differentiate the talk show from the written discourses I have mentioned above. Most significantly, the presence and participation of the audience (represented by a studio audience, or included through phone-ins or letters) functions differently on TV. The possibility of broadcasting itself constitutes a mass audience and depends on an assumption of contemporaneity and present-tense address to its viewer. These factors have resulted in a long period of ascendancy for the talk-show format. Interestingly, the debut of *Sex and the City* in the late 1990s coincided with the shift to prominence of confessional talk shows addressed to a more youthful audience. The focus on improvement and individualism was supplemented by a greater emphasis on interpersonal conflict, sexuality and emotion, and the staging of aggression. *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Ricki Lake* are notable internationally syndicated examples of this format, which has significant similarities to the confessional forms in *Sex and the City*.

In 'Sex and the City' (1:1), the narrative moves to a segment in which Carrie asks, 'Why are there so many great unmarried women, and no great unmarried men?' The following sequence is a series of close shots of men and women addressing the camera and explaining the women's problems in finding attractive, wealthy and sexually satisfying men, and men's indifference to these concerns. The men are identified by captions giving their names and occupations, and the designation 'Toxic Bachelor'. The women are identified by name and occupation, and the caption 'Unmarried Woman'. The form of the sequence is dissimilar to factual TV in the presence of music, and the use of people who will become established characters in the sitcom.

But the captions and *vox-pop* style uses the codes of documentary, while the designations in the captions are much like those in talk shows. It would be easy to imagine an episode of *Ricki Lake*, for example, titled 'Why are there no great unmarried men?' or even 'Toxic Bachelors'. This is an interesting mix of generic codes, but it led both to the attractiveness of *Sex and the City* as a new twist on sitcom, but also to a carrying across of the inflammatory aspects of contemporaneous developments in the talk show. The accusations of prurience, voyeuristic interest in sexual manners, and acceptance of 'bad' language that were directed by both the left and right wings against confessional talk shows in the 1990s are parallel to the negative reactions of both conservatives and liberals to *Sex and the City*.

The transfer of the confessional discourse from women's magazines and talk shows into *Sex and the City*'s privileged class and status group enables the programme to address a valuable audience sector. In the autumn of 2001, *Sex and the City* was awarded the Emmy for the year's outstanding comedy series, and this was the first time that the award had gone to a cable programme. The fact that *Sex and the City* was nominated for nine Emmys in 2001 is not simply a recognition that it is promoted and watched as 'quality' TV in the US broadcasting context and in international markets. It is also in recognition of the programme's success at attracting relatively affluent, young, mainly female audiences, and its consequent profitability for HBO. For broadcasters funded by advertising, a programme that attracts a large and relatively affluent audience group such as women between 18 and 35 is attractive because it offers a place where advertisements for aspirational products (branded clothes, cars or perfumes, for example), as well as products aimed at women in general, can be placed. So there is a connection between the commodification represented narratively in the programme and the commodity status of the programme itself. Carrie and her friends' concern that they are seen in public to best advantage when wearing Manolo Blahnik shoes or Gucci handbags provides a very supportive environment for the commercials that are screened between segments of the programme.

In the US (specifically in San Francisco in July 2002 at the start of the fifth season) *Sex and the City* was screened in prime-time on HBO from 9.00 to 9.30pm. HBO preceded *Sex and the City* with the hour-long comedy drama *Six Feet Under*, and followed it with the

sitcom *Arli\$\$.* Of the terrestrial networks, Fox competed in this slot with *Malcolm in the Middle*, CBS and ABC with cinema films, and NBC with the police drama *Law and Order*. HBO's scheduling of *Sex and the City* is similar to the strategy used in Britain by Channel 4 to screen first-run episodes in its evening strip of mainly imported American sitcoms on Fridays. In autumn 2002, when repeats of the fourth season were being screened by Channel 4 on Wednesdays, it followed a similar principle in scheduling *Sex and the City* at 10.35 pm preceded by *V Graham Norton* and followed by *The Osbournes*. The positioning of the programme among light entertainment and comedy programmes serves to address a young adult audience which represents a significant niche market.

The fact that HBO is owned by the media conglomerate Time Warner places it among a group of media properties in print publishing as well as TV. Time Warner publishes magazines, and although the publishing and TV businesses operate independently, *Sex and the City* is an example of synergy in which the interests of one part of the conglomerate benefit the interests of another of its companies. *Sex and the City* can be regarded as a commodity in which a gendered discourse of confession and witness becomes commodified itself as a means of addressing a particular class and gender group in the TV audience. Its creator Candace Bushnell has been quoted in magazine interviews as saying that she regards the programme as concerned less with gender than with the dynamics of wealth and power. In her view, *Sex and the City* is about relationships that have more to do with social position and status than with sex or gender. In one sense this is accurate, since for the production company and its parent company *Sex and the City* is primarily important as a vehicle to address a specific audience and thus to generate revenue and profit, whether that audience is male or female, and whether the representations in the programme are socially and politically progressive or not.

Comedy and critique

An analytical approach to this sitcom should also be concerned with the detail of how audiences might understand representations of gender and sexuality. From a point of view interested in the

representation of gender, *Sex and the City* can be argued to perpetuate discourses about women's narcissistic self-absorption, the focus on heterosexual sex as the barometer of personal and social success, and the normalisation of commodity fetishism. From the theoretical points of view that I have outlined so far, the emphases of *Sex and the City* episodes are on the 'wrong' things, and perpetuate the agendas set by the women's magazines that Winship, McCracken and others criticise. From this perspective, *Sex and the City* can be argued to render invisible the questions of economic status, work and social power for women. But I would like to complicate this evaluation of the series by considering its generic form as sitcom, and the theoretical approaches which can be taken to the issue of humour.

As in the sitcom *Ally McBeal*, which concerns a young woman lawyer and her difficult relationships with her colleagues and her attempts to define herself as a childless woman lacking a satisfying sexual relationship, the sitcom format enables *Sex and the City* to engage with questions of feminine identity, but also to dissipate them into physical comedy and verbal wit. Indeed, the sophisticated character comedy, witty phrases, moments of insight and minor revelations that Carrie's voiceover presents distance the viewer from the issues that are the subject of the narrative and instead focus attention on the TV form in which they are communicated. This focuses the audience's attention on the ability of Carrie and her friends to cope with emotional and social problems rather than their inability to analyse them or to change them. This reading emphasises the duality in which *Sex and the City* places significant emphasis on questions of gender identity and empowerment at the same time as it represents them in potentially regressive ways and collapses them through humour. Similar problems of dual and often contradictory interpretation have been evident in the TV histories of sitcom within which *Sex and the City* can be placed, and also address the play in the series with modes of audience engagement and interpretation that 'belong' in apparently dissimilar TV genres.

There is a heritage in TV sitcom of programmes featuring single women finding their way in the city. The most significant early example was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which signalled this in the opening title sequence of each episode with the eponymous central character standing in Times Square joyously throwing her hat into the air, signifying the possibilities of pleasure and independence

found in a mythical New York. For a British audience, there may also be memories of the 'Swinging London' film cycle in which London also functions as a cultural capital offering similar possibilities to women. The British sitcoms *The Liver Birds* and *Take Three Girls* also contained pairs or groups of young women making their way independently, with episodes concerning both working life and romance. More recent American sitcoms such as *Ellen* and *Cybill* have continued these questions of independence and femininity in different ways. *The Golden Girls* featured a group of female friends, though its focus on older women produced a different set of comedic possibilities. The ensemble structure of *Friends* features both men and women, and thus occupies different terrain from *Sex and the City*, though the feminisation of *Friends*' male characters (maintaining relationships, seeking romance, and persistently self-doubting) has some connection with the set of structural variations in *Sex and the City* that I have discussed above.

Sex and the City contains some elements of the workplace sitcom format, since its emphasis on Carrie's production of her column provides a structural motivation for episodes, and places the central character socially and economically. But since Carrie works from home, her friends are not her workmates and hierarchical relationships are relatively insignificant, so that the programme represents an interesting variation on this form. The whole city is Carrie's workplace, and her friendship networks and personal concerns merge with her occupation. The other central tradition in the sitcom form is the familial structure, in which getting along with an intimate family circle, or characters who are assimilated into familial roles, drive situations and character dynamics. Aspects of this appear in *Sex and the City*, since getting along and conflicts among the friendship group of the central characters involve rivalries, jealousy and competition. For the relatively youthful viewers of *Sex and the City*, it seems likely that the central characters are understood in comparison with their own friendship networks, and identification with the characters takes place on a 'horizontal' plane of substitution rather than in relation to a 'vertical' paradigm in which the identity of the character is given by relative position within a hierarchy. In this connection, it would also be possible to connect *Sex and the City* with dramas focusing on liberal explorations of sexuality (such as Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* or *Queer as Folk*), with teen

dramas (like *Charmed* or *Daria*) which deal with questions of independence, especially for female characters, and with soap operas' formation of couples and an increasing concern with younger characters (as in *Hollyoaks* or *Brookside*). *Sex and the City* needs to be understood as part of a historical development of sitcom that engages with feminine identity, sexuality, work and community, as well as in a syntagmatic field where sitcom draws on possibilities of representation and TV form that emerge elsewhere in TV and outside it. The politics of sitcom are not solely a matter of textual meaning but also of contextual, intertextual, transgeneric and cross-media meanings.

Television and generic negotiation

John Ellis (2000) has argued that one of the notable features of contemporary TV is its focus on witness. The presence in the TV schedules of various forms of reality programming, often in combination with generic elements drawn from drama and other light-entertainment forms testifies to the continuing demand for new generic combinations and new formats to provide novelty and engagement for the TV audience. But it also represents a cultural preoccupation with the increasingly blurred boundaries between authenticity and performance. New consumer video shooting and editing technologies and the ability to exchange images over digital communication networks have led to an increased familiarity among the audience with the production practices, technical codes and structural conventions of filmmaking. Recent years have been marked by debates about video surveillance, and the expectation, particularly among younger people, that they are subject to surveillance in many areas of public space. Blurring the boundaries between the pro-filmic event and the event performed for the purpose of recording is already a characteristic of TV factual genres that have been around for a long time, including the TV talk show. Reality TV has been blended with genres such as the game show, soap opera, documentary and factual light-entertainment programmes (home improvement, cookery and gardening, for example). This can be regarded as a perpetuation of a process that is endemic to TV's own internal worrying over its status either as an external witness or as a participant in reality. *Sex and the City* is not a reality TV programme. But it has

already become the subject for the generic blurring between drama, light entertainment and reality TV. For example, the US network Women's Entertainment (WE) has produced the Sunday night reality TV programme *Single in the City*, in which 11 women compare their dating experiences.

There was even an attempt by the production team to connect *Sex and the City* to the complex of genres and discourses associated with news and current affairs. 'Anchors Away' (5:1) was able to respond to the events of 11 September 2001, and Bobbin (2002: 3) quotes Sarah Jessica Parker describing the opening episode as 'one of those coincidental things where, as the city is trying to recover and find some balance, the same is true of Carrie'. The episode is set during Fleet Week, and Parker explains (Bobbin 2002: 3) that 'There are a lot of sailors and a real feeling of America without being too jingoistic'. Sitcom in the US is organised industrially and institutionally around the figures of the central performer and the writer-producer, in distinction to the British tradition, where the writer has been the creative focus. This institutional context provides an enabling environment in which Parker as both the star of the programme and an important figure in the production team can argue for and represent the responsibility of the programme to address an assumed concern among the audience and the nation as a whole. Rather than assuming each episode to be the work of a single individual that is realised by the TV institution, the collective enterprise of star, producers and writers assimilate for themselves the collective reaction to the 'war on terrorism' attributed to their audience. *Sex and the City's* premise is to document and witness the state of metropolitan sexual manners, and it can even bear witness to its imagined audience's reaction to contemporary events.

The unifying discourse that Parker asserts *Sex and the City* can represent is enabled by the disunification of the component generic elements of the programme. The series blurs the boundaries between sitcom, talk show and (occasionally) current-affairs genres in TV, and between TV, magazines and the pro-filmic realities to which drama necessarily gestures and with which it attempts to correspond. What is at stake here is the relationship between TV as a technology of record that can bear witness to an authentic truth that precedes it, and TV as an epistemologically and ontologically separate arena from that which is true. This is an issue that is normally discussed in

relation to factual TV genres, especially documentary. But the general question of boundaries and separation is central to the arguments about the programme that I have proposed. The question of how to evaluate *Sex and the City* depends first on identifying what it is. I have attempted to show in this chapter that this initial identification, in relation to media other than TV and in relation to genres and forms within TV culture, is significantly problematic. The problem is partly a matter of *Sex and the City's* origins in written text produced for journalistic publication, partly a matter of its assimilation of elements of various fictional and factual TV forms, partly a matter of its audience address, partly a matter of its institutional position in the output of the HBO cable network, and partly a matter of the blurring of boundaries between intratextual and extratextual elements such as its performers and related products. But in considering some of these I have aimed not to privilege any one of them. In posing a question of reference both as a medium and in the generic boundaries between the productions that the medium disseminates, TV bears witness to, and worries over, central ontological and epistemological questions of representation.

The generic mixing that occurs in *Sex and the City* is not especially radical in comparison to other sitcom examples (like *The Office*, for instance), but it does demonstrate the pervasiveness of this issue across TV in a striking way because sitcom is normally considered to be a very stable genre. There are three fundamental points that I would draw attention to, finally, as the causes of this generic negotiation in TV. First, the TV institution requires novelty in the elaboration and extension of existing genres and formats, and this is connected with the medium's historic focus on the present, contemporaneity, and the offer to the audience of new pleasures that can be understood in terms of previous ones. This leads to the trying-out of forms and modes of address in one genre or form that are adopted from apparently different genres and forms. Second, the fact that each programme is surrounded by programmes in different genres before and after the time of broadcast, and by competing programmes on other channels at the same time, requires both similarity and difference from these alternatives. The process of adaptation and adoption of borrowed formats, forms and modes of address is part of a continual negotiation of identity for programmes, and leads to generic instability. Third, programme-makers and TV

institutions continually imagine audience needs and desires, and represent these to themselves. If particular programmes seem to catch an audience constituency that shows up in the programme's ratings, or generates public talk as evidenced by press coverage, items on radio phone-ins, or on other TV programmes like talk shows, they quickly acquire generic centrality, economic value and public visibility. TV genre is negotiated between texts, institutions and audiences in a radically flexible way that both suggests TV specificity and also its imbrication with other media and with the culture of the present in general.