

'Trying out', 'Trying on': Identity, Queerness and Consumerism in *Sex and the City*

Gloria Metz

***Sex and the City's* "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl"**

"Was Sean's generation on to something? Was sexual flipping the wave of the future? If it was, could I play that game or was I over the hill? If women can transform into men, and men into women and we can sleep with everyone, then maybe gender doesn't exist anymore. If we can take the best of the other sex and make it our own, has the opposite sex become obsolete?" (Carrie in "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl")

Sex and the City is not only one of the most successful TV series but it is also a very complex and multilayered text which can be read in many different ways.¹ This essay will look at the representation and interconnectedness of identity, queerness and consumerism in the series, particularly in the

¹ Tukachinsky, Riva H.: Feminist and Postfeminist Readings of Romantic Narratives, in: *Feminist Media Studies* 8.2 (2008): S. 181-196, hier S. 183.

episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl”. This episode is a good example of how queerness is represented in *Sex and the City*, as it shows a variety of queer aspects experienced by the heterosexual main characters. First of all, the title of the episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” is already very telling and could be read in two ways. On the one hand, when the title is repeated often enough, the two words blur into another and thus underline the central statement of the episode, namely that gender is an illusion.² On the other hand, the title of this episode stresses the two gender categories and their binaries by making the repeated distinction between *boy* and *girl*. Queer theory in connection with popular culture is a popular research field in contemporary cultural studies. Queering popular culture, such as *Sex and the City*, means to analyze how popular culture influences and also constructs the audience’s perception of sexuality and how “meaning and identity are (inter)textually (re)produced”.³

I will argue that queerness and sexual experimentation are represented as consumer products and lifestyle trends instead of a quest for one’s own sexual identity. By analyzing selected scenes in regard to how queerness is represented, this paper will explore which possibilities for reception *Sex and the City* offers its audience. I argue that although the episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” motivates the audience at the beginning of the episode to question heterosexual norms, stereotypes and gender binaries and to rethink queerness and their own perception of it, hetero-normativity is re-established at the end of the episode.

The Representation of Queerness in *Sex and the City*

According to Gerhard, the series *Sex and the City* “has taken advantage of the narrative possibilities afforded by queerness.”⁴ She argues that post-feminism and queerness are trends in recent popular culture and that the

² Lukas, Christan, Sascha Westphal: *Die Stadt, der Sex und die Frauen*. München 2002, hier S. 319.

³ Sullivan, Nikki: *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York 2003, hier S. 190.

⁴ Gerhard, Jane: *Sex and the City*, in: *Feminist Media Studies* 5.1 (2005), S. 37-49, hier S. 37.

combination of both in *Sex and the City* makes the series so popular.⁵ Judith Halberstam argues that there is an up- as well as a downside concerning the presentation of queerness in mass media. On the one hand, recognizing and acknowledging queerness bears the possibility to alter the dominant culture but on the other hand, the presentation of queerness serves mostly the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience and therefore achieves nothing.⁶ This is definitely true for *Sex and the City* because on the one hand, the show is praised for making female sexuality as well as queerness visible but on the other hand, the series is so extremely popular because it caters to the voyeuristic pleasures of the audience.⁷

Important for my thesis is the argument by Akass and McCabe that only from the outside *Sex and the City* seems to celebrate women and queer life but that at a closer look *Sex and the City* turns out to be misogynistic and homophobic.⁸

Drag Kings – Gender as an Illusion

Gender as an illusion can be regarded as the theme of this episode. The episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” starts with Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Stanford, Carrie’s gay best friend, visiting the newest exhibition named “Drag Kings – The Collision of Illusion and Reality,” an exhibition of photographs of drag kings, in Charlotte’s gallery.

The photographs cause a discussion about the visibility of gender, their own gender identity and gender relations in their own daily life. After Samantha says that “being a drag king would be fun,” Miranda states, “I have enough trouble figuring out how to be a woman in a men’s world without trying to be a woman pretending to be a man in a men’s world”. This scene illustrates

⁵ Ebd.

⁶ Halberstam, Judith: *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York, London 2005, hier S. 156f.

⁷ Bernal, Dolores: *Sex and the City* and Lesbian Visibility.

<http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/TV/sexandthecity.html> (11.04.2010).

⁸ Akass, Kim, Janet McCabe, eds.: *Reading 'Sex and the City'*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris 2004, hier S. 40.

the confusion of gender and gender identities, which will be the topic of the whole episode. The discussion is depicted in a funny way, so that the audience is able to laugh about what is said but it also highlights problems in society concerning gender. Someone who regularly watches *Sex and the City* knows that Miranda is a successful lawyer, who had to compete with men in the past and who would most likely describe herself as a feminist.⁹ Since the audience sympathizes with the four female protagonists as well as with Stanford, the viewer is inclined to agree with what is said and to share their opinion.

The photographs shown in the episode are taken from *The Drag King Book* by the gender variant visual artist Del LaGrace Volcano, who published the book together with Judith Halberstam. Halberstam argues that everyone has at least some gender-strange characteristics and that all gender identity is performative.¹⁰ Judith Halberstam argues that “[d]rag’ and ‘performance’ have recently become key words within contemporary gender theory, and they are generally used to describe the theatricality – illusion – of *all* gender identity.”¹¹

These opening scenes of the episode, which are set in Charlotte’s gallery, help to prepare the audience for the oncoming story. Later in the episode, Charlotte is asked by the photographer Baird to pose for him as a drag king but she refuses first:

“Charlotte: I’m not...

Baird: A model?

Charlotte: No, butch.

Baird: You’d be surprised. Every woman has a male inside. Even you.

Charlotte: No, not me. I’m really bad at math and I can’t change a tire to save my life.

⁹ Wignall, Alice: „Can a Feminist Really Love *Sex and the City*?” *The Guardian*. guardian.co.uk, 16 April 2008. 17 December 2009.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/apr/16/women.film/print>>.

¹⁰ Halberstam, Judith: *Female Masculinity*. 1998. Durham, London: Duke UP 2000, hier S. 153 und S. 236.

¹¹ Ebd., S. 236.

Baird: Pose for me. I'll get it out of you. Be a man."

Charlotte uses the term *butch* in order to distance herself from drag kings and lesbians, who are stereotypically associated with drag kings or being butch. Interestingly, *model* and *butch* are represented as two opposed elements, seemingly indicating that one excludes the other.

The characteristics that Charlotte associates with being male, such as being good at math, seem very stereotypical, which underlines her representation as the naive, feminine, good girl. Baird on the other hand is represented as very male, as he is demanding and persuasive. By changing her outer appearance, Charlotte is then transformed from a feminine woman to a man and after Baird puts a second pair of socks into her pants, Charlotte changes and becomes more self-confident and offensive. Now, she "wasn't just a chick with a dick, she was a chick with balls," who takes the sexual initiative and kisses Baird. This scene has an underlying homosexual connotation because Charlotte is still dressed as a man. Thus, Baird seemingly kisses a man, which stresses again the confusion of gender. All scenes with Charlotte and Baird have a strong sexual undercurrent, representing cross-dressing as sexually exciting.

It is interesting that Charlotte, who is represented as the most feminine character in the series and therefore far away from the butch-image, experiences her masculine side through cross-dressing. This emphasizes that even very feminine women have a hidden masculine side and that clothes influence one's behavior and self-perception but even more important, this scene represents the male sexual organs, symbolized by the socks, as the key to male power.

Bisexuality as a 'Must-try'

Another queer element in this episode is bisexuality. Carrie dates a young man, Sean, who is in his twenties. When he tells her that he once had a relationship with a man, Carrie is confused and does not know how to handle the situation. She tells her friends about his bisexuality and stresses, "the weird thing is, he was so open." The four friends then have a discussion about bisexuality.

In their view, bisexuality is a phase of sexual experimentation one goes through in one's twenties, like Miranda, who "did the date-a-bisexual-guy

thing in college.” According to Samantha, “all the kids are going bi,” this shows that bisexuality is interpreted as a kind of trend and therefore not taken seriously. The show also hints at the pressure within peer groups as well as through trends and questions it at the same time, “if they all jump off a bridge, you will too?”

In contrast to the other three women, Samantha, as the sexually aggressive woman, is very open about bisexuality as well as about sexuality in general. She thinks that bisexuality is “hot” and argues that it shows that “he is open to all sexual experiences.” Thus, bisexuality is represented as something exotic and therefore sexually desirable. As a self-proclaimed “trysexual”, Samantha tries anything at least once and argues that Carrie should “forget the label.”

Charlotte on the other hand, who represents the conservative woman, is “not even sure bisexuality exists” because in her view it is “just a layover on the way to Gaytown.” During their conversation, bisexuality is also described as “greedy” because it would be “double-dipping.” These utterances have a very negative connotation and indicate, more than the other utterances, a negative perception of bisexuality. The problem in general seems to be that someone who is bisexual cannot be put into one category. Although this does not matter to Samantha, it is a matter for the other girls, especially Charlotte: “I’m very into labels. Gay. Straight. Pick a side and stay there.”

Just as the four girls represent four, more or less, different types of women, they pick up on different views on bisexuality. Thus, every viewer will be able to identify and to agree with one of the different views. Although bisexuality is not ultimately judged in this discussion, it is already indicated that it is not taken seriously. The discussion is a witty argument, peppered with jokes but also stereotypes.

Later in the episode, Carrie and Sean go to a party of his ex-boyfriend Marc. Carrie describes the party as “confused sexuality land” because his friends are a mixture of heterosexuals, homosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals, who seem to change their sexual orientation as often as their relationships. By using the term *confused*, which has a negative connotation in this context, Carrie backs Charlotte’s view of sexual orientation, namely that one should “pick a side and stay there.” Carrie does not know how to deal with the situation, this actually shows that she herself is confused and not the others

and their sexuality. But since the viewer experiences the party situation from Carrie's point of view, Carrie's heterosexuality and her perception of relationships are presented as the norm and everything else as abnormal.

Furthermore, the party is situated at the fifth floor of a run-down-looking building; this might function to marginalize the existence of bisexuality as a form of subculture and to present it in a rather shabby light and in sharp contrast to Carrie's heterosexual and wealthy lifestyle. The secluded party location also serves to illustrate bisexuality as something unknown and distant.

The depiction of bisexuality in the episode "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" seems to be influenced by the three myths of bisexuality. Rebecca Brasfield refers to Joy Morgenstern, when she outlines in her essay the myths of bisexuality.¹² One myth is, according to her, that bisexuals are "sexually promiscuous nymphomaniacs."¹³ A second myth is that bisexuality is "a transitional phase that will end in homosexuality or heterosexuality."¹⁴ A third myth, which is also illustrated in this episode, is that "bisexuals are indecisive neurotics who will never be sexually satisfied."¹⁵ According to Brasfield, this indecisive myth is represented in the game of spin the bottle because one has to kiss to whomever the bottle points.¹⁶ Carrie thinks that the game is childish, which underlines again the myth of bisexuality as a transitional phase. She also feels too old and too superior to play this game but nonetheless she wants to prove to the others and to herself that she is not an "old fart" and kisses Dawn, played by the famous singer Alanis Morissette¹⁷, when the bottle points to her.

¹² Brasfield, Rebecca: "Rereading *Sex and the City*: Exposing the Hegemonic Feminist Narrative." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Vol. 34, No. 3 (Fall 2006):130-138, hier S. 136.

¹³ Ebd.

¹⁴ Ebd.

¹⁵ Ebd.

¹⁶ Ebd.

¹⁷ It seems that Alanis Morissette was deliberately casted for the role of Dawn, because she herself is bisexual as well (Lenzhofer).

One can say that bisexuals in “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” are represented as the ‘others’ and are marginalized, so that the heterosexual hegemony is protected and re-inscribed. Heterosexuality is taken as the norm to which queerness is compared. Queerness is depicted as weird, especially through the confusing situation of relationships which is depicted as unusual, although Carrie and her friends have many changing sexual partners as well.

Experiences of Queerness in Daily Life

The episode also addresses the topic of queerness, the confusion of gender and gender stereotypes as well as gender-strangeness in daily life, by focusing on the character of Miranda. Miranda is not depicted as a very feminine character in the series. She has short hair and often wears pantsuits but the audience likes her because she is so different, independent, tough and sarcastic. In this episode, Miranda tries to find her feminine side after being accused of being too masculine. This forms a contrast to Charlotte, who experiences her male side in this episode. Judith Halberstam challenges in her book *Female Masculinity* the idea of “gender normativity” and argues that everyone has at least some characteristics which could be described as gender strange, without judging these attributes.¹⁸

Miranda’s boyfriend Steve wants to move into her apartment. When Miranda tells Steve that she does not want him to move in, he exclaims “Jesus, Miranda. It’s like you’re the guy sometimes,” stressing that Miranda violates the hegemonic masculinity. According to Akass and McCabe, the reposition or violation of hegemonic masculinity is a recurrent event in *Sex and the City*.¹⁹ Akass and McCabe argue that *Sex and the City* represents independent, sexually liberated women, who do not want to adopt traditional models of femininity anymore.²⁰ Nonetheless, although they want to keep their independence, they (Samantha excepted) yearn for a solid relationship. In

¹⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, S. 153.

¹⁹ Akass, McCabe, *Reading*, S. 7.

²⁰ Ebd., S. 18.

this episode, this is especially illustrated by Miranda, who wants to stay together with Steve but is afraid of moving together with him because he will then see all her flaws.

When Steve first accuses her of being the guy sometimes, Miranda feels very hurt. To be like a man is depicted as an insult and Miranda takes it as a critique of her personality. She then tries to find her female side by an *inner goddess-fitness training*, which is supposed to be the latest fitness trend in New York. The training is depicted in a very comical way, indicating that one cannot find one's female side by bumping hips and swinging shawls. It is a humiliation for Miranda, who seems to be unable to bump her hips and to move to the music. After the training, Miranda tells Carrie about her worries that her behavior is queer and unusual for a woman: "I'm never gonna be a girly girl. I never will. [...] A girly girl would want her boyfriend to move in." Miranda and Carrie joke about stereotypical female attitudes, for instance wearing make-up to the gym. Thus, girly girls are dismissed and women who are themselves are presented in a positive light.

Throughout the episode, Miranda is presented in a very positive and likeable way. It does not matter that she lacks certain female attributes. She is liked because she does not represent the girly girl. But nonetheless, the audience is happy to see at the end that Miranda makes up with Steve and is finally able to cry on his shoulder. Miranda as well as the viewer are happy to find out that she does have a girly girl inside of her. It illustrates that one can have both – a rather male and a female side. Steve, who is often represented as a rather needy and soft character, is now able to be the male protector. The example of Miranda and Steve shows that everyone has dual powers and that this is good. Furthermore this example shows that normativity as well as hegemonic masculinity can be challenged but nonetheless it is represented as desirable that normativity and male hegemony are re-established again in the end.

Sexual Experimentation and Consumerism

Consumerism plays an important role in *Sex and the City*. The show represents a nearly utopian consumer behavior and a way of life which could not be afforded by the average person. But does consumerism also influence sexual behavior? Akass and McCabe would confirm this and argue that the heroines are conceptualized as "citified consumers" with not only

fashion but rather men as the objects of their compulsive consumption.²¹ This is illustrated by the many changing sexual partners and relationships throughout the series. Arthurs agrees with Akass and McCabe and argues that sex, as it is represented in *Sex and the City*, “becomes like shopping – a marker of identity, a source of pleasure – knowing how to choose the right goods is crucial.”²² Arthurs argues that *Sex and the City* encourages women’s sexual pleasure and agency as part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude.”²³

In his book *Reading Sexualities*, Donald E. Hall refers to the many commentators who “have pointed out that we live in a consumer culture today that runs on narratives of newness and difference, on an engine of constant experimentation and the ‘trying on’ of different identities as fashion items” but he also stresses that one actually does not and cannot change one’s sexuality as easily as one can alter the outer experience.²⁴ So on the one hand, sexuality seems to be influenced by a behavior of consumerism as well as the media, which depicts a certain kind of sexuality, but on the other hand, one cannot change one’s sexual identity completely.

Trying out and Trying on – Sexuality, Fashion and Youth Craze

The episode “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” starts with Carrie’s voice from the off: “It’s been said that the New Yorkers are the most jaded people in the world. The fact is we’ve done and seen it all”. New York, as a global and fast changing city, represents consumerism and unlimited possibilities. By saying that New Yorkers have “done it and seen it all”, it is also implied that New Yorkers are supposed to be very open about sex, just as the four protagonists. But since the episode gives the impression that New Yorkers are shocked or at least impressed by the photographs of drag kings, it is also implied that queer-

²¹ Akass, McCabe, Reading, S. 39.

²² Arthurs, Jane: “*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama.” *Feminist Media Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (2003): 83-98, hier S. 94.

²³ Ebd., S. 85.

²⁴ Hall, Donald E.: *Reading Sexualities: Hermeneutic Theory and the Future of Queer Studies*. Milton Park, New York: Routledge 2006, hier S. 8.

ness, such as drag, is not considered as 'normal' by New Yorkers but as *different*, just as Carrie later experiences bisexuality as *different*.

In *Sex and the City*, fashion, New York City and consumerism are all tied together. Costumes as well as sex play an important role in the series. According to Akass and McCabe, "the *Sex and the City* women plunder identities from a range of possible options – associated with race, sexual preference and sexuality, to reveal modern citizenship as a lifestyle choice complete with matching shoes and handbags."²⁵ The question is whether the show implies that one can try out and try on different sexualities just like clothes. Hall argues that one cannot change one's sexuality just as clothes but it seems that the women in *Sex and the City* at least try to do it. Furthermore it is questionable, whether one can really construct one's identity through fashion or whether one can only artificially and temporarily renew oneself.

"Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" also raises the question whether a specific sexual behavior can be 'in fashion' for a certain generation: "Was sexual flipping the wave of the future? If it was, could I play that game or was I over the hill?" The episode gives the viewer the impression that bisexuality really is just a fashion trend set by the younger generation, a trend which comes and goes but which has been long ago dismissed by the generation who is over thirty.

One could argue that Carrie gives it a chance and 'tries bisexuality on' when she dates Sean and kisses Dawn at the party. By kissing Dawn at spin the bottle, Carrie proved to herself that she could kiss a woman and that she is not an "old fart". It makes her proud but it had nothing to do with sexual experimentation in order to find one's own sexual identity. Carrie's wish to prove that she is not an "old fart" rather is influenced by the youth craze which is tied to the consumer culture. Nonetheless, at the end of the episode Carrie decides for herself that she is too old and leaves the party, "They could do what they wanted, but I was too old to play this game. So I took my hot, old fart-ass home. That's just me." She dismisses queerness and the

²⁵ Akass, McCabe, Reading, S.10.

viewer gets the impression that she feels superior to the younger generation. Her age is given as a reason for her ignorance in regard to alternative forms of relationships and sexual orientation which deviate from her heterosexuality. However, being open towards other sexual orientations has more to do with personal disposition than age. Carrie uses the word “game” which refers not only to the game ‘spin the bottle’ but also to the “sexual flipping,” giving the viewer the impression that being bisexual is a “game” and not a sexual tendency.

The episode gives the impression that there are no sexual binaries for young people because they have not found their true sexual identity yet. To experiment at a younger age is represented as a way to find one’s sexual identity. It seems that binaries become stronger with growing age. Carrie’s own position in regard to bisexuality gives the viewer a certain point of view. Carrie is on the one hand liberal towards bisexuality and accepts it but on the other hand, she distances herself from it. She distinguishes between ‘them’ and herself, meaning that they can do whatever they want as long as her life is not affected by it.

According to Susan Willis, the fitness industry is another realm of fashion consumption.²⁶ In this episode, Miranda is influenced by the newest fitness trend in New York – the *inner goddess-fitness training*. The show makes fun of the fitness training by representing Miranda in a comical way and Carrie as extremely bored. This indicates that this is not the right way to work on one’s female sexuality but it also seems to be a critique on (fitness-) trends in general. The audience sympathizes with Miranda and feels her humiliation. At first, it seems that Miranda has to accept that she is not as girly as other girls but at the end of the episode, when she cries on Steve’s shoulder, she finds her hidden feminine side. This gives the impression that all women, even the tough ones, have a vulnerable side. Thus, vulnerability is equated with femininity and gender stereotypes are re-established again.

²⁶ Miles, Steven: *Consumerism as a Way of Life*. London: SAGE Publications 1998, hier S. 102.

Another question which could be raised is whether and in how far clothing changes one's sexual behavior. Charlotte feels more self-confident and discovers her masculine side when she is dressed up as a drag-king. This shows that there is a connection between how one dresses and one's sexuality. The episode "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" gives the audience the impression that one has to try out and try on fashion as well as sexual practices and orientations in order to find out what one really wants. But after a phase of trying out, the four protagonists always decide that they are heterosexual. Thus, *Sex and the City* only challenges heterosexuality in order to re-establish it again as the norm.

Sexual Experimentation and the Search for Identity

In general, it is thought that sexual experimentation is important to find one's sexual identity. The episode "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" makes the audience believe that bisexuality is a kind of sexual experimentation which is a phase young people experience. Sexuality plays an important role for the four protagonists throughout the series and it is also a central element which expresses the identity of the characters in the series.²⁷ Nonetheless, queer experiences, as in this episode, are rather seldom and are only used to reconfirm the resolute heterosexuality of the protagonists.²⁸ According to Dolores Bernal, only eight episodes out of a total of 95 *Sex and the City* episodes feature female homoerotic behavior.²⁹

Hall explains sexual identity as a "narrative we tell ourselves and we tell about ourselves" and he argues that "'I am a...'" follows from a set of decisions and impositions that reduces the uncapturable complexity of our sensual and emotional responses to a convenient story and history."³⁰ The beginning of the episode "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" as well as the title itself seem to argue that these impositions cannot be made and that there are no clear

²⁷ Akass, McCabe, Reading, S. 164.

²⁸ Arthurs, *Sex and the City*, S. 92.

²⁹ Bernal, AfterEllen.com

³⁰ Hall, *Reading Sexualities*, S.1.

options to choose from. Just as Carrie, Miranda and Charlotte have to rethink their own perception of sexual identity, is the audience animated to rethink their perception of sexual identity. At the beginning of the episode, it is argued that gender is an illusion and later in the episode, the audience is confronted with alternative forms of heterosexual relationships. Through the communication which takes place in the show, the viewer is confronted with different points of view. But at the end of the episode, when Carrie leaves "confused sexuality land," Miranda cries on Steve's shoulder and realizes that she really is a woman and Charlotte is embarrassed of her forward behavior as a drag king, the heterosexual narrative is chosen again.

Cramer emphasizes in her study the "care of self" as a central means of representation in the *Sex and the City*.³¹ She argues that putting one's needs first is presented as the primary moral value in the series.³² This is also the case in the analyzed episode and especially illustrated by the last sentences of it: "So I took my hot, old fart-ass home. That's just me." This stress that being oneself is considered to be most important. Although the last sentence is spoken by Carrie, Miranda and Charlotte also put their needs first in the end and make their own decisions about what they think is best for them.

The Influence of *Sex and the City* and its Representation of Queerness on its Audience

In order to look at the audience's reception of "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl", one has to look at the audience first. The target audience of *Sex and the City* is women between the ages of 18 and 34 but of course also men and in general people outside this target group watch the series.³³ One has to keep in mind that the audience is not a homogenous group but, according to Doty,

³¹ Cramer, Janet M.: "Discourses of Sexual Morality in *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk*." *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 40, No. 3 (2007): 409-432, hier S. 417.

³² Ebd., S. 414.

³³ Stern, Danielle. "Role Model and the City?: Viewers Respond to 'Sex and the City'" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Sheraton New York, New York City, NY, Online <PDF>*. 2010-06-09 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p11714_index.html, hier S.8.

“fragmented” and “contradictory.”³⁴ For analyzing the audience’s perception, it is also important to look at the narration and kind of gaze which is constructed in *Sex and the City*. The series is ultimately a heterosexual narrative, which constructs and sustains a heterosexual, female gaze because the audience takes over the subject position of the four protagonists for looking and identifying.

Halberstam’s argument that “[e]ntertainment is the name we give to the fantasies of difference that erupt on the screen only to give way to the reproduction of sameness” can be confirmed by *Sex and the City* and especially by the reviewed episode, because heterosexuality is first challenged and queerness experienced but in the end, heterosexual normativity is re-established and thus sameness is reproduced.³⁵ She explains that on the one hand, the audience wants to believe in alternatives to their existing lives but on the other hand, they “want to believe that the choices they have made and the realities within which they function offer the best possible options.”³⁶

Finally, one can say that in the first part of the episode, through the drag king exhibition and Charlotte’s appearance as a drag king, Miranda’s trouble with Steve and her being too much the man in the house as well as Carrie’s experiences with the bisexual Sean, the female viewer is challenged, just as the protagonists, to rethink gender constructs, categories and stereotypes. But at the end of the episode, when Miranda cries on Steve’s shoulder and states “I guess I really am a woman,” when Charlotte is too embarrassed about her sexual aggressive behavior to see Baird again and when Carrie flees from the party after being kissed by a woman and splits up from Sean, the heterosexual and binary norms are re-established again.

The conclusion this episode gives its audience is that gender is not an illusion. The episode seems to argue that, although, everyone has dual

³⁴ Doty, Alexander, ed.: *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, hier S. 3.

³⁵ Halberstam, *Queer*, S. 84.

³⁶ Ebd.

powers within oneself, binaries such as “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” exist. Since the viewer identifies with the protagonists and is guided by means of representation, the viewer is glad to see that the heterosexual and gender-normative initial position is re-established.

Many theorists have analyzed the function of dialog in the series. According to Cramer, the emphasis placed on dialog in *Sex and the City* serves moral reasoning and the development of a sexual morality framework.³⁷ She argues that the show illustrates “the moral functioning that occurs when listening to one’s voice and the voice of others.”³⁸ Arthurs argues that *Sex and the City* dramatizes the kind of consumer and sexual advice which can normally be found in women’s magazines.³⁹ So when the four main characters meet to talk about their problems and give each other advice, they also advise the viewer.

Throughout the show, the audience is exposed to Carrie’s narrative of her thoughts and inner feelings through voice-over narration.⁴⁰ Central thoughts, which lead through the episode, are put into questions. At the end of each episode, Carrie “has come to some truth or value about relationships, sex, herself, or her friendship, revealing that the narrative voice and the voice in dialog with others represent an aspect of moral authority.”⁴¹ In this episode, Carrie has come to the conclusion that sexual flipping does exist for some people but that she is too old for it and that although gender can be illusionary sometimes, the opposite sex is far from becoming obsolete.

Cramer argues that “the discourse of confession is a free and voluntary expression, representing how exposing one’s inner thoughts is a means of coming to know our sexuality and developing a sense of sexual ethics.”⁴²

³⁷ Cramer, *Discourses of Sexual Morality*, S. 423.

³⁸ Ebd.

³⁹ Arthurs, *Sex and the City*, S. 89.

⁴⁰ Cramer, *Discourses of Sexual Morality*, S. 423.

⁴¹ Ebd., S. 423f.

⁴² Ebd., S. 425.

Thus, Cramer relates moral authority to self-care, which she sees as the primary value presented in *Sex and the City*.⁴³ Although this is true and might influence the viewers to have their own inner dialog about sexual ethics, Carrie's voice-over narration is also a dialog with the audience and the moral Carrie draws from each episode influences the audience in its perception of morality. So by offering a ready moral drawn from the events throughout the episode, the audience is not challenged to expose their inner thoughts in order to come to know their own sexuality or to develop their own sense of sexual ethics, they are rather inclined to adapt the represented 'truth' instead of reflecting it.

Conclusion

To sum up, at first the episode "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" makes queerness visible in all its facets and motivates the audience to question their own perception of it as well as to rethink heterosexuality and normative gender roles. The dialogs in the episode play an important role because they confront the audience with different points of view but they also influence the viewers in their perception. In the end, Carrie draws a moral from the story and the audience is inclined to accept it. Taking the representation of bisexuality as an example, bisexuality is never directly represented in a negative way but it is neither represented as an adequate sexual orientation. Bisexuality is represented as a phase of sexual experimentation associated with younger people and therefore not taken seriously. In the end, Carrie dismisses bisexuality in her final words and states that she prefers heterosexuality. Since the heterosexual hegemony is reestablished at the end, it seems that queerness is only challenged in order to stress heterosexual hegemony and normativity.

I have illustrated that queerness and sexual experimentation are connected to consumer behavior because the modern consumer always wants to make new experiences, is influenced by (fashion-)trends and wants to stay young. Furthermore, by representing queerness, *Sex and the City* also caters to the

⁴³ Ebd., S. 426.

voyeuristic pleasures of the audience. But, although, “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” represents the connection between queerness and consumerism and Miranda, Carrie and Charlotte make their queer experiences, it is promoted that one should stay oneself and do what one feels to be right for oneself. In the context of “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl”, this means that hetero-normativity is depicted as the ultimately right decision.

Since *Sex and the City* is and stays a heterosexual narration, the search for one’s sexual identity will always be limited to a short encounter with bisexuality or same-sex love. Nonetheless, *Sex and the City* seems to promote sexual experimentation and queer encounters but only to find out that one is really heterosexual.

Filmografie

“Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl...” *Sex and the City*. Season 3, episode 4. Produced by Darren Star, et al.; directed by Pam Thomas; screenplay by Jenny Bicks, source material by Candace Bushnell. Cast: Sarah Jessica Parker (*Carrie Bradshaw*), Kim Cattrall (*Samantha Jones*), Kristin Davis (*Charlotte York*), Cynthia Nixon (*Miranda Hobbes*), Donovan Leitch (*Baird Johnson*), Eddie Cahill (*Sean*), Alanis Morissette (*Dawn*). HBO, first aired: 6/25/2000 (U.S.), 05/23/2002 (Germany). Length: 28:01.

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Autorin

Gloria Metz, B.A. in Germanistik und Anglistik, derzeit im Masterstudiengang in Anglistik und Germanistik an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Der vorliegende Beitrag basiert auf ihrer Bachelor Arbeit.

Kontakt: Gloria.Metz@rub.de