

Heterotopias of identity in Sex and the City

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Abstract

This article looks at how space and its temporal dimensions interrelate with female identity building within late modernity, in the television series Sex and the City. As elaborated throughout the analysis, which profits from Foucault's work on heterotopias, the spaces of New York -to which the show pays homage- fluid and contradictory, both enable and curtail the possibilities of identity transformation. Time adds to the fluidity of space, as its signification can transform space from utopia/eutopia to heterotopia and vice versa. Late-modern consciousness is largely heterotopic, pointing to or being in relation with other places of consciousness and identity. The main characters of the show are aware of and largely accept their heterotopic condition, with all its fallacies. New York, their preferred heterotopy-bearer, offers this multitude of other spaces, inconsistent, fragmented, even broken, for the four women to choose the pieces to form their selected heterotopias, which, under special circumstances, may become enacted eutopias.

Keywords: *Heterotopias; Foucault; Sex and the City; identity; space; time*

Introduction

Sex and the City, the successful television series that follows the lives of four young, independent women in New York attracted much praise and scorn for the open and often provocative ways of portraying aspects of feminine sexuality. Even though the

show's last season was originally aired in 2004 by the television network HBO in the US, it is still being rebroadcast in many countries around the world.¹ Through the stories of the four friends -Carrie, Charlotte and Miranda, in their thirties, and Samantha in her forties- that focus mostly on their sex experiences, the show displays issues of gender, identity and femininity in a palette of incongruous variety. Therefore, not surprisingly, most academic analyses of the programme attempting to address issues of identity focus on its sexual dimension (Kim, 2001; Henry, 2004; Gerakopoulou, 2012). And while the setting of New York is one of the constitutive components of the series, the role of space in the formation of the characters' identity in metropolitan New York has been scarcely addressed (among the exceptions one can find: Richards, 2003; Handyside, 2009; Doudaki, 2012a). Furthermore, no attention has been paid to the relations of space with time. The present article, addressing this scarcity, will attempt to examine how space and its temporal dimensions interrelate with female identity building within late modernity, in *Sex and the City*.

The analysis profits from Michel Foucault's (1984/1967)² treatise on *heterotopias* (from the ancient Greek *ἕτερος* [another] and *τόπος* [place]). Foucault's ideas on those "different spaces" or "other places" that challenge the space we live in, seem appropriate for this analysis, since, as will be elaborated throughout the article, late-modern identity is an identity of heterotopias, of "other spaces" or of the possibility and anxiety of those "other spaces".

Space, time and identity in context

In late modernity the individual forms its identity in conditions of high fluidity, ambivalence, mobility, fragmentation and discontinuity (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). The social experience is disembedded from time and space (Giddens, 1990). Modernity, for Giddens, "is precisely the transmutation of space and time" (Friedland & Boden, 1994, p. xi) changing "the representation of space and time and hence the way we experience and understand them" (Friedland & Boden, 1994, p. 2). "Modernity, Foucault argues, is characterized by the adoption of new disciplinary mechanisms that reorder or form new [societal] spaces [...], as well as new disciplines that constitute new discursive spaces within which subjects are classified" (Friedland & Boden, 1994, pp. 24-25). Maybe, this is why, for Foucault (1984/1967), "[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We

¹ *Sex and the City* was originally broadcast from 1998 until 2004, by the television network HBO in the US, comprising six seasons and 94 episodes. This study does not involve the two films bearing the same title, released in 2008 and 2010 respectively.

² The publication of this text, written in 1967, was authorized by Foucault in 1984. The text, entitled originally 'Des Espaces Autres', was published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in October 1984 (vol. 5: 46-49). The present article uses a translated version, by Jay Miskowiek, available online at: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> (lastly accessed: 3 October 2017).

are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed”.

If there is any ground in Foucault’s claims, the study of these “simultaneous”, “dispersed”, “counter-sites”, in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1984/1967), can bring into light significant elements of identity within the late-modern condition. Nevertheless, space can hardly be studied without taking into consideration time. Time and space might be dissociated from place in late modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991) but the temporal dimension cannot be disregarded in any analysis on space. *Simultaneity*, after all, is as much about time as it is about space. Furthermore, Foucault’s “new discursive spaces” of modernity cannot be spatial only; discourse is always in dialogue with time.

This article argues for the need to study identity in contextualised environments, in order to give prominence to the complexity and specificity of identity. Also, it is argued that any research attempt on the space-identity interrelations would profit from the analysis both of the temporal dimensions of space and the spatial dimensions of time, together with their discontinuations -the disruptions of space, which create “other spaces”, namely “heterotopias”, and the disruptions of time, which produce “heterochronies”. Thus, the examination of the spatiotemporal interconnections of identity in the specific setting of *Sex and the City*, given the prominence of New York in the show, allows for the study of identity both contextually and theoretically.

As a *contemporary* programme, a programme of *our time*, *Sex and the City* bears the typical characteristics of late modernity, set however in a specific environment. Temporally and culturally, *Sex and the City* is a millennium series, a product of a pre-austerity, and partly, pre-9/11 milieu, inextricably set within a cultural context of celebratory consumerism. These specificities are important in order to understand its aesthetics and the development of its narration. Also, these specific characteristics play a role in how issues of identity, space and power are treated in the show.

For the purposes of the analysis, all six seasons of the show were studied and analysed. The analysis focussed on elements of space (and time) in the 92 episodes of the series, which were textually analysed, instructed theoretically by Foucault’s *heterotopias* and the work of cultural studies theorists on cultural geography, identity, and gender and space (e.g., Soja, 1995; Young, 1986; McRobbie, 2008; Kellner, 1995).

Sex and the City’s heterotopic citizenship

As briefly mentioned earlier, in the era of (late) modernity, identity is directly associated with the individuality and the development of a unique self, is self-reflexive and subject to change (Giddens, 1990), in contrast to traditional and

pre-modern societies where it was specific and stable, a function of the group or collective, clearly defined by (social) origin and determined by space. The modern subject is conscious of the constructed nature of identity and of the possibility to change and modify it at will. That is why anxiety becomes a constituent experience of the modern self: one is never certain of the right choice or even whether one can have an identity at all (Kellner, 1995, p. 232). For Hall (1996, p. 16), modern identity is constructed through the dialectic relation of necessity and impossibility, a dilemmatic position in which the characters of the show often find themselves. As Carrie (whose narrations guide us through the four friends' stories and adventures), the main character of *Sex and the City*, wonders:

Since birth modern women have been told that we can do and be anything we want – be an astronaut, the head of an internet company, a stay-at-home mom. There are no rules anymore and the choices are endless ... but is it possible that we've gotten so spoiled by choices that we've become unable to make one? ('All or Nothing', 3:10)³.

Sex and the City is “situated in the broader postmodern world of contradictions. The storylines of the show are woven around the twofold awareness of the modern urban woman: the freedom to create new identities and at the same time, their flimsy nature” (Doudaki, 2012b, p. 6). Important, in this aspect, for the characters of the show, is the urban space of New York, which interrelates with their private and public identity both in enabling and curtailing ways. The eligibility for motion that urbanity offers is a reminder to the characters of the show both of the freedom to construct their identity and the distress of such an endeavour.

“The recurrent experience of modernity and urbanity was always ambivalent, alternating between the sense of endless possibility and the sense of loss, between exhilaration and despair” (Patton, 1995, p. 119). The city, according to Raban, “is a place where individuals can assume different identities with comparable ease, but where they run the risk of losing themselves in the process” (Patton, 1995, p. 115, for Raban's *Soft City*). In Metropolitan New York, where, as Carrie argues, you *can get anything, anytime* (“The Big Time’, 3:8) and where *anything is possible* (‘Boy, Interrupted’, 6:10), “nothing is fixed, the possibilities of personal change and renewal are endless and open” (Raban, 1974, p. 245). The city offers to the characters of the show infinite options and opportunities for pleasure and meaning, for identity building (*That's what's great about New York: There's always a new neighborhood, a new restaurant, a new man* – ‘To Market, to Market’, 6.1), enhancing at the same time the expectation and melancholia of this freedom. The affordances of mobility, which the metropolis offers, enhance the sense of fluidity in ways that work against the quest for fixed reference points in the endeavour for

³ ‘Episode title’, season: episode number. Accordingly thereafter.

identity construction. In addition, New York's palette of "a whole series of places that are foreign to one another" (Foucault, 1984/1967) is an uneasy reminder to the four friends that the utopia⁴ of a unified, stable identity cannot be accomplished.

The public space of New York is lived by the four friends circumstantially, incidentally, as space to be consumed, producing an individualised, fragmented, heterotopic citizenship. The citizen in the show is featured as an isolated unit, not as member of a collectivity. Post-feminist individualism is celebrated in the series⁵ (Hammers, 2005; Cramer, 2007); the individual remains solitary in public spaces, is not a public agent or a member of the polis. The characters of *Sex and the City* are self-confined in their micro-universe (myself, my friends, my boyfriend), detached from the problems of the city. Self-centeredness, individuality and apotheosis of the values of the self, attributes of the narcissistic late modernity (Lasch, 1979/1991), are displayed as main functions, desirable and preferable, of the modern citizen. The emphasis is on the rights and values of the individual, not the citizen, where well-being and improvement -when existent- have to do with the self, not the community. Cut-off from society, the four friends experience the city as a space for survival and, if they can afford it, for pleasure and not as a place for collective action.

However, at the same time, it is exactly this indifference found in big cities that fosters tolerance towards difference, towards this "unassimilated otherness" (Young, 1986, p. 22). Cosmopolitanism entails indifference, something that is often featured in *Sex and the City*, through its incongruous coexistence of various fashion styles, sexual relations, family formations. New York, as a metropolis that forms its own identity through heterogeneity and multiculturalism, accommodates and creates the action and the relations of the heterogeneous elements that in turn

⁴ Utopia, from the Greek *οὐ* ('not') and *τόπος* ('place'), bears the meaning of 'no place', and can refer to an intended or aspired ideal community or society. Modernity allowed for the imaginary of alternative societies but at the same time contested the utopic ideal of their perfect nature. For Levitas (2003, p. 3), "utopias are blueprints of the good (or even perfect) society, imagined elsewhere and intended as prescriptions for the near future", but regardless of whether they are conceptualized positively or negatively (as ideal places that can be achieved or as non-places), they are not real (yet). Foucault (1984/1967) posits that

[u]topias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

For Foucault, utopia "is a nowhere which exists only within the realms of fantasy" (Whittaker, 2011, p. 127) and only heterotopia, which he calls "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault 1984/1967) can be real.

⁵ Viewed as an example of postfeminist television, *Sex and the City* has been critiqued for its "depoliticized and fragmented treatment of feminism" (Stillion Southard, 2008, p. 152), based on the assumption that "there is no more need for feminism because equality has been achieved" (Kim, 2001, p. 321). Postfeminist television programs have also been accused of promoting a "lifestyle feminism" (Dow, 2002, p. 260), portraying women trapped in their own achievements: educated and professionally successful, yet personally unhappy (Vavrus, 2000; Hammers, 2005). According to Brasfield (2006, p. 133), "Sex and the City's master narrative is that the women's aim is to gain equal power to white, heterosexual, middle-class men within the existing hegemonic social structure".

receive and produce the characters' private and public identities. New York is the *métapolis*⁶ that hosts the disparate micro-universes of citizenship, which are individualised and often incompatible, being thus heterotopic.

The show does celebrate female friendship and solidarity (Henry, 2004; Winch, 2012), however not elevated to the level of social solidarity. The party of the four friends forms their own selected family (Doudaki, 2012b), which is rather introvert and not connected to the polis. Issues not directly affecting the characters in their lives are largely abolished and the encounter with the problems of the modern city is minimal and only in relation to their everyday routine: heavy traffic, difficulty in finding a taxi or making a reservation in the new 'hottest' restaurant of Manhattan. Crime, unemployment, poverty, is jettisoned from the magical world of *Sex and the City* and any references to the social conditions or problems of the city are almost non-existent or exorcized with humour. As Miranda ascertains: *There are no available men in their 30s in New York. Giuliani*⁷ *had them removed along with the homeless* ('Valley of the Twenty-Something Guys', 1:4). While *Sex and the City* celebrates the possibility of single women to be masters of their lives, living on their own and inhabiting the city space with confidence, it does not refrain in this case from commenting on Giuliani's crusade to 'clean' the streets from crime and bring safety back to the city. Also, when Carrie loses her way and asks for directions, a man gunpointing at her mugs her, demanding her bag (*baguette*, Carrie corrects him), her ring, her watch, but also her Manolo Blahniks (!) and only then does Carrie protest, as ... this is her favourite pair of shoes ('What Goes Around, Comes Around', 3:17).

As the public space in *Sex and the City* is customized, individualized, the characters of the show largely ignore the broader environment, creating and being attached to micro-spaces, which are not fully compatible with the polis. New York's space, at the same time that fosters the possibility of a selected identity through the potentially limitless choices of consumption, pleasure and fantasy, restrains, fragments and disjoints public identity through its seemingly neutral, depoliticised spaces.

In *Sex and the City*, the effect of entering the public sphere "is not politics, but merely visibility" (Zieger, 2004, p. 99). Politics is experienced as heterotopia, as non-present, dislocated, as an indifferent or even annoying reality taking place 'elsewhere'. Consistently, issues of political ideology are almost absent. In the beginning of the third season Carrie is involved with a politician, and as she informs us: *I thought we made a good match: I was adept at fashion, he was adept at politics. ... Really what's the difference? They're both about recycling shop-worn ideas and*

⁶ According to Tsoukala (2008, p. 149), François Asher describes with the term *métapolis* the modern city in the era of globalization (*Métapolis ou l'avenir des villes*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995).

⁷ Rudy Giuliani: Mayor of New York City (1994 – 2001).

making them seem fresh and inspiring ('Politically Erect', 3:2). In the same episode, the four friends' discussion on politics, focusing exclusively on the style and looks of politicians, is transforming the "aesthetic [into] politically anaesthetic" (Soja, 1995, p. 21). Despite the conspicuous sense of humour and irony in the scene, the lightness in their discussion is not fertilized with elements of alternative versions of political practice. It is true that *Sex and the City* refrains from being didactic, which is often the case in television shows, and frequently resorts to humor and irony to address sensitive issues (mostly of sexuality and sexual practice) (Akass & McCabe, 2004; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014, pp. 187-188), however, the undermining of frivolity is not always productive of alternative readings. On the other hand, as Fiske (1987, p. 68) notes, "[i]rony, as a rhetorical device, is always polysemic and is always open to apparently 'perverse' readings because it necessarily works by simultaneously opposing meaning against each other." Thus, an alternative reading, consistent with late-modern bipolarity, could be that (political) ideology, being stubbornly absent from the show, is actually present. Along the same vein, and in line with Foucault's understanding of heterotopia as the contestation of dominant perceptions of space (and practice), the show does not disallow the contestation of the hegemonic politics of space established in New York.

Heterotopic coordinates of identity

The 'other spaces' within New York, in relation to and in juxtaposition with the metropolis, influence in different and often contradictory ways the identity of the show's characters. As it is shown through the analysis, the signification of 'other spaces' and their contrast to New York curtails in practice the opportunities the urban space creates for identity building. At the same time, however, by ambivalently signifying the space, the show is leaving room to its characters to select or construct their *own* spaces.

New York is the place where and in dialogue with, everything is tested and experienced (Richards, 2003, p. 148): sex, relationships, friendship, family, profession. The series highlights the potential for the modern woman of the metropolis to construct and reconstruct her identity through fashion, change of sexual partners, structuring of her own family relationships. However, this possibility exists in a specific environment, which is much more limited than the boundaries of New York: it is Manhattan and in particular the southern part of it; it is not even Bronx of the black community, let alone booming Brooklyn. The emerging reality *outside the walls* is of no relevance to the show.

In the series, "Manhattan is constructed as the site of positive identity politics, and all other spaces are relentlessly marginalized as either fake or foreign. [...]"

Marginalization occurs not because of one's gender or sexual orientation but due to one's geographical location" (Handyside, 2009, p. 406). The four friends exorcize anything outside the island of pleasures and wonders, and is considered deadly sin to live anywhere else. When Samantha's young boyfriend, Smith, who is an actor, invites her to his new play, Samantha responds: *It's in Brooklyn. I don't do borough* ('To Market, To Market', 6:1). Yet, as the show is faithful to its contradictions⁸, Miranda breaks the rule, after making a family and moves to Brooklyn, despite her initial fervent denial (*I am a Manhattan girl. I do not like anything non-Manhattan* – 'Out of the Frying Pan', 6:16).

Billingham (2000) uses the term *geo-ideological* in order to express the interface between the literal and the metaphorical constructs of location. According to the author, our perception of the geographical-as-location entails a prevailing sense of the ideological signing of that location. Together with the spaces' ideological load the show creates, it also constantly designates coordinates of identity through the display of places positively and negatively signified. Identity in the show is very often determined by occupation, economic status and place of residence (of course, in lower Manhattan), presented as tokens of eutopia⁹. We learn, through the narrations of Carrie, about Miranda's new boyfriend: *His name was Ted Baker, he was 32, a sports medicine doctor with an apartment overlooking the Museum of Natural History* ('Secret Sex', 1:6). Also, for one of Samantha's dates: *Harrison was a very successful litigator who took steam baths with Ron Perlman and owned an apartment on the 39th floor of Museum Tower*.¹⁰ *An excellent first-date pedigree* ('The Freak Show', 2:3). Finally, for Charlotte's new boyfriend: *His name was Arthur. He was a nice, sweet, handsome, funny, great investment banker, who lived between Madison and Fifth* ('Where There's Smoke...', 3:1). According to Foucault (1999, p. 140), "space is fundamental in any exercise of power". The spaces of eutopia here are spaces of status, of discipline and control, and being in practice spaces of power, they summon exclusion: reserved for the few, rich and powerful.

⁸ As Fiske (1987, pp. 71-72) notes,

[h]eteroglossia, polysemy and contradictions are [...] all ways in which social differences and inequalities are represented textually. As society consists of a structured system of different, unequal, and often conflicting groups, so its popular texts will exhibit as similar structured multiplicity of voices and meaning often in conflict with each other. It is the heteroglossia of television that allows its texts to engage in dialogic relationships with viewers.

⁹ Eutopia, deriving from the Greek εὖ ('good' or 'well') and τόπος ('place') is synonym for 'good place'. Eutopias can be related to utopias, with the difference that, even though they are usually connected to conditions of ideal being, they offer the possibility of a real place. While the focus in utopias is on the 'good places', in heterotopias is on the 'other places', the ones that are usually outside normal view, contradicting or contesting the 'normal' places. Heterotopia can barely exist on its own, not in comparison, in juxtaposition or in contrast to other spaces. However, it can create the conditions of transformation that will lead to eutopia. For this reason, under certain circumstances, eutopia can be perceived as a kind of auspicious heterotopia.

¹⁰ Building of luxurious apartments, overlooking Central Park.

Another example of power-spaces used in the construction of racial othering, is presented in the third season, when Samantha is having an affair with an Afro-American, named Chivon. His sister, Edina, who apparently has a great impact on Chivon's choices, is objecting to her brother dating a 'white woman'. One of the times they are in a club where exclusively Afro-Americans frequent and 'black' music is played, Edina is making things clear for Samantha: *I'll say it to you plain. I don't care how many Jennifer Lopez looking dresses you have hanging in your closet, you don't belong in here. You can never understand what I'm talking about. This is a black thing* ('No ifs, ands or Butts', 3:5). The 'black' clubs in this case are cultural spaces of race identification, where the other races are excluded. At the same time, however, issues of marginalisation of the black community by the dominant white community and self-exclusion of the white community from the 'black' places, can be raised.

Since New York is presented as the Paradigm of urban living, almost all the *other places* are portrayed as heterotopias or even dystopias¹¹, connected to the idea that life in New York is actually much better or at least more sophisticated. Carrie might think that *one of the best things about living in a city like New York... is leaving it* ('Bay of Married Pigs', 1:3), when she goes for a weekend at a friend's house in the Hamptons, however she rushes back after seeing her friend's husband naked in the hallway.¹² Also, in the third season, the four friends go to Los Angeles, which is constantly compared to New York aesthetics. The obsession of people living in L.A. with physical appearance is poisonously portrayed in the dialogue Miranda is having with an old friend, Lew, while meeting him for dinner. Lew is a former cynical New Yorker writer who moved to L.A. and espoused the lifestyle of wellbeing ('Sex and Another City', 3:14):

- *Why aren't you swallowing your food?*
- *You think I look this good by eating?*
- Miranda realized Lew hadn't found inner peace, he'd found an eating disorder.*
- *Are you serious?*
- *Don't put your toxic shit on me. This is fucking L.A., OK? You have no idea what pressure I'm under here.*
- *Who cares what you look like? You're a writer.*
- *For a hit show. Trust me. No one wants to hire a fat story editor.*

¹¹ A dystopia (from *δυσ-*, 'bad, hard' and *τόπος*, 'place'), often presented as counter-utopia, is a fictional or potentially upsetting or frightening community or society. While dystopias focus on the threatening malfunctioning of social formations, with no room for positive transformation or rebirth, being thus inherently pessimistic, heterotopias, even though usually disturbing, do leave space for metamorphosis.

¹² Even from the beginning of the episode we are warned by Carrie on the superior position subjects assume for themselves when acquiring a house in places of high economic value and status symbol. As she explains, with a dose of irony: *Hampton houseguests are always required to sing for their supper.*

Even Paris, the city of Carrie's dreams, fails to keep up with the utopic ideal she had created for the city of light, when compared to New York. In the last season, Carrie accepts to go to Paris with Aleksandr, a famous Russian artist and her partner at that time. However, life in Paris does not turn out to be perfect. Apart from the problems in her relationship, which she ends, Carrie actually seems uninterested in her until-then utopia. During her stay in Paris we see her bearing all the manners and habits of New York, as if she has never left the latter. Hence, Paris is doomed to be a heterotopia.

New York's spaces, as a palette of infinite possibilities for self-discovery, change and transformation, are theatrical, embodying "a series of stages upon which individuals could work their own distinctive magic while performing a multiplicity of roles" (Harvey, 1990, p. 5). And like in any imaginary world, also in this one, issues of isolation or of compatibility with the *real* world arise. When Carrie announces to her friends that Big (her longest relationship and greatest love) is moving to Napa, California (A "Vogue" Idea, 4:17), Samantha is wondering: *I am always surprised when someone leaves New York – I mean, where do they go?* And the pragmatist and cynical of the group, Miranda, responds: *The real world?*

Also, when Miranda is dating Luke ('The Freak Show', 2:3) he proudly confesses:

- *I haven't left Manhattan for 10 years ... Everything you want is right here. Culture, food, the Park, cabs at 3 a.m.. Why leave?*
- *Perhaps to experience a world outside Manhattan? Miranda demurs.*
- *There is no world outside Manhattan, Luke assures her.*

However in New York, even within (lower) Manhattan, there are various spaces that "mirror, reflect, represent, designate, speak about all other sites but at the same time suspend, neutralize, invert, contest and contradict those sites" (Johnson, 2006, p. 78), alternating between heterotopia and eutopia: privileged places can easily reveal themselves as betrayed utopias, not fulfilling the promise of a better life or of a new identity, while abolished places can work as enacted utopias. For example, during the time that Carrie and Big are having a secret affair (third season), they choose to meet in hotels located in 'safe areas' unlikely to be seen by people they know. When Carrie comes out of a hotel on 56th and 8th, Charlotte happens to pass by, as she had gone at the tailor's nearby to try on her wedding dress, and is asking with evident astonishment: *Carrie, what are you doing in this neighbourhood?* ('Running with Scissors', 3:11). *This neighbourhood*, negatively signified, is a heterotopia abolished from the geographical identity of the four friends. At the same time, however, this revoked area is hosting the secret love of the couple and becomes for them a "heterotopia of illusion" (Foucault, 1984/1967), "a source of fascination, a forbidden place of secret pleasures" (Johnson, 2006, p. 85), despite

Carrie's feelings of guilt. In this respect, New York in the show is a heterotopia in itself as it "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1984/1967).

Transgressive intersections of space and time

As explained earlier, the ways space and time are experienced are crucial in how identity is being built in late modernity. Thus, the interaction of the show's characters with space cannot be separated from time: time gives meaning to, signifies the space and sets the conditions of its experience in late modernity, Foucault's 'epoch of simultaneity'. The concept of simultaneity, according to Pugliese (2009, p. 671) allows us to understand the temporal juxtaposition of absolutely dichotomous figures within the same geographical space. What this study argues, in addition, is that simultaneity can also describe the coexistence of the temporal and physical dimensions of space, and their synchronicity or disharmony. In this context, simultaneity of good time and place appears as a precondition of eutopia¹³. On the other hand, disharmony between space and time creates 'heterochronies'.

For example, in one of her short affairs, Carrie is having a wonderful night at her younger lover's apartment, but the utopian experience is felt somehow differently in the morning: *I woke up wanting more, or maybe not. In the grey morning light, everything looked completely different: Candles from Urban Outfitter, dirty laundry, a pizza box. Suddenly, reality hit: I'm in a twenty-something apartment* ('Valley of the Twenty Something', 1:4). Also, in the case of Carrie's secret affair with Big, as the burden of remorse and the frustration of meeting secretly become difficult to handle, the hotel on 56th and 8th is transformed, from the haven that hosts their love, to the place where she is mistaken as a prostitute and is accidentally confronted by Charlotte, who strongly disapproves of the affair. In both instances, the ruptured harmony of good space and time turns the places from utopias to heterotopias.

According to Foucault (1984/1967), heterochronies are fully enacted when people's 'traditional' time is radically disturbed. An example of such a disruption in the show appears in 'Cock-A-Doodle-Do' (3:18), where the work place of the transsexuals on the street outside Samantha's apartment comes to disrupt her private space and lifestyle. Her utopia, her new expensive apartment, is contested, even violated, by the transsexual prostitutes working on the street. Here, heterotopia

¹³ In his *Heterotopias* Foucault does not refer to eutopias, he only introduces utopias, as the reverse of heterotopias, as those 'unreal spaces' in contrast to the 'other spaces'. However, the notion of eutopia, of the 'good place', can under certain conditions be linked to what he calls "heterotopias of compensation". A heterotopia of compensation creates another real space that is "as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (1984/1967). In the context of time-space interrelations, a heterotopia of compensation can be realised when (good) time and place are met.

is experienced as contestation of space and time, as apart from the juxtaposition of Samantha's space and the space of transsexuals, the latter also invade in and disrupt her private space-time with their noise –she cannot sleep and make love, which infuriates her: *\$7,000 a month and I have to put up with a trilogy of fucking trannies down there? I don't fucking think so! I am a taxpaying citizen and member of the Young Women's Business Association. I don't have to put up with this shit!* This is one of the very few instances in the show where civil status and citizen rights are mentioned. However, even in this unique moment of Samantha's citizenship, the latter is selfishly expressed as a personal condition, where her rights are opposed to the transsexuals' rights. She is a taxpaying citizen of high status, they are not. She has a right to be there, they do not. Samantha might be tolerant of other people's sexual lifestyles and activity, however she is intolerant to any severe challenge of her status and power position.

Foucault argues that “there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries” (1984/1967). In these places, “time never stops building up and topping its own summit.” Opposite these heterotopias “there are those linked, on the contrary, to time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal”. Much in *Sex and the City's* New York is about the temporary, frivolous, or passing. In addition, the narrative is highly linked not only to place but also to time. In the episodes of the series we are often positioned in the plot through the narrations of Carrie with coordinates of place and time (*Friday night at Chaos.... Crème de la crème of New York - 'Sex and the City', 1.1. Also: Saturday, 22:30: The hottest new restaurant in Manhattan - 'Valley of the Twenty Something', 1:4*).

Most places in the show are not of accumulating time.¹⁴ Even galleries are principally about the new favourite artist whose artwork is up in the market; similarly, in retrospectives, the art is for selling and consumption that will offer added value to the cultural capital of those affording to buy it. The four friends regularly attend gallery openings, museum and ballet gala events, where the art is consumed as a social event, to gain visibility and not for the pleasure of the artistic experience. Even for Charlotte, who is an art dealer, art is a vehicle for social acceptance, cultural capital to be exchanged for status, and not a liberating field from social norms.

The importance of *being seen*, constitutive of the contemporary cultural capital and ticket for recognition by others, is emphasized, often with excess, in the series, as the characters frequent in fashion shows, or in restaurant, bar and gallery openings, in order to be part of a temporal visibility. Carrie attending a fashion

¹⁴ One of the few exceptions of places *with no expiration date* is the coffee shop on 73rd and Madison, where Carrie frequently goes to write her newspaper column.

party narrates: *A little past ten, I was dressed to the nines at Brasserie Eight And A Half located on the corner of Right Now And Everyone Was There. It was the place to see and be seen* ('The Real Me', 4:2). However, the places *to see and to be seen*, where the four friends are eager to be found, are promised but almost never fulfilled utopias. The heavens of visibility -for example, restaurants and clubs, where is actually difficult to gain entry, as they are reserved for a few privileged ones- "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault, 1984/1967) and gain their status through exclusion: the higher the number of people excluded, the more successful they are considered. Furthermore, accessing these sites is inexorably tied to time. Next month or even next week another 'hot' place flashing a new trend will replace the current paradise and today's utopia would be tomorrow's heterotopia (*Balzac overnight became the only restaurant that mattered* - 'The freak show', 1:5. Also: *New York City restaurants are always looking for the next new angle to grab that elusive and somewhat jaded Manhattan palate. Last year, it was 'Fusion-Cajun', Last month, it was 'Mussels from Brussels', And tonight, it's 'S & M' - 'La Douleur Exquise!'*, 2:12). Interestingly enough, the characters of the show are fully aware of, and actually enjoy the transient fashionability of these places. Their imminent unfashionability is expected and even welcome in New York's high-speed lifestyle.

Heterotopias of the temporary, of the festival, are usually connected to pleasure and summon consumption. The citizen of *Sex and the City* and of metropolitan New York is primarily a consumer. The fetishism of style and the apotheosis of consumerism the show fosters have often been a point of critique among cultural studies scholars (Arthurs, 2003; McRobbie, 2008). Consumption in the show is not only connected to the construction and reconstruction of personal identity, but also becomes a way of exercising citizenship linking the private to the public, personal identity to public identity. Even patriotism passes through consumption. As Carrie urges her friends: *If you want to do your patriotic duty as a New York woman, you will come shopping with me right now and throw some much-needed money downtown* ('Anchors Away', 5:1). It should be acknowledged that this consumerist impulse reflects on a preeminent discourse of post-9/11 New York, where citizens are urged to go out and shop to show solidarity and their love for the city.

Identity, however, is not constructed only through consumption and stylistic choices (McRobbie, 2008), but also through the places of consumption. The last \$400 Manolo Blahnik pair of shoes purchased by Carrie has to be exhibited in the currently most popular club of Manhattan, to obtain any value. In this way, personal style becomes an element of public identity when displayed in specific public places. Carrie's Manolo Blahniks may be an object of admiration and the best ticket for the 'hot' spots of Manhattan, yet, just a little further, in a not-so-glamorous neighbourhood of Brooklyn they would not have any symbolic or

exchange value. Moreover, the consumption of fashion for acquiring style and image is of worth at particular moments (for as long as the specific fashion trend lasts) within these locations. The *right* place and time need to coincide to fulfil the moment of simultaneity, in which the constructed image of the individual is recognised and validated by others. In practice, the ever-changing, transgressive quest for the image takes the form of a dual heterotopia, related to subject position and to time. Firstly, what we see in us is never identical to what the others see. Secondly, our image is always elusive; what we/the others see in us will not be the same the next day. Thus, the ideal image is never realised, as bound to be always disharmonic.

Conclusion

The present study examines the spatiotemporal interrelations with female identity building in the television series *Sex and the City*, profiting theoretically and analytically from Foucault's treatise on *Heterotopias* (1984/1967). The analysis also explores the temporal dimensions of space and the spatial dimensions of time, together with their disruptions, as they illuminate significant elements of the identity-space relation within the late-modern condition. This multidimensional approach of space-time through the study of a specific text of popular culture allows reflecting on identity both contextually and theoretically.

The spaces of New York, bearing the typical characteristics of big cities in late modernity, are contradictory, fluid, experienced ambiguously. The *good* and the *bad* space and time coexist, enabling "mobility and blockage, visibility and invisibility, flexibility and entrapment" (Perera & Stratton, 2009, p. 591), pointing always to the possibility of 'other spaces'. Time adds to the fluidity of space, as its signification can transform space from utopia/eutopia to heterotopia and vice versa. In all occasions, harmonious spaces presume simultaneity of good time and place.

New York is constantly giving coordinates of identity while keeping alive the promise of the possibility of continuous transformation. As mainly limited in Manhattan, the show restrains in practice the theoretically endless opportunities for free motion. The very selection of its main characters -privileged women inhabiting a privileged urban space- does produce a set of limitations on the perceptions of identity, citizenship and space that are introduced in the series. Creating geographical and temporal exclusions, *Sex and the City* proposes its politics of good geography, leaving unquestioned the fact that these seemingly apolitical spaces, are power-spaces of discipline and control for the few and privileged.

The show does introduce limits and restrictions, often only to point to their dubious nature, or even to their impossibility. New York, even though constantly flirting with the possibility of utopias, is always in motion. Its spaces, in continuous dialogue with time, are in movement, towards change, towards what is different than the current state and therefore heterotopic. At the same time, however, its heterogeneity does create a fluid amalgam of cultures and styles with which its inhabitants can connect; always partially, always fragmentarily, but with a sense of freedom in selection. New York hosts a “complex juxtaposition and cosmopolitan simultaneity of differences in space that charges the heterotopia with social and cultural meaning and connectivity. Without such a charge, the space would remain fixed, dead, immobile, undialectical” (Soja, 1995, p. 15).

It may be that “to live in a city is to live in a community of people who are strangers to one another” (Raban, 1974, p. 15), but for Young (1986, p. 21), this “being together of strangers”, is exactly what is liberating in the metropolis. “The city allows differences of religious, cultural, or sexual orientation to flourish in ways not possible in smaller and more homogenous communities” (Patton, 1995, p. 119). At its best, it embodies an “openness to unassimilated otherness” (Young, 1986, p. 22) that “can produce indifference as a kind of tolerance” (Tonkiss, 2003, p. 309) and this is actually what Carrie and her friends mostly appreciate about life in New York. Thus, the connection of the four friends with the city is heterotopic: they are never full members of the polis but at the same time free to be part of it.

The anxiety of identity is experienced by the characters of the show largely as heterotopia, which is a post/modern condition. The modern consciousness is heterotopic, always pointing to or being in relation with other places of consciousness and identity. In *Sex and the City*, New York, the exemplar metropolis, is a heterotopy-bearer, creating and hosting these other spaces:

Neither fully real nor entirely imaginary, but partially both, the unoppressive city is a postmodern object par excellence undecidedly modern and postmodern, visible and invisible, it is both a dimension of the experience of city life and a metaphor of politics. (Patton, 1995, p. 120)

The spaces of New York are heterotopic, generating a “double imaginary” (Whittaker, 2011, p. 126), as they are real and unreal, factual and fantastic. “These different spaces ... glitter and clash in their incongruous variety, illuminating” passages for the four women’s imagination (Johnson, 2006, p. 87). What is presented initially as utopia in *Sex and the City* is often undermined, working actually as heterotopia. New York offers sites of promise to the heroines of the series, usually disrupted, but at the same time transgressive. The four friends know that the metropolis is heterotopic. They flirt with this reality, they make fun of it,

they clash with it, but New York is still their favourite heterotopy-bearer. With all its fallacies, New York offers this multitude of *other spaces*, contradictory, fragmented, even broken, for the characters of the show to select the pieces to form their *own* heterotopias. Under special circumstances these *other spaces* may even be enacted eutopias.

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