

The sopranos and sex and the city



This essay will focus on a comparison, contrast and review of the opening sequences of ' Sex and the City' and ' The Sopranos'. I will analyse how each scene depicts and represents the city of New York, and how the actual programme itself is portrayed.

I will deconstruct and break down each technique used, and how it is symbolic towards the city and series. ' Sex and the City', the first programme I will be analysing, follows the daily routine and lifestyle of Carrie Bradshaw; a mid-30s single American woman. The television show focuses on Carrie, her friends, and their sexual and personal relationships and experiences in New York. It is aimed primarily at the young female adult demographic, and therefore it is always shown after the watershed. It would appeal to other audiences, but I believe that it has been produced with that one specific demographic in mind. Normally, the show has to be screened late at night, due to regular extreme language and explicit sexual content.

The Sopranos', the second programme that I studied, follows the exploits of an Italian-American family of gangsters, and their involvement with the criminal underworld of New York. The main character, Tony Soprano, is usually the person that has his life documented by the camera.

Stereotypically, ' The Sopranos' would appeal to the adult male demographic, as it contains an abundance of profanity and general adult content that would be considered to be unsuitable for viewing by minors. It is for these reasons that ' The Sopranos' is permanently shown after the 9pm watershed. Although both of these shows have many direct contrasts between them, they also share many similar representations and methods of encoding through iconic signifiers.

The actors chose to represent the roles are both perfect examples of the stereotypical characters they play. For example, ' Tony Soprano' (played by James Gandolfini) is the typical gangster. He has the perfect stance and appearance, and uses props to his advantage in signifying ideas to the audience. ' Carrie Bradshaw' (played by Sarah Jessica Parker) also does this, but for an entirely different typecast.

Even though both of these shows are set in New York, each represents and displays an entirely different atmosphere and ambiance for both districts of the city, evoking very different thoughts and feelings. Both ' Sex and the City' and ' The Sopranos' also illustrate a completely different variety of life, the former presenting the more glamorous and wealthy side of New York, and the latter demonstrating the industrial and criminal district. It is this harsh divide in lifestyle and routine that sets the programmes apart, allowing each to explore entirely different philosophies and concepts of the city. Each program has its own distinct style of encoding, with the signified being much more apparent and obvious in ' The Sopranos'.

Although some of the connotations in ' Sex and the City' are evident, most require deeper thought and further analysis to full appreciate. Both these shows touch on many controversial and disputed perceptions in their unique way, and this will be considered in this essay. The opening sequence of ' Sex and the City' follows a young, mid-thirties girl and her short journey through the busy and hectic streets of central New York. We see the feminine, unconventional, vivid clothing that she is wearing stand out against the monotonous dark-suited sea of men in the background, as she is crossing a road in the metropolitan city that is New York.

As we follow her relaxed walk through the city, we see ‘ flashes’ of mainstream New York from her line of vision. These brief images include the Manhattan skyline, the Chrysler and Empire State buildings, and the Brooklyn Bridge. Carrying an abundance of sophisticated shopping bags, the girl continues to walk onwards, looking intermittently at the sky, possibly dreaming of future aspirations and ambitions. The audience is completely unaware of the character’s name for the majority of the opening, until the individual is splashed by dirty puddle water by a bus with her name and picture on the side in advertisement form.

The commercial contains the caption, “ Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex”, and informs us a great deal about the actual content of the programme. The music backing the opening sequence is varied, using multiple tempos and pitches of xylophone tune. The speed of the music increases nearer to the end of the opening, showing an increase in speed of the actual speed of Carrie’s journey. This change of tone and rhythm also demonstrates a diverse change in speed of life, explaining that the daily routine of the main character is erratic, and therefore frequently changes. The music has been composed to appeal to women in general, due to the normally high pitch and the overall ideas that the tune conveys. The music reveals that there is a multicultural feel in New York, due to the specific mix of instruments and genres used.

A mix of jazz, tango and salsa, the theme tune gives a definite Spanish impression, showing that there is a variety of ethnicities and cultures in the city. The music is generally uplifting, demonstrating a sort of curiosity, and further reinforcing the feeling of the audience participating in Carrie’s

journey. The business of the city is also represented, due to the extraordinarily high tempo used. The creators of the opening sequence for 'Sex and the City' have opted for a specifically bright and predominantly vivid theme, with many of the colours being greatly exaggerated, to significantly emphasize the obvious contrast between the deep blue skies and the intense pink and white of Carrie's clothing. This intentional contrast and difference between colours shows the inclusive mood of the programme, by the signification of Carrie standing out from the crowds behind her.

The extreme focus the character gives to the sky further strengthens the idea of Carrie looking above the buildings and dreaming, thinking, contemplating and reflecting upon her life. The bright lighting, clear skies and shining sun are also signifiers that inform the audience that New York is a happy place to be, and that on the whole, Carrie is content with her life. The lack of shadow apparent is also very important, showing that there is a lot of good in the city of New York. Usually associated with evil and immorality, the use of very little dark colour and shadow signifies that that district of the city is a safe and friendly place to be.

The sun just coming up also denotes the start of Carrie's journey, not just through the city, but through life in general. A very optimistic atmosphere is created by doing this, by showing the future, and consequently a new day and fresh start. The effect is also that an especially stereotypical feminine environment is displayed, making Carrie seem additionally at home in the city. From the opening sequence, the audience is explicitly shown that Carrie Bradshaw is unafraid to experiment and flaunt her sexuality in public. This is made obvious from revealing, unconventional, provocative clothing that she

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wears, as well as the billboard advertisement on the side of the bus that explains how “ Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex”. Walking through the fashionable, exclusive district of Manhattan, New York, Carrie clutches onto an assortment of shopping bags; all of which look to contain incredibly luxurious and expensive.

We can also infer from this that Carrie is fashionable, and wishes to keep up with all the latest trends and styles. Wearing only a tight baby pink top and pure white tutu, the audience knows that Carrie is a non-conformer, and is confident to express herself in quite brash and vulgar ways. Carrie’s hair is long and flowing, curly and loose, with blonde colouring. This informs the audience that she is flirty, free and single, as well as having a fairly bubbly personality. We can also infer from Carrie’s choice of appearance that she is holding on to past youth, perhaps to help the romantic aspect of her life. Carrie is the stereotypical ‘ all American girl’, from the long blonde hair to the perfectly proportioned body, making her a role model for the target audience.

Being a Caucasian white female, Carrie seems to have no lack of attention from the male population of New York, which is represented by the bus advertisement and Carrie’s general attitude and her way of strolling through the city. When Carrie is soaked by the puddle near to the end of the opening, it not only shows that every journey has an end; it shows that for Carrie, something always seems to go wrong, ruining her carefully laid plans. In the opening of ‘ Sex and the City’, many of the landmarks that are typically connected with New York are prominently featured, and have considerable significance to the way the program is represented. For example, the

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Chrysler and Empire State buildings are stereotypically associated with power, luxury, wealth and glamour. These would also apply to Carrie's life, and her lifestyle documented by the television show.

These buildings also display a want and need for success; with some of Carrie's ambitions and dreams possibly shown. The Brooklyn Bridge is again shown for these reasons, but also shows the journey that Carrie is on. We can infer from the way that the landmarks are encoded, that this journey is not just a physical one from A to B, but a spiritual passage, and a journey of self discovery. The Manhattan skyline visible at the very start of the opening sequence shows how cosmopolitan and mixed Carrie's life is, with the highs and lows that every journey has. The camerawork is very unusual in the opening sequence of 'Sex and the City', with a multitude of diverse camera angles and focus. There are many close-ups of the main character, allowing the audience to see her face, and develop some insight into her thoughts, emotions and feelings, through the complex expressions that adorn her face.

It is by this that the producers of the programme allow the audience to realise that the focus is Carrie and her personal relationships, by alluring them into feeling a sense of empathy towards the main character. There are also numerous long shots of buildings, which form the background of Manhattan, showing the location and setting of the programme. The handheld camera effect gives the feel that we (the audience) are in control over the journey, and the tracking of moving vehicles demonstrates the chaotic lifestyle and routine that Carrie follows. It also gives the sense of a chase, with us following not only the main character, but all the events happening around her.

This helps the audience to feel more immersed in the programme, and in a subtle way demonstrates the sheer confusion in Carrie's life. A zoom lens is used to refocus on Carrie later on in the opening, especially at the point where she is soaked by the bus. This gives the impression to the viewer that they have in common and can associate themselves with the character. The camera has been enhanced with a filter to emphasize colour, showing a more diverse contrast between primary colours.

This helps shapes seem friendlier and less severe, making the audience additionally engrossed in the opening. It also helps to make New York appear very welcoming and pleasant. Editing has increased the speed of clouds in the sky, showing the very quick pace of life in New York, and showing us that sometimes, the world and her life actually moves around Carrie, while she stays still. This also reinforces the idea of New York being a very busy and demanding city. The cuts between scenes are very quick and in time with the music, making the viewer want to see more of the City. We learn from the quick cuts even more about the pace of life, meaning that sometimes there is just not enough time to do everything that needs to be done.

This is also coinciding with the speeding up of the crowds of businessmen walking around Carrie, to make the city and her life seem more exciting and interesting. The opening takes place over such a short period, that many cuts have been included to allow the audience to experience and understand the full excitement of New York and the programme itself. The main message signified in the opening sequence is how Carrie's life is orientated around sex. She is in mid-thirties, but still feels very youthful, and therefore wants to preserve her youthful good looks. Overall, the opening shows

Carrie's desire for love, money power, glamour and youth. This is signified through the setting, costume, camera angle and many other signifiers.

Carrie tries to subvert her stereotype, but generally fails and falls into other typecasts. The pace of life in New York is symbolised greatly by the stereotypical crowds of businessmen in the street, and the speed they all seem to move around Carrie. This shows a definite contrast between her life and that of others in New York, showing how much more interesting and exciting hers is. The Sopranos' Opening sequence follows the drive of a middle aged Italian-American man through the suburban districts of New York. Travelling through numerous tunnels and small towns on his journey, we see the trip from the perspective of main character, Tony Soprano. On his journey, in the distance, the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan skyline can be seen, but do not resemble the industrial district that most of the journey focuses on.

Travelling through the New Jersey turnpike toll booth at one point, we catch a glimpse of Tony's face, seeing his harsh facial expression. He slowly drives through Little Italy, admiring his surroundings, before proceeding to his home. Many of the buildings he passes are industrial in nature, and seem to be designed for manufacture or engineering. The towns he passes through appear to be full of working class families, with relatively cheap houses. Smoking a cigar in his car, Tony's face is always partially hidden, but his plain, average clothes and stocky build look at first glance to be nothing out of the ordinary. The music in the background of the opening sequence is quite sinister, with threatening undertones.

The lyrics are also rather disturbing, with the line “ You woke up this morning, Got yourself a gun” recurring frequently during the opening. This gives a quite malevolent feel to the programme, giving the audience some insight into the gangster profession that main character Tony follows. The theme song also makes New York seem very unpleasant, as it frequently hints to the large criminal underworld of the city. The lead singer has a very deep, gravelly voice, and is backed by a variety of reasonably high pitched backing singers. The general tone and pitch are very deep, making the song mostly fall into the rock genre.

The theme tune of the opening would most appeal to teens and adults, but would interest any fans of rock to watch the programme, increasing the target audience. Overall, the theme gives ‘ The Sopranos’ an appropriately dark and sinister atmosphere, and falls right in with the mysterious mood that the programme resonates. The producers of ‘ The Sopranos’ have opted to use very neutral tones for the programme, making it seem as realistic as possible. This helps the viewer to immerse themselves better inside the fantasy world, and would greatly help to make the programme itself and the city of New York appear more accurate. Unlike ‘ Sex and the City’, ‘ The Sopranos’ uses the maximum amount of shadows to its advantage, utilising the shadow and darkness to create an air of mystery, and making the viewer more interested and excited in the programme.

Most of Tony’s features remain cast in shadow during the journey, allowing the audience to use their imaginations to complete the character’s face. It also helps to make ‘ The Sopranos’ and New York seem fittingly sinister, creating a disturbing ambiance that surrounds the show. The muted colours

help to reflect Tony's life, helping maintain the mystery and secrecy of his life. Although most of the journey is set in almost darkness, when we approach his estate, it seems to be brighter; signifying to the audience that not all areas of New York are unsafe; his house seems welcoming and hospitable.

On the whole, the lighting used helps uphold the gritty and grainy atmosphere that would surround a life of crime. In the opening sequence, we only see the main character, Tony Soprano. Balding and wearing plain, innocuous clothes, he looks like an average, middle class, Caucasian American male. The balding head is used to represent and signify the amount of experience he has with his job, and the pressure he faces from it on a day to day basis. It also shows his age, helping the target audience associate better with his character. We see Tony smoking a cigar during his journey, one of the stereotypical features of the gangster typecast.

This cigar shows wealth and power, not only that of Tony, but the wealth and power of New York as a city. Since we never fully see Tony's face, he remains a mystery to the audience, which makes his surroundings seem even more questionable. His stature and stance are also typical of the stereotype he represents, with a stocky but muscular appearance and sharp glare. As we see his hands manoeuvring the steering wheel, the viewer can infer that Tony must be very heavily built, not just showing the requirement for his job, but also signifying the wealth he has.

Also on his hand are many gold rings, which may have been paid for by his many, everyday criminal dealings. Tony obviously picked his clothes

especially to blend in with his surroundings, showing the audience that suburban New York and New Jersey would be mainly populated with working class families. Prominently featured during his journey are the other cars that travel alongside Tony on the road. Most of these other cars are cheap, showing that many of the residents from the area do not have a lot of disposable currency, meaning that it is quite a poor district of New York.

Many of the buildings passed on the journey are small, dilapidated shops, with potential customers walking past. Again, many of the people seen are wearing very casual, inexpensive clothing, showing that the area is not particularly fashionable or glamorous. While passing a church and graveyard on his travels, Tony is reminded of his religion and tradition, and possibly even friends he has lost due to their activity in the criminal underworld. The main thing noticeable on the journey is the class divide between the two areas of New York that Tony passes. The first, Manhattan, is luxurious, expensive and glamorous, whereas the second, the New Jersey suburbs, is the direct opposite; unpleasant, cheap and dull. As Tony passes the first district, his glance lets the audience know that secretly, he desires the power, wealth and glamour of Manhattan and mainstream, stereotypical New York.

There are many different and unique uses of the camera in the opening of 'The Sopranos', with the camera moving independently for most of the journey. This helps the audience feel like they are actually part of the journey, and lets the viewers feel as if they are actually a part of the action. Many close-ups of Tony are used, all of which reveal parts of his body one at

a time; like a sort of jigsaw puzzle. This helps preserve the mysterious atmosphere of Tony and his lifestyle.

Tracking is also used to follow an aeroplane in the sky, further showing Tony's ambition to travel and to acquire power. Tracking is additionally used to follow Tony's car from a third person perspective, allowing the audience to fully establish his location in suburban New York. Almost everything on the journey is observed from the perspective of a passenger, allowing the viewer to totally involve and immerse themselves in the programme. Lots of scenes are cut between the journey to allow the audience to see as much of New York as possible, to help the viewer establish a fair representation on the city.

Overall, the opening sequence of 'The Sopranos' conveys a message of mystery to the audience, showing Tony's position in the criminal underworld, and helping to explain his purpose. We learn about the programme itself that it focuses on the life of an Italian-American gangster family, and that New York is primarily a man's world. We know this from the amount of references to stereotypical male 'items' included, such as the cigar, the sheer abundance of cars, and the amount of factories visible. The New York skyline iconography is also very symbolic of the power and wealth that Tony craves so badly, making the two sides of New York seem very distant. The opening also demonstrates a great moral conflict for Tony between his family life and tradition, and his life involved with the criminal underworld of New York.

There are many similarities between the opening sequences, including a key concept that is touched upon by the opening sequences of both programmes; the dominance of men in New York.

Each opening demonstrates that each main character is living and working in a city that is operated and controlled by males, where females are always considered to be inferior. From 'Sex and the City', Carrie seems to be determined to challenge this typecast, but still wears very stereotypical feminine clothing. Tony, alternatively, is one of the leading figures in the predominately male city, and would most likely fight to keep it that way. In conclusion, although there are many similarities and differences between both opening sequences, I believe that the opening of 'Sex and the City' is the most effective of the two at representing the actual city and the programme itself, due to the way that it uses a much more obvious way of encoding, that means decoding connotations is to a great extent easier.

I also believe that the opening of 'Sex and the City' was more effective at communicating to the viewer because it used a great deal of close ups, allowing the viewer to feel empathetic towards characters, and associate from a first person perspective.