

Metonymy and the Metropolis: Television Show Settings and the Image of New York City

This article argues that contemporary portrayals of cityscapes on television create a “postcard effect,” a way of seeing that affords the viewer the pleasure of a tourist gaze. This disposition both reflects and legitimizes a fragmented experience of visiting a location without immersing oneself in the intricacies of its politics and geography. Building on critical urban studies, film theory, semiotics, and critical ethnography, this article analyzes depictions of New York City in five television shows (Seinfeld, Friends, Sex and the City, Felicity, and The Sopranos) to demonstrate how metonymic representations of the city produce a narrative of a tourist destination on display.

Keywords: *New York City; television; metonymy; postcard effect; tourist gaze; image marketing*

Cityscapes exercise enormous rhetorical power over public imagination. A recent example is sufficient to demonstrate this: in the wake of September 11, 2001, the question of how to rebuild Lower Manhattan moved to the forefront of public debate. Through the efforts of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the media, all those concerned about the future of Ground Zero could voice their opinion on the matter. However, some observers and architecture critics cautioned that despite the enormity of the tragedy and its significance to the American psyche, the popular sentiment toward the Twin Towers as icons of New York would hasten but not enrich the process of reimagining the city.¹ Among professional architects and cultural critics, the common worry was that the public would urge policy makers and developers to restore the familiar skyline rather than pause to reflect on the role architecture plays in the lived experience of a metropolis. As one critic remarked, “Skylines are for tourists. They don’t matter. The touristic response can be obscene” (Campbell, 2001, p. 37).

Although this remark may appear elitist on its face, the popular attitude to urban centers summarized by the term *touristic response* is an artifact of contemporary “destination culture” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998), a culture in which the experience of visiting a place is no longer a spontaneous activity but an aggressively marketed commodity. Critical urbanists and cultural geographers have been exploring the relationship between urban planning, tourism, and entertainment for some time.² Recently, film scholars have joined this critical effort by linking cinematic representations of cities with political and cultural issues surrounding urban life.³ Building on the insights of Walter Benjamin (1969) and Laura Mulvey (1989), they examine cinema as a technology of visual pleasure that both shapes and reflects historical attitudes toward cities and city life.

This article aims to extend this interpretive perspective to portrayals of cityscapes on television. We argue that television’s representations of cities create a “postcard effect” that affords the viewer the pleasure of a tourist gaze,⁴ a disposition that both reflects and legitimizes a fragmented experience of visiting a location without immersing oneself in the intricacies of its politics and geography. To support this claim, we offer a reading of five New York–set television shows, *Seinfeld*, *Friends* (Bright, Kaufman, & Crane, 2003), *Sex and the City* (Star, 2002), *Felicity* (Abrams & Reeves, 2002), and *The Sopranos* (Chase, 2000). Although New York City has long been an object of representation in literature and cinema, it is arguably television portrayals of the city that are responsible for promoting the tourist attitude toward the metropolis in recent decades. In all of these shows, the image of New York is constructed through a fragmented collage of postcard-like shots that together constitute a dominant narrative of a tourist-friendly destination.

To be sure, New York City has been the object of so many photographs and a backdrop of so many movies that it has become a screen for projecting a variety of meanings and attitudes. As Kevin Lynch (1960) suggests, “The image of the Manhattan skyline may stand for vitality, power, decadence, mystery, congestion, greatness, or what you will, but in each case that sharp picture crystallizes and reinforces the meaning” (p. 9). As it is represented in a variety of television shows, however, the city becomes a collection of different iconic fragments that together construct a hegemonic narrative of a postindustrial metropolis. Within this narrative, icons act as a “means of control” (Barthes, 1991, p. 29), anchoring the urban landscape in a significant piece of the massive puzzle. Therefore, any one building in Manhattan can stand in for the whole Big Apple. However, there are potential dangers of using images as representations for the whole, for “we have bits and pieces of the city in our heads, which creates this funny stew of images that don’t make a city” (Dorsey, 2003, p. 1). If the city is a large jigsaw puzzle, using just one piece reduces a complex whole to a shiny fragment. Consequently, the images of New York, when fused

together, create a tourist-friendly narrative that obscures the magnitude and complexity of the livable urban area.

In what follows, we first set up a theoretical framework for our analysis by building on Barthes's (1991) concept of image as an anchor, Eco's (1977) notion of hyperreality, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) notion of destination culture. We then discuss portrayals of New York City in earlier decades to provide a historical background of contemporary media depictions of the metropolis. Our textual analysis relies on Lynch's (1960) categories of the imageable city to demonstrate how five New York-based television shows, *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and *Felicity*, all employ New York's most recognizable architectural icons and settings as anchors, postcards, and marketing tools. Each show imbues the Big Apple with a distinct set of meanings, but each contributes to a dominant narrative of New York City as a tourist destination on display.

Imaging the Metropolis: A Theoretical Framework

According to Barthes (1988), representations of a city "always tend to limit, to concentrate, to condense the center; the center-city is experienced as the exchange-site of social activities" (p. 200). This core phenomenon leads to the anchoring of the image in the center. Barthes (1991) states that anchoring is "a means of control, it bears a responsibility, confronting the projective power of the figures, as to the use of the message" (p. 29). The image anchors the narrative of the city and crystallizes the meaning of the message through a visual metonymy.⁵ Architectural images have been often used to anchor messages, for according to Vale (1995), "architecture and urban design have been used regularly in the service of promoting the preferred self-image of powerful persons and institutions" (p. 647). For example, the now fallen Twin Towers of the World Trade Center offered a sublime spectacle of postindustrialism and globalization, having risen as a result of obliteration of a busy manufacturing neighborhood known as "Radio Row" (Mosco, 2004).

Eco (1977) proclaims that there is "a constant in American imagination and taste, where the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication" (p. 6). We have wax museums, zoos, historical monuments, and living farms, where people can experience a way of life foreign to modern society. We tend to forget, however, what the replica actually represents. Things must seem real to "connote the real," but in the process, the "completely real" appears "completely fake" (Eco, 1977, p. 7). The death of authenticity breeds hyperreality. Within time, the recurring metonymic representation of the city makes people forget about the real New York. The city image becomes a postcard, for "what counts . . . is not the authenticity of a piece, but the amazing information it conveys" (Eco, 1977, p. 15).

The hyperreal image is clear and consistent but also askew from urban life. Not only does it banish representations of poverty, homelessness, and racial tensions, but also it disallows any visible signs of these problems such as panhandling, garbage-strewn streets, and graffiti-covered subway cars. It is well known that Mayor Giuliani's perceived success at "cleaning up" New York City in the 1990s relied on tactics intended to minimize the appearance of disorder in the streets by whatever means necessary, even if this involved infringement on civil rights and occasional police brutality. On the surface, the city's streets did become cleaner, but this cleanliness disguised a widening gap between rich and poor, rising unemployment, and deterioration of social services.⁶ Media representations of New York City as a glamorous, clean, and safe hub of entertainment and consumption may thus implicitly abet reactionary social agendas.

The hyperreal postcard image has paramount ramifications for the marketing industry, which tends to rely on a pleasant city image to persuade people to visit a particular locale. Thall (1994) asserts that "people who come to the American city bring their cameras. . . . They come because the city represents, and contains, something they value" (p. 3). The panoramic postcard image, according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), "lays out the whole world . . . experientially in a scenic effect" (p. 54). As the city image develops into a two-dimensional postcard, it becomes an "agency of display" and attracts attention from outsiders. The two hallmarks of display are the "foreignness of objects to their contexts" and the "location of meaning at their destination" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 1). The image of New York City permeates the whole world, but its meaning emanates primarily from the city itself. Thus, the image acts as a marketing device to attract visitors to New York City. This phenomenon of "strategic place marketing" presupposes conversion of locations into marketable images: "Every community has to transform itself into a seller of goods and services. . . . Places are, indeed, products, whose identities and values must be designed and marketed" (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993, p. 10).

If places can be packaged as products, then television shows are an appropriate forum to formulate a mission for the product, as they carefully construct an image of a city based on the show's premise. The city is a tourist destination and a place of business and residence, but increasingly the shift has been toward marketing the image for visitors. The city becomes "an ecology of museums that is itself a museum, historicizing, monumentalizing, giving weighty pause to aspiration and accident alike" (Thall, 1994, p.14). The museum effect leads marketing experts to describe the city according to its hyperreal aspects rather than its historical features.

Phil Simms, a producer of the New York-based sitcom *NewsRadio*, (1995-1999) remarks that "there's always been a disjunction between the general notion of how the country perceives New York—as this strange, crazy place—

and how much they identify with shows set in New York” (Hirschberg, 2001, p. 118). On a superficial level, Simms distinguishes between the image on the television show and the image in reality. They differ remarkably from each other, and only the educated consumer can really tell them apart. For Kotler et al. (1993), an image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a people have of a place” (p. 141). This definition illustrates how a television show’s portrayal of a city adds to the current “sum of impressions” that one has of New York City. These impressions of New York City have been building since the early 20th century, when both filmmakers and architects began to design the images that feature prominently in today’s modern New York City.

Earlier Portrayals of the Metropolis

In the early years of film, New York City was the center of the industry. The convenient access to a big city and the grand allure of living in New York made it a perfect place to house celebrities and directors. At this point, movies capitalized on the tradition of “actualities,” early short documentaries filmed in the streets of New York. By the end of the silent era, even feature films exuded realism: “Roaming the city with impunity, the silent camera offered a direct, documentary-like portrait of New York, closely attentive to its developing character, from the largest shifts in population and geography to finer-grained changes in physical appearance” (Sanders, 2001, p. 42), meaning that the films depicted New York City in a realistic fashion because the resources were readily available to shoot within the city. When “talkies” became big, however, New York’s noise was a burden on the sensitive sound equipment. Additionally, the landlocked studio space in the urban New York area began to constrict production opportunities. Thus, the industry moved west to California, where more dreamlike depictions of the city were created on movie sets. Most New York-based films and television shows today are actually staged in Los Angeles, with exterior shots taken in New York at a later date. This fragmentation leads to people imagining the city as a “dream space, a delirious world of psychic projection rather than sociological projection,” according to Peter Wollen (Donald, 1995, p. 90). The depictions of the city have become much more fantasy-oriented rather than true studies in urban culture.⁷ Structures in the city become elements of an “ingenious or despairing rhetoric,” depending on how each filmmaker decides to portray them (Donald, 1995, p. 78).

Rhetoric of despair is one way to describe director Martin Scorsese’s (1976) interpretation of New York City in the film *Taxi Driver*. Starring Robert De Niro as a befuddled cab driver who eventually grows insane, the film depicts the Big Apple as a filthy, immoral “sewer,” full of corrupt politicians, pimps, and thieves. In the midst of all this is Travis Bickle, De Niro’s character, who sees the dark world of New York through the windshield of his yellow

taxi. The sights Travis sees are much different from today's depictions of New York. The streets are the main images, but they are dirty and dark. Travis navigates through Times Square and other popular attractions commonly seen on today's shows, but these areas are filled with adult bars, prostitutes, and drug dealers, a far cry from the sanitized, postcard-like image one associates with Times Square today, after its corporate "Disneyfication" under the aegis of Giuliani's "cleaning up" campaign (Eeckhout, 2001).

Taxi Driver depicts corruption in the city at the street level. Most of the action takes place at night, which symbolically underscores the dark underworld of New York City. As Travis puts at the beginning of the film, "All the animals come out at night." When the city is shown during the day, it is filled with people walking down the street in a rush, everyone oblivious to the grittiness of the city. Most characters are deceitful and mischievous, and Travis grimly remarks, "Someday a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets." If Travis was still driving a cab today, he would realize that metaphorically his dream has come true, at least for those who now visit the city after seeing it portrayed on television as a welcoming, glossy postcard.

In contrast with the grittiness of *Taxi Driver*, the movie *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987) depicts the city as a place of business, with the World Trade Center always in the background to symbolize economic success and anchor the film's message of corporate excess. By observing the various settings and images shown in the film, one can conclude that the director chose to emphasize the dark underside of New York City's famous icons. For instance, one sees the New York Stock Exchange, a historic symbol of the powerful American business, but minutes later the action turns toward the insider trading and other shady dealings. At the beginning of the film, the sun rising over the Twin Towers symbolizes the start of a new day, but it also highlights greed and misfortune. Through the use of New York's most famous skyscrapers, *Wall Street* attempts to describe what happens beneath the surface of the modernist structures. Although this portrayal is less damning than *Taxi Driver*, it reinforces the view that New York is a dangerous, corrupt place to live.

The television shows of the 1990s depart from this dark portrayal and move toward a friendlier, inhabitable New York City. They depict New York as what De Certeau (1984) calls a *concept city*,

[a] fantasy that motivates planners and reformers in their desire to make the city an object of knowledge and a governable space. They dream of encompassing the diversity, randomness, and dynamism of urban life in a rational blueprint, a neat collection of statistics, and a clear set of social norms. (Donald, 1995, p. 78)

New York becomes unified in the discourse of television shows and the dominant images that portray the city. The metropolis becomes *un espace propre*,

using De Certeau's term, "its own space and a purified, hygienic space, purged of 'all the physical, mental, and political pollutions that would compromise it'" (Donald, 1995, p. 78). This purified image, in turn, abets the cultural dominance of late capitalist norms of production and consumption. As Drzewiecka and Nakayama (1998) put it, "Capitalism is more than an economic system here: It is an ideology and way of life. Indeed, it is a defining feature of cultural life" (p. 25). The advanced capitalist nature of the city acts as a driving force to attract attention to the image of the city and develop New York as a tourist destination for all to see.

The five television shows *Seinfeld*, *Sex & the City*, *Friends*, *The Sopranos*, and *Felicity* take into account the history of New York in their portrayal of the city, but they leave behind the grittiness that characterized earlier portrayals. After defining the five types of images that make up a city, this essay will show how television images act as anchors, hyperreal postcards, and marketing devices.

Textual Analysis

Lynch's (1960) topographical categories for picturing the legible city provide the analytical framework for interpreting urban imagery on the five television programs. Lynch contends that the "legibility" of a cityscape is "the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern" (p. 3). People must be able to recollect the image of the city with clarity, without contradicting images and views. In New York City, the repeated use of the skyline image has reinforced the city's place and has clarified the image in people's minds to the point that most people can recognize the Big Apple from a small piece of the overall image. There are five elements to a well-imagined city: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks (Lynch, 1960, p. 46).

The significance of paths is best explained by Jane Jacobs (1961): "If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull" (p. 29). Infrastructure is the first perception point for most people in a city, and thus clean streets are a major marketing point. The Brooklyn Bridge, intimate city streets such as Fifth Avenue, and the various interstates running through New York constitute paths.

Edges are "boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls" (Lynch, 1960, p. 47). In New York City, these would be the Hudson River, the Long Island Sound, or even Central Park, which demarcates one side of Manhattan from the other. Edges separate New York City from the rest of the world, and thus by depicting the city from its edges, one sees the city as a postcard.

Next come districts, which are "medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent" and which have some "common

identifying character” (Lynch, 1960, p. 47). Manhattan is, in the broadest sense, a district; but on television shows, the district is often confined to a city block or less. The district can be both a marketing device and a hyperreal postcard, for it is often the central image used to promote New York City.

Nodes are “strategic foci into which the observer can enter, typically either junctions of paths, or concentrations of some characteristic” (Lynch, 1960, p. 72). Nodes constitute the public spaces of a city. Central Park, popular restaurants, shops, and apartment buildings are nodes, for these are the primary settings for television shows and also for social interaction in New York City.

Finally, landmarks are external physical objects. They single out one element from many possible elements and can be used as radial references (Lynch, 1960, p. 48). The architectural symbols of New York such as the Statue of Liberty or Twin Towers are landmarks and often the most frequently identifiable elements of the city because they can be used as references to other parts of the city.

Assembled together, all five elements constitute the perfect image of a city. For each television show, five episodes were scrutinized in regard to their depiction of these elements. Each show has a somewhat different take on New York, yet each makes the city legible in the same way via the use of paths, edges, districts, landmarks, and nodes.

Seinfeld: The Grandfather of Hyperreal New York

The first show to portray New York City in a hyperreal fashion was Jerry Seinfeld’s eponymous sitcom “about nothing.” The show premiered in 1990 with little fanfare, but quickly built itself into a number one attraction by poking fun at life’s little quirks within the context of New York City. Other shows such as *Will and Grace* (Kohan, 1998), *Just Shoot Me* (Levitan, 1997-2003), and *Mad About You* (Jacobson, 1992-1999) all have tried to capture New York City in a similar vein as *Seinfeld*, but *Seinfeld* is still the original image maker for the 1990s reinvention of the Big Apple.

As much as *Seinfeld* defines New York, however, the show itself was filmed in Los Angeles. The New York backdrops and exterior shots were added later and thus “the accents may be from Brooklyn, but the bodies are all in Burbank” (“Seinfeld,” 1998, p. 24). This distance between the action and the setting has a tangible impact on the portrayal of New York City, for as accurate as the show tries to be, its geographic remoteness from the actual New York only allows it to find a small element of the city and magnify this image. Because other shows have copied *Seinfeld*’s formula, this contradiction in city imagery has been amplified within the years, to the point that the image is merely a postcard that is good for marketing the city but not for getting to know it.

The first thing *Seinfeld* did in reinventing the image of the city was clean up the paths. When Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are outside, the streets are clean, the passersby are neat in appearance, and the buildings are spotless. Although some of these shots are filmed on a soundstage, the paths in *Seinfeld* look sanitized in comparison to *Wall Street*, *Taxi Driver*, or television shows from the 1970s. In one of the episodes, the gang is stuck in a traffic jam downtown because of the Puerto Rican Day Parade (David, Seinfeld, & Cheronos, 1998). A bunch of yellow cabs are shown amidst the stranded cars, and everyone is fairly calm, except, of course, for the four main characters. In *Taxi Driver*, most pedestrians were angry and the cars appeared dirty. In *Seinfeld*, however, most cars in the traffic jam are brand new and clean. Everyone except for Jerry gets out of the car and walks around the city to find a way home. Elaine ends up meeting other people caught in the traffic jam and tries to lead them to safety, but she keeps hitting roadblocks. She gets into a cab, only to be stuck in another traffic jam. Other episodes, including “The Busboy,” (David et al., 1991a) find the characters walking down the street past clean buildings and professionally dressed pedestrians. These path images market New York City as an ideal place, where people can walk down the street and not worry about their personal safety.

The successful paths of *Seinfeld* breed successful districts in the vein of Jane Jacobs (1961), who says, “The bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers” (p. 30). The district on *Seinfeld* is primarily Manhattan, and most imagery focuses on the exterior of the main characters’ apartment buildings. In each episode, Jerry’s apartment is shown from three different angles. First, there is a medium shot of the red brick exterior, two windows, and a tree. Second, the image focuses on just the two windows. Third, the shot pans out to the whole apartment building, showing the building’s green awning and the sidewalk. The same three images appear in most of the episodes, including “The Pony Remark” (David et al., 1991b) and “The Busboy,” (David et al., 1991a) and they act as anchors in the transition between scenes. When an apartment shot is shown, one knows that the next scene will be in Jerry’s apartment. Viewers come to identify with Jerry’s building and want to live in a similar apartment if they ever decide to move to New York. Thus, the district shots of his apartment act as a postcard that draws people into the city. Another popular exterior shot is the diner. A red neon sign says “RESTAURANT” and right below is a blue door (“The Butter Shave”; Berg, Schaffer, & Mandel, 1997). This restaurant comes to signify all of the restaurants of New York City, and thus it is a metonymy for the type of public space that characterizes the city.

The restaurant also represents the primary node in *Seinfeld*. The gang hangs out in the “RESTAURANT” in four of the five episodes used for this analysis, and the episode that did not feature the “RESTAURANT” still found the char-

acters at another food establishment. Thus, food becomes a commodity of public space, whereby people primarily interact at places of consumption. The apartment is also a significant scene of interaction in *Seinfeld*, for all five episodes feature at least one scene in Jerry's apartment. In "The Butter Shave" (Berg, Schaffer, & Mandel, 1997), Kramer comes in to tell Jerry about his new tanning method. Soon, Elaine and George are in the apartment to chime in on their own problems. The nice New York apartment that Jerry Seinfeld owns becomes a public space for the four characters, who will often barge in whenever they feel like it.

The restaurant and the apartment become the dominant images of New York City in *Seinfeld*, and the exterior images of both anchor the storyline and give meaning to the message of the show. *Seinfeld* does not usually depict edges or landmarks in any significant way, and it has no opening sequence, so the city imagery is not as much of a postcard on *Seinfeld* as it is on other shows. However, the city image is still a marketing tool because people come to associate New York with the apartment of Jerry Seinfeld and the clean streets it frequently shows. One reporter found that most *Seinfeld* viewers actually live in Boston, Chicago, and the West. Thus, "*Seinfeld* may be the quintessential New York show; but his people are slowly dragging America westwards" ("Seinfeld," 1998). People across the world perceive New York through the eyes of *Seinfeld* episodes, and thus the images on the show have profound meaning in our culture. At the height of *Seinfeld's* frenzy, *Friends* premiered, and it follows in the same vein as the show "about nothing" in its portrayal of New York.

Friends: New York City in One Compact Block

Through the clutter of *Seinfeld* imitators of the mid-1990s, *Friends* came out a major success, spawning its own plethora of copycat shows set in posh New York apartments and trendy coffeehouses. The six characters on *Friends* truly identify with New York City, and the city images anchor the story's message. The storyline could take place in any city, but New York is the obvious choice because of its significance in the media and American culture.

Paths take on a limited role in *Friends*. Rarely are the characters outside or driving in a car. In "The One With the Football," (Bright et al., 2003) the six pals play football on Thanksgiving in a nearby park, but the action takes place only at the apartment and the park. In "The One With the Candy Hearts" (Bright et al., 2003), the characters get together at the Central Perk coffeehouse, the apartment building, and Monica's restaurant, but never does any character venture outside. This may have more to do with production costs because the show was filmed in Los Angeles, but it differs from *Seinfeld*, where the paths took on an existence all their own.

The opening sequence is a good example of edges. The first shot of the series is a water view of the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building from the New Jersey side. The sequence then intersperses clips from the show with shots of the characters dancing in a fountain (“The One With the Blackout”; Bright et al., 2003). In “The One That Could’ve Been” (Bright et al., 2003), an exterior shot of the Brooklyn Bridge and Hudson River are shown, and later in that episode, when Joey goes to Silvercup Studios for his acting job, the camera pans from the World Trade Center to the studios, across the East River. Thus, edges anchor Manhattan and the setting of the series and also become a postcard that identifies the show as New York based.

Although the characters apparently live in the district of Greenwich Village, they rarely venture out of their building. Thus, the district on *Friends* is very small, but it signifies the convenience of the Big Apple. The landmarks of this district include the characters’ apartment building, which houses the Central Perk coffeehouse on the ground floor. “The One With Ross and Rachel” episode (Bright et al., 2003) begins and ends in Chandler and Joey’s apartment, and, in between, the characters move between Monica and Rachel’s apartment and Central Perk. The world of *Friends* is very narrow, but the image is still a postcard because it represents a virtual place that is so perfect and convenient for all of the characters that outsiders want an experience like that themselves. People want to visit New York City to have a similar “coffee-shop” experience as the people on *Friends*.

Friends uses shots of the skyline as transitions between scenes. In “The One With the Candy Hearts” (Bright et al., 2003), the Empire State Building is shown, and then the camera pans down to Chandler’s apartment. In “The One That Could Have Been” (Bright et al., 2003), the camera shows the Empire State Building again to signify Phoebe’s workplace. Most times, however, the skyline shots have very little to do with the episode’s plotline, and they merely act as anchors. These images metonymically represent the whole city, and viewers come to identify the show’s setting by the use of these images.

Like *Seinfeld*, the nodes on *Friends* are predominantly restaurants and apartments. Chandler and Joey’s apartment, as well as Monica and Rachel’s, are spacious and colorful with modern furniture and appliances, a far cry from the apartment Travis inhabited in *Taxi Driver*. Such characters could not afford these places, but these nodes are not meant to show reality. Rather, they are meant to show the city as an attractive place to live and visit. They represent a two-dimensional microimage of what every city in America should offer. The restaurants in *Friends* are often fancier than those pictured by *Seinfeld*, including both Benihana and Monica’s restaurant in “The One With the Candy Hearts” (Bright et al., 2003). Replacing the “RESTAURANT” is Central Perk, a trendy coffeehouse on the street level of their apartment complex. This node

has helped feed the “espresso culture” of the late 1990s and elevate the coffeehouse to a national icon. Central Perk is the primary public space on *Friends*, and no doubt it has become a main public space in North American cities. *Friends* portrays the coffeehouse as the ideal meeting place, where people can come together and talk about life’s trivial problems, much like *Seinfeld*’s diner.

Friends has amplified the image of the city created by *Seinfeld* by relying on landmarks and nodes. The landmarks act as anchors and postcards, whereas the coffeehouse becomes a marketing tool for every city to emulate. The coffeehouse also plays a big role on *Felicity*, for most of the main characters end up working at it as the show goes on. What *Felicity* did more than anything, however, was show how an outsider could come in and adapt to New York City.

Felicity: An Outsider Adapts to the Big Apple

Even though the image as marketing device primarily attracts tourists to cities, it can also attract university students who want to experience the city while they study. This is the case in *Felicity*, which follows the travails of a California girl at the University of New York. Felicity abandons her premed ambitions at Stanford to follow a guy she barely knows to a New York college. Although her parents are very unhappy with her decision, Felicity feels this is the perfect way to “Get away from everything” and start a new life (“Pilot”; Abrams & Reeves, 2002). No doubt, the city imagery of New York City is a driving force in Felicity’s decision to come to New York, just as it is with tourists.

Felicity is often seen walking to school or to work, and thus paths are important in *Felicity*’s image of the city. In the opening sequence, Felicity gets out of a yellow cab with a suitcase in her hand, ready to start a new life in the Big Apple. Next, Felicity and her friends goof around on the sidewalk in front of a coffee shop, a Laundromat, and a brownstone apartment building (“The Last Stand”; Abrams & Reeves, 2002). There is also a shot of Felicity waiting for a subway. In “Pilot” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002), Felicity sits atop the roof of her dormitory with her resident advisor Noel and looks down at the tiny cars below. She muses, “I can’t wait to see this place when it snows” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002). Felicity has high expectations for her college experience in New York based on the postcard image of the streets.

Edges and landmarks are both minimal on *Felicity*, except in “Pilot” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002) where several shots of the skyline signify that Felicity has entered New York City. In “Boggled” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002), Felicity walks down the street and one can see the Twin Towers in the background, another anchoring device for the narrative.

The district in *Felicity* is the University of New York. Action primarily takes place within the halls of the dorm and the classroom buildings. Felicity does go

outside quite a bit, but only in close proximity to the school. In “Hot Objects” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002), Felicity is in her dormitory, the dorm lounge, the dining hall, and the classroom. There is one shot of her entering the building with a “Big Brown Bag,” meant to signify Bloomingdale’s and the lure of shopping; but besides that, Felicity, like most college students, sticks to the area around campus.

As for nodes, Felicity often interacts with others in the classroom and the dormitory. Her friends all live on the same floor as she, except for Ben, who lives in an apartment nearby. Her interactions with Ben take place by the mailroom and in the classroom (“Boggled”; Abrams & Reeves, 2002). The dorm, like the apartment on *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, is a primary public space on *Felicity*, even though it is meant to be private. The image of a spacious dorm with a nice view of the city only further markets the city to outsiders, only this time to college students rather than tourists or working professionals.

The coffeehouse is also a primary node for the *Felicity* crew. In “Spooked” (Abrams & Reeves, 2002), Felicity takes a job at Dean & DeLuca, a real New York grocery and coffee shop chain. In future episodes, Ben and Noel also take jobs there, and the manager of the shop, Javier, becomes a full-time character. Dean & DeLuca acts as an icon that signifies the culture of New York City. In reality, it is an actual place, but people come to identify it with *Felicity*, and thus it too enters the realm of the hyperreal. Visitors go to New York and buy Dean & DeLuca T-shirts so that people back home know they went to New York and saw Felicity’s workplace. This is a strange phenomenon, but it works from a marketing standpoint, for the anchoring, hyperreal image of the coffee shop becomes just another way to attract attention to the city.

As producer of *Sex & the City* Darren Star states, “People have always come to New York City to be the outsiders and the radicals and a little apart from everything. And now we’re being embraced, and I’m not so sure how everyone feels about it” (Hirschberg, 2001). At the same time that *Felicity* premiered, another ambitious show called *Sex & the City* debuted, and although it also uses the same city images as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Felicity*, the image of New York becomes much more glamorous and superficial, to match the outlandish characters.

Sex & the City: Glamorous New York City

Sex & the City premiered in summer of 1998 as a more feminine version of *Seinfeld*. Tierney (1999) describes the main characters as “four narcissistic Tinker Bells with attitude.” The main character of the show is sex columnist Carrie Bradshaw, played by Sarah Jessica Parker. Her three friends are Samantha, a public relations executive; Charlotte, an art dealer; and Miranda, a lawyer. All four of the main characters are successful professionals living in

the Big Apple. Each episode features them in various complex sexual (or shopping) escapades meant to characterize New York City as a whole. Besides these metonymic acts, however, the more profound imagery of *Sex & the City* is the cleanliness of New York City. Every path, edge, node, district, and landmark is spotless, even though the storyline is quite dirty. *Sex & the City* producer Darren Star reiterates this assertion when he states, “*Sex & the City* always takes as its core material this great frisson of silliness and fashion and an enormous amount of money and superficiality” (Hirschberg, 2001). The four women on *Sex & the City* criticize the ulterior motives of most denizens of New York, but they still portray the city as a glamorous, exciting place.

The opening sequence of *Sex & the City* demonstrates this lighthearted, postcard approach. As soft, airy piano music plays in the background, an image of the top of the Chrysler Building appears behind the show’s name. Then, Carrie’s head becomes visible amidst a sea of yellow cabs on the street. The ever-present under-the-Brooklyn-Bridge view of Lower Manhattan comes next, followed by a medium shot of Carrie on the street again. A shot of the Twin Towers is followed by a shot of yellow cabs on the street. Gradually, more of Carrie’s body appears until one sees that she is wearing a ballerina costume on the streets of New York. An image of the Brooklyn Bridge appears immediately after the cab shot, and then a close-up shot of the Chrysler Building is shown. Finally, a yellow cab splashes Carrie as she strolls on the sidewalk, and right behind it is a bus with her picture on it. In this 2-min sequence, Carrie walks down a path through midtown Manhattan, a district, with shots of edges and landmarks interspersed between the actions. However, it is her presence as an attraction (doubly emphasized by her tutu and her portrait on the side of a bus) that heightens our awareness of these markers as anchors in a landscape of televisual entertainment.

The yellow cab comes to signify the path in *Sex & the City*. None of the characters seems to have a car, and all of them shun public transportation. When they attend the Firemen’s Ball on Staten Island, the women are forced to take the public ferry, which does not sit well with any of them (“Where There’s Smoke”; Star, 2002). Views of the street are interspersed throughout most episodes, but the street is fairly clean and full of properly dressed people. The sidewalk is a main path in *Sex & the City*’s city, and the “long walk” with the boyfriend often finds the characters passing by iconic parts of the city. In “No Ifs, Ands, or Butts” (Star, 2002), Carrie and her new boyfriend walk by brownstones with symmetrical steps and lush shrubbery. In “Politics” (Star, 2002), Carrie and a politician wait in line for a movie at a famous theater. The street is a friendly place in this city, thus *Sex & the City*’s image is a good marketing tool for attracting tourists.

Edges in *Sex & the City* are seen in the opening sequence with the under-bridge view of Lower Manhattan and also when the women take the ferry to

Staten Island. When they see the skyline from the East River, Charlotte exclaims, “I can’t believe it looks so small” (“Where There’s Smoke”; Star, 2002). The women see the city from the outsider’s perspective and realize just how two-dimensional it really is. The city image anchors the meaning of their world, and the women feel out of place once they leave the city. Miranda notes, “Who would have thought an island that small could hold all of our old boy-friends?” (“Where There’s Smoke”; Star, 2002). By living in New York City, the women do not realize just how profound the image of the city really can be. Once they leave it, however, the edges and landmarks become more distinct, and they are drawn back into its iconic power. Thus, the edges really market the city well, because they separate the other world from the perfect world.

The ferry ride also clearly presents districts and landmarks, for one can see the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building in the background. The shot is taken at night, so the city is full of lights, which amplifies the anchoring value of the city because the lights act as a beacon in the distance. The show primarily takes place in Midtown Manhattan, and thus this district becomes an anchor for all of New York City.

The bars and restaurants in *Sex & the City* constitute the primary nodes of the image of the city. Jane Jacobs once said that bars “have a bad name in many city districts precisely because they do draw strangers, and the strangers do not work out as an asset at all” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 41). In *Sex & the City*, however, the bars are the main public spaces where people interact, and the “strangers” are the people the women often take home. The nodes of New York City become major “meeting points” for the main characters. In between the bed scenes, the four women often meet for breakfast or lunch at different restaurants to share stories about the night before. In “Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman” (Star, 2002), the four women eat Sunday brunch at a sidewalk café and talk about their relationships. In “No Ifs, Ands, or Butts” (Star, 2002), the four sit in a restaurant booth and once again talk about their relationships. The restaurant as a node or public space is an ongoing leitmotif on the show, and it showcases fine New York restaurants. The nodes act as a means of control because they zoom in on one particular aspect of the city image and magnify its significance to the whole picture of New York City. Therefore, nodes are the most important element of the city image for *Sex & the City*, and they are the primary way that the city becomes a marketing tool. Fans will want to come to New York to eat in a nice restaurant and gossip, just like the four protagonists on *Sex & the City*. As Tierney (1999) comments, “It’s a grotesque picture of New York, but it’s funny because there’s a certain emotional truth to it” (p. B1). More than any other show, *Sex & the City* portrays its characters as consumers of expensive goods and services. Internally, the characters might have problems, but the city with its boutiques and restaurants is always there to comfort them. This is also a main theme of *The Sopranos*, for even though it takes place in New Jersey,

New York is the ideal icon, always in the distance to signify something better for the characters.

The Sopranos: *The Postcard City in the Distance*

Unlike the other four television shows, *The Sopranos* is not set directly in New York. This is truly a postmodern depiction of New York, because the primary residence of the characters lies outside of Barthes's (1988) "empty heart." However, *The Sopranos* still conforms to the same pattern of depiction, for the city is still an iconic anchor off in the distance that holds the show together. Action rarely takes place in New York City, but the city is a constant backdrop in the storyline, a postcard to contrast with the dark world of the main character, Tony Soprano.

In essence, *The Sopranos* is about a mob boss and his struggle with two families: his wife and kids and also the mob. The show takes place in New Jersey, and much like *Taxi Driver*, the scenery of the show is often gritty and dark. Unlike *Taxi Driver*, however, the grittiness is in the outskirts of New York, not within the city center. The "bad" city, in a sense, has moved outward, and now the suburbs are the towns in need of urban renewal. New Jersey is still "New York," because its fragments fit into the mass conurbation that is the New York metropolitan area.

The most evident example of *The Sopranos* drawing meaning from New York City is in the opening sequence ("The Sopranos"; Chase, 2000). Tony Soprano, played by James Gandolfini, is driving through the Lincoln Tunnel, a path, on his way back to New Jersey. Dark, haunting music plays in the background as Mr. Soprano leaves the tunnel and enters the Garden State. Metal poles and road signs are in front of the car, and through the passenger window is a clear shot of the New York City skyline. The Empire State building and Chrysler Building frame the shot, and the Hudson River is the edge that anchors the image. The car slowly moves by until the skyline is gone. Soon, Tony Soprano sees a sign that reads "NJ Turnpike." Next, Tony sees the skyline of Lower Manhattan through the passenger-side window. The Twin Towers majestically fit within the window of the car, and then, in a bit of clever cinematography, the skyline is reflected in Mr. Soprano's rearview mirror. This is a clear example of the image as a hyperreal postcard, for the entire skyline fits into a postcard-size mirror that Tony Soprano can view as he leaves the city. The city image is anchoring the storyline by showing that the Soprano family lives near the Big Apple. After Tony passes through the turnpike toll, he lights a cigar in his mouth and drives over a few bridges. The sewage treatment plants and oil tanks that characterize Newark, New Jersey, signify that the outer New York area is vastly different from the inner city. These New Jersey landmarks only give greater meaning to Manhattan, because they are unfavorably com-

pared with the crystal-clear, vertical skyscrapers across the Hudson River. Tony Soprano's car then passes by Newark Airport, where one can see a plane flying low overhead. The Statue of Liberty pops up in his rearview mirror before a sign for "Elizabeth" appears overhead. The Statue is the last landmark Mr. Soprano glimpses before he enters his true home; he is moving away from the grand, iconic city into a sinister space of corruption and greed. Now one can see the images of Tony Soprano's city. The car passes over more bridges, by more factories, and through several small run-down towns. He passes by a Sunoco gas station, then a cemetery, and finally by two nodes, Satriale's Pork Store and Pizzaland, two public spaces in the show. After going by several suburban houses, Tony enters a forested area and drives up a long driveway. At the top is his illustrious mansion, signifying the great wealth and power Mr. Soprano has come to receive. The mansion image anchors one side of Tony's world, whereas the city image anchors the other. Both signify similar things, but the mansion is the main site of discourse. As one reporter has observed, *The Sopranos* "has turned the Lincoln tunnel into a tourist trap" (Peysner, 2001). The images shown anchor the setting of the story, but they are also destination sites for a themed travel experience.

Paths are very important in the world of *The Sopranos*. Many scenes take place outside, near busy streets in urban Newark, New Jersey. The mob family often sits outside Satriale's Pork Store at a small table to discuss their "business" ("Denial, Anger, and Acceptance"; Chase, 2000). Most of the criminal activities take place in alleyways or on dark, gritty streets. For instance, in "Meadowlands" (Chase, 2000), Tony Soprano's therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, is stopped by a corrupt police officer hired by Soprano to find out more information about her. The officer starts clubbing Dr. Melfi's date in the face and harasses her for being drunk. The street becomes this dark place in the *Sopranos*, and in most cases, the path is a dead end, for the mob will eventually get even.

The only edges seen on *The Sopranos* are the Hudson River in the opening sequence and the forests near Tony Soprano's house. Districts include Newark, where Satriale's Pork Store is, and, of course, Manhattan, in the opening sequence. New York City landmarks are seen in the opening sequences and also sparingly in various episodes. In "The Sopranos" (Chase, 2000), Tony and Carmela, his wife, go to New York City for dinner, and the image of the skyline flashes across the screen right before the scene opens. This signifies that the Sopranos are in New York City, but it also shows that they are only there for entertainment purposes. The allure of the Big Apple draws them there for dinner, but not much else.

As for nodes, the main spaces in *The Sopranos* are the mansion, Satriale's Pork Store, and the Bada Bing! Strip Club. Scenes with Tony's immediate family take place primarily in the mansion, whereas discussions with the mob fam-

ily are based in the seedy strip club and the back room of the pork store. Sometimes, the mob will eat at the restaurant Vesuvio (“The Sopranos”; Chase, 2000), another public space. Thus, most nodes are either the home or a restaurant, feeding the representation of public space as an arena of consumption.

What *The Sopranos* does more than any of the other four shows is depict the city as a mimetic icon in the distance, rarely touched but always present to anchor the meaning of the greater urban area. New York City has a pull to it for most of the characters, as is seen when Carmela wants to take her daughter Meadow shopping in the city (“The Sopranos”; Chase, 2000). Meadow winds up at Columbia in the third season, which puts her in a safe world away from the corruption on the other side of the edge, the Hudson River. *The Sopranos*’ setting is separated from the Big Apple to show the city in a positive light. The opening sequence proves that the city is more of a fake postcard than a place of residence. New York City is two-dimensional when viewed from the other, darker side of the metropolitan area.

Conclusion: Metonymy, the Metropolis, and the Museum

Our analysis has shown how five television shows depict New York City through the use of five topoi: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. In each case, the image becomes an anchor that boils down the meaning of New York City to a metonymy, a part that stands for the whole. In addition, the image becomes hyperreal, for television audiences begin to associate places and images with the television shows instead of the city itself. Finally, these images function as marketing devices that attract attention to New York City by displaying the urban fragments in a glamorous light.

The meanings constructed from images on *Friends*, *Sex & the City*, *Seinfeld*, *The Sopranos*, and *Felicity* are potentially polysemous, but when put together, they coalesce into a hegemonic narrative of what New York City should look like. All of the coffee shops, boutiques, apartment buildings, skyline shots, and paths converge to create a dominant image of the Big Apple, the one of vibrancy, prosperity, cleanliness, and order. Lynch (1960) postulates, “In our vast metropolitan areas we do not connect the choir and the bells; like the Sherpa, we see only the sides of Everest and not the mountain” (p. 12). However, the hyperreal representations of New York’s sites become so reassuring that most viewers would be content with seeing only fragments of the “real” city. Consequently, the city becomes a museum in itself, for “tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 9). Today, visitors to New York can take a guided tour of many sites used on the shows analyzed in this essay. As the Web site for On Location Tours promises, fans can “visit the apartment building where Monica, Chandler and other

Friends live,” “order soup from the *Seinfeld* ‘Soup Nazi’ (in season),” “see the Jimmy Choo boutique where Carrie buys her shoes,” and “see Pizzaland, the Muffler Man, and other sites from the opening credits [of *The Sopranos*]” (<http://www.sceneontv.com/>). It is not the allure of the real New York City that gives it such prominence, but rather the appeal of the absolute fake version shown on television. The aggregation of the various metonymic representations shown on television transforms the city into a destination for tourists who come from all over the world to see if New York City is truly like it is on television.

The concept of the city as a museum leads to an increasing emphasis on image marketing, for “a museum excursion typically culminates in a trip to the museum shop” (Haskins, 2003, p. 15). Urban planners and marketing executives endeavor to market the city as a postcard so that the image attracts tourists, which in turn will increase the revenue for the location. The city may not be like its representation on television, but “what matters about myth and magic is not their truth, but their effectiveness” (Donald, 1995, p. 79). *Seinfeld* was the first of the 1990s to market New York City as a tourist destination, and many other shows have followed, proving that television setting has a rhetorical influence on consumer-spending decisions. The city itself is a museum in need of visitors, just like all of the theme parks and casinos that normally attract media attention and draw tourists.

Television images of cityscapes, multiplied and recycled as backdrops and transitions in location specific serials deserve critical attention as a special sort of image marketing. The city is an important icon in American culture, and it has gained even more prominence in postmodern era. Television imagery profoundly influences how the viewing public perceives a certain city, and this observation is applicable to places other than New York City, such as Los Angeles, Providence, Dallas, and Baltimore. What makes New York City stand out is that so many producers and filmmakers have chosen the city for their setting. The relationship between television settings and postmodern capitalist image production is mutually reinforcing. This is indeed the assumption of urban planners, who are concerned not only with constructing the perfect city, but also with creating the profitable, tourist-ready destination. Television show settings, therefore, act not only as narrative links in trivial stories about colorful characters, but also as potent rhetorical devices in a tourist economy driven by the production and consumption of places and their images.

Notes

1. As a counterpoint to official efforts to rebuild Lower Manhattan, scholars of architecture and urban planning urged a slowing down of the process to reflect on the meaning of the tragedy for the future of urban development. See, for example, Sorkin (1992) and Zukin (2002).

2. For recent studies in this vein, see Hannigan (1998), Huxtable (1997), Sorkin (1992), and Zukin (1991).

3. For example, Aitken and Zonn (1994), Clarke (1997), Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001), and Krause and Petro (2003).

4. We borrow this term from Urry's (1990) landmark study of ways of looking that characterize modern tourism. Although Urry is concerned with embodied tourism (i.e., the physical experience of traveling whereby the pleasures of looking are augmented by other sensations), we are proposing that television representations of places to visit position audiences as potential tourists.

5. Following Burke (1952), we use the term *metonymy*, rather than *synecdoche*, to underscore the symbolic act of reduction implicit in the use of visual icons to represent the city. As Burke explains, "representation (synecdoche) stresses a relationship or connectedness between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction . . . but reduction follows along this road in only one direction" (p. 509). De Certeau (1984) uses the term *synecdoche* (without distinguishing it from *metonymy*) to describe spatial practices of representing "totalities by fragments (a less in the place of more)" (p. 101).

6. The cleanliness of New York City remains a heated issue: "In a poll in 2002, almost half of the visitors to New York (and more than half of New Yorkers themselves) said that the city's streets were dirty" (Robinson, 2004).

7. Admittedly, several prime-time television shows in the 1970s and early 1980s incorporated less-than-glamorous imagery of the city into their story lines. *Bridget Loves Bernie* (Kinon & Nelson, 1972-1973), a tale about an interfaith relationship between a low-middle-class Jewish man and a wealthy Irish Catholic woman, juxtaposes the shots of Bernie's working-class neighborhood with the shots of Bridget's parents' posh apartment building on the upper East Side. A similar contrast can be observed in the opening credits of *All in the Family* (Lear, 1971-1979), as an aerial shot of Manhattan is followed by a tracking street level shot of Archie Bunker's blue-collar neighborhood in Queens. The scenes accompanying opening credits in *Welcome Back, Kotter* (Komack, 1975-1979), a series about a young teacher returning to his old high school in Brooklyn, leave little doubt that he is coming back to a tough neighborhood: After the sign "Welcome to Brooklyn, 4th largest city in America," we see a montage of scenes depicting crowded, gritty streets, clothes drying outside on clotheslines, and graffiti covered trains. Still, even though these shows broach serious topics such as racial, ethnic, economic difference, and juvenile delinquency, outside shots are used on all of these shows sparingly, usually only at the beginning and end of each episode. Police dramas, of course, tend to depict more of the city. Thus, in *Cagney and Lacey* (Rosenzweig, 1982-1988), a critically acclaimed show about two female NYPD detectives, the camera follows the lead characters on various assignments to economically depressed parts of town, and as a result of their encounters, the two women end up discussing pressing social issues such as abortion rights and poor women's access to medical care.

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William J. Sadler is a 1st-year law student at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities. He graduated from Boston College in 2004 with a bachelor's degree in communication and economics. His research interests include legal aspects of urban planning and popular representations of cities in visual culture.

Ekaterina V. Haskins is assistant professor in the Department of Language, Literature, and Communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She has published in the areas of rhetorical theory and criticism, visual rhetoric, and public memory.