

## **Cinderella vs. Barbie: The Battle for Postfeminist Performance in Teen Transformation Narratives**

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In this paper, I will analyze the ways in which the gender politics of the teen makeover film, at its height of popularity between 1999 and 2004, can be read as formulating an anxious dialogue in response to a range of mass marketed femininities popular with young consumers. I will argue that these feminine types, which scholars have generally conceptualized as symptomatic of the 'postfeminist' era, but whom have also been more specifically termed chick postfeminist (Holmlund, 2005), girl hero (Hopkins, 2002) and neo-feminist (Radner, 2011), find representation in narratives through the antagonists of the piece – plastic mean girls situated as “whores” of consumption in opposition to the protagonist’s virtuous and virginal Cinderella. Teen makeover films, like many postfeminist texts, are fraught with contradictions in their representation of femininity, here simultaneously elevating and rejecting feminine masquerade as a means to success. But while the means to success for girls and women in the postfeminist age may always depend on adherence to a set of stringent rules as to what is culturally valued as desirably feminine, as is suggested by the use of a makeover trope, what marks the *achievement* of success or personal fulfillment may constitute a key rupture at the core of popular postfeminist philosophy. The teen makeover film aims to resituate heterosexual romance as of utmost importance to the development and happiness of adolescent girls in a society where the trappings of rampant consumerism and the increasing temptation of fame and celebrity due to a perceived democratization of these spheres threatens to derail their journey to adulthood. In analyzing the “Barbie” girls deemed as villainous in the texts, I hope to draw attention to how their construction as quasi-celebrities impacts other women negatively, thus providing an avenue for the makeover of the protagonist to be read as empowering – a recognition of the worth of a woman deemed inferior by her peers while at the same time necessary for patriarchal law and reproduction. In reading representations of youthful female celebrity in a group of films, I hope to convey that these feminine identities signify more widely in an age that is simultaneously characterized by advanced consumer capitalism and yet is resentful and fearful of this fact. The girl idol, I will argue, becomes a scapegoat for what are seen as the ills of modernity in American society. The filmic high school becomes a simulated social space where power relations are distorted and the reign of the girl idol is eventually called into question and renegotiated.

Examples of the teen makeover film that I will consider include *She's All That* (1999), an update of the Pygmalion myth in which high school athlete Zack (Freddie Prinze Jr.) accepts a bet that he can make any girl prom queen with the right hair and make-up; *The Princess Diaries* (2001), which tells the story of socially awkward teenage girl Mia (Anne Hathaway) who discovers that becoming a princess is her birthright, and *A Cinderella Story* (2004), which retells the fairytale in a high-school setting where the protagonist Sam (Hilary Duff) remains enslaved by her stepmother and frustrated that she is invisible to the boy of her dreams. These films more closely resemble classic cinematic examples of the makeover cycle such as *Now, Voyager* (1942) or the Audrey Hepburn vehicles of the fifties in their close adherence to the ugly-duckling-to-swan-narrative. Other films that I will reference include *Never Been Kissed* (2000), where journalist Josie Gellar (Drew Barrymore) masquerades as a teenage pupil for a story but in the process heals her traumatic adolescent past and finds romance; and *Wild Child* (2009), which features a deviant teen who is sent to an English boarding school, where she undergoes a *makeunder*, revealing a striking resemblance to her deceased, idealized mother. Finally, I consider *Mean Girls* (2004), which while atypical in the portrayal of its main character, pays closer attention to the villains of the piece, with a narrative that has protagonist Cady (Lindsay Lohan) undergo a makeover prior to infiltrating a socially dominant group of girls in an effort to decode their mechanics of power.

### **Surveying Postfeminist Culture – Consumption, Sex, Power, Fame ... Family?**

What does it mean to locate a debate on postfeminism within films that have an ideological drive that may also be theorized as quintessentially postfeminist? Before exploring the characterization of females within these films in their cultural context, I first provide a brief overview of how the term postfeminism has been utilized in recent scholarship, paying particular attention to how it has been applied to female representation within popular culture. I will aim to show that while the postfeminist era has rightly been defined as neoconservative in its privileging of romance, marriage and family values, its relationship with the intersections of neoliberalism, consumer culture and market demands often threatens to create instability for a conservative agenda that may not always be deemed commercially attractive.

Any attempt to delineate the meanings of postfeminism can be difficult not least because it has been used extensively and to different purposes within academia. However, important to my hypothesis here is an examination of postfeminism as popular philosophy. Many commentators agree that while the term postfeminism indicates that feminism is a movement belonging to the past, the language of feminism nevertheless

has been co-opted, distorted and commodified into a substitute discourse that serves an anti-feminist agenda (Modleski, 1991; Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have argued that popular culture since the 1990s has been characterized by a heightened address to female consumers, promoting consumption as an empowering strategy to cure dissatisfaction, stating, "the construction of women as both subjects and consumers or perhaps as subjects only to the extent that we are willing and able to consume is one of the contradictions at the core of postfeminist culture" (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 8). This commodified language of feminism is inextricably bound up with a neoliberal form of governance that encourages the individual to become less reliant on the state and strive to meet the needs of the marketplace as both worker and consumer. Neoliberalism defines individual success as bound up in the capacity to self-regulate, and as such, the social actor is addressed in a way that foregrounds discourses of choice and agency even when faced with decisions that require conformance to idealized modes of being (Arthurs and Gill, 2007). Angela McRobbie, referencing texts such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), describes the quintessential postfeminist woman as confident in declaring anxiety about finding a husband while at the same time enjoying her sexuality without fear of a double standard. She adds that these women do not appear to need a man for financial support, arguing that independence through wage-earning capacity is rewarded on the provision that women abandon a critique of patriarchy and adhere to a masquerade of hyperfemininity (McRobbie, 2009: 21). Thus, women in popular culture are commonly shown to use femininity to their advantage, having been both formed by and yet disavowing of feminism (Brunsdon, 1997).

Governing the representation of adult femininities in popular culture texts, however, are two competing discursive strands. Diane Negra (2009) has convincingly argued that many recent films and television programs aimed at women, including *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), *13 Going on 30* (2004) and *Providence* (1999-2002), encourage a re-domestication of female protagonists as they come to realize their lives as urban career women are deficient and begin to prioritize romance and family. Although today's girls and women are heralded as enjoying an unprecedented economic liberation due to newfound career opportunities (Harris, 2004), textual constructions of femininities commonly imbue career women with a certain melancholia that can only be appeased through the embrace of a traditional role as wife and mother. Aspirational consumption here is tied into "sumptuous domesticity," with Negra citing lifestyling shows and domestic goddesses Nigella Lawson and Rachel Ray as additional evidence of this ongoing trend (Negra, 2009:132-135). Hilary Radner (2011) challenges the concept of a temporal shift away from and in opposition to feminism, arguing that what she calls neo-feminism originated *alongside* the second wave movement through the writings of Helen Gurley Brown.

Radner argues this term better applies to a neoliberal feminine culture where choice and self-fulfillment are realized through an engagement with consumer culture. In what constitutes a key break from Negra's analysis of popular postfeminism, Radner explains that the "single girl" achieves her identity outside marriage and without defining herself in terms of maternity, noting "one of the significant traits of the neo-feminist paradigm is the way in which consumer culture glamour replaces the maternal as the defining trait of femininity" (Ibid: 11). Central to such neo-feminist films as *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (1997), *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008) are the importance of female friendship and bonding, and fashion as showcase as well as source of empowerment, with the role of romance and marriage in the protagonist's life treated with ambivalence. Postfeminist popular culture, then, while presenting "empowerment" as resulting from adherence to idealized gender norms and as achievable through aspirational consumerism, displays uncertainty with regard to the meaning of empowerment. While the consumer capitalist ethos and the domestic ideal can co-exist, and while the two above ideologies can operate separately within the pop-cultural sphere, a certain friction arises between the end goal of the romantic happily ever after and the possibility of an ever-continuing renewal of the self. This perpetual self-renewal is facilitated through conspicuous consumption and may extend to one's romantic relationships. The teen makeover film, while similar in ideological drive to one of Negra's retreatist texts, explicitly invokes aspects of neo-feminist philosophy through villainous teen-girl characters in narratives that can be read as battlegrounds for the future of the feminine. As such, a commentary on currently celebrated femininities can be read through the juxtaposition of a virtuous yet socially disadvantaged "Cinderella" figure and a plasticized consumer-driven "Barbie" villain. While the teen makeover film promotes beauty as the primary form of currency for girls and constructs a female subject who must be made over in order to enjoy a more empowered position in society, it does so explicitly in the name of heterosexuality and reproduction. The antagonistic Barbie figure operates as a warning of the social damage that can occur when the neoliberal consumer capitalist ethos is taken to its logical extremes.

Closely aligned with the neo-feminist philosophy and predominantly targeted towards adolescent and even pre-teen girls has been the concept of girl power, which originated in the music industry and plays upon the aspirational fantasies of the young consumer, invoking fame as the ultimate means of social and sexual domination. In the girl-power world, fame provides one with the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) necessary to command public space and by extension multiple male admirers who are situated in masochistic positions in relation to the female star. The lyrics below performed by popular girl-power music icons illustrate this link between celebrity and the promise of sexual "power."

"There's only two types of guys out there  
 Ones that can hang with me and ones that are scared

...

I'm a like the ringleader, I call the shots  
 (Call the shots)  
 I'm like a firecracker, I make it hot  
 When I put on a show"  
 Britney Spears, "Circus"

"Boy I'm just playing, come here baby  
 Hope you still like me, if you hate me  
 My persuasion can build a nation  
 Endless power, our love we can devour  
 You'll do anything for me  
 Who run the world? Girls!"

Beyoncé, "Run the World (Girls)"

"Oh I'm a trendsetter  
 Yes this is true 'cause what I do, no one can do it better  
 You can talk about me  
 'Cause I'm a hot topic  
 I see you watching me, watching me, and I know you want it  
 When I grow up  
 I wanna be famous"  
 The Pussycat Dolls, "When I Grow Up"

Theorized as a "depoliticised market ploy" revolving around the celebration of quintessential feminine symbols including makeup, high heels and Barbie dolls as key to an agenda of power (Munford, 2007; Taft, 2004), girl power often relies on the market formula of a manufactured sisterhood that spouts the value of female friendship over heterosexual love while appearing overtly sexualized. Brought into the mainstream in 1996 by the Spice Girls, the girl power influence can be seen in groups such as the Pussycat Dolls as well as female solo pop acts such as Britney Spears, who nevertheless are commonly backed up by a group of female dancers acting as "friends" on stage or in videos. This formula grants possession of the star rights mainly to the female consumer, who can engage in the illusion of possessing and perhaps befriending the star by buying into her brand through tie-in merchandising. Susan Hopkins (2002) argues that girl power promises of fame, fortune and sexual agency have replaced fantasies of romance and marriage for girls. In exploring the links between girl-power postfeminism and celebrity power, Hopkins notes not only that marketers aim to build a relationship between celebrities and consumers that is channeled toward increased consumption, but also that celebrity culture appears to reward "feminine pleasures of image, make-up and masquerade" (Hopkins, 2002:

5). Catharine Lumby has noted a shift in popular concerns regarding girls' relationship to fame, from "their irrational idealisation of predominantly male idols to concerns that they are obsessively fantasising about *becoming* famous themselves" (Lumby, 2007: 342). Real-life girls, sold on the rags-to-riches fairytale stories of stars such as Britney Spears, the Pussycat Dolls and Kate Moss, line up for global reality TV shows like *American Idol* (2002-) and *America's Next Top Model* (2003-) hoping to be discovered not only for talent, but in equal measure for the fact that they have the "right look," or more accurately that they have managed to carefully emulate the look of their idols. It is common for a girl-power icon to be on the judging panel, for instance Nicole Scherzinger on *The X Factor* (2011-) or Jennifer Lopez on *American Idol*, or to act in a mentoring role throughout the series. What is important here for participants is a chance to be seen and noticed by many under the guidance of one who has been successful in this aim before them – to "become someone." The appeal for those who adhere to this regime of strict self-surveillance, beautifying and sexualizing their bodies in order to fit with patriarchal ideals, is both celebrity and the social and sexual power that promises to result from being the object of the admiring public gaze. The Barbie antagonists of the teen makeover film act out this girl-power promise within the social milieu of the school.

Given the appeal and seductiveness of the girl power/neo-feminist philosophy for younger and younger women, a certain panic has arisen regarding consumption of the media by lower-age groups and the teen makeover film's interventionist narratives must additionally be read in this context. Due to widespread debate that girls are being sexualized too early (Durham, 2008; Brown and Lamb, 2006) but also that girls, particularly within American high schools, are becoming more socially and sexually aggressive or "meaner" (Wiseman, 2002; Simmons, 2002), the films in question may problematically invite a reading as socially responsible, as necessary for the well-being of teenage girls.

### **The Presentation of the Female Antagonist as Mass-Produced Celebrity**

In order for the Cinderella heroine of the teen makeover film to be recognized as a somehow more "natural" embodiment of future womanhood, she must be first compared and contrasted to other "unnatural" or deviant female-adolescent characters. These adolescents may vie for the attentions of the male love interest, as is the case in *She's All That*, *A Cinderella Story*, and *Mean Girls*; or they may simply resent the social elevation of the protagonist and seek to stand in her way, as in *The Princess Diaries*. As I have discussed earlier, these characters are created in the likeness of certain popular femininities and yet seemingly act more narrowly as indictments of cliques in American schools. The deviant female adolescents adopt a performance of hyperfemininity in order to conceal their bid for mastery of the social

body, with the degree of success they achieve resulting in a flawed sex-role power dynamic. Through the villains of the teen makeover film, it is possible to read a commentary on contemporary popular culture, one that indicates girls and women alone are responsible for a renewed policing of the female body that negatively affects them, as opposed to a policing of femininity that would guarantee their happiness and contentment. These texts present the antagonists in their initial state as teen idols in the school and then move to expose them as threats to the other characters, all the while working towards what the films ultimately see as a more sustainable version of femininity for society as a whole.

The antagonists of the teen makeover film are commonly represented as a girl gang of wealthy and devoted shoppers who command an omnipotent power within the educational institution. In a very key sense they function as celebrities in the space of the school, their status as "popular" not indicating that they are well-liked but that they are well-known and a source of fascination. As Turner, Bonner and Marshall note, "celebrities are people the public is interested in" (2000: 9). The members of the girl gang operate at the center of the social space, often symbolized by their sitting at the largest or most central cafeteria table, and appear to act as generators of meaning (Couldry, 2000). In *She's All That*, a male character notes that Taylor Vaughan (Jodi Lyn O'Keefe), head of the female clique in the film, is "an institution in this place – every girl wants to be her and every guy wants to nail her," thus situating her as an object of desire for girls and boys alike. In *Never Been Kissed*, Josie's boss orders her to become friends with the popular girls as part of her undercover operation because they have been featured in the news for partying and drug taking. He holds up the newspaper featuring a photo of the girls at the tellingly nicknamed The Court, a hot spot for those at the top of the school's elite inner circle. He then explains to Josie while pointing to these female images that "this is where the stories are." *Mean Girls* features a segment where various female students in direct address to the camera gush about Queen Bee Regina George (Rachel McAdams), her glamour here aligned with her "flawless" beauty, the expensive items she owns, and a link to celebrity with rumours she does car commercials in Japan. A character notes too that a celebrity has bestowed worth on Regina, who once sat next to John Stamos on a plane and who told her she was pretty. In some senses, the members of the girl gang function as a star-making machine in their ability to mobilize discourses about their own histories and habits that generate awe and discussion amongst their peers. By carefully emulating the style of the girl gang, Cady is able to command the same kind of attention. Regina George is an avid consumer but is also influential over consumption practices. Cady's attempt to deplete Regina's power through the vandalism of her clothes backfires as the other girls in the school similarly vandalize their clothes to be like her. The film thus alludes to the imitative practices of fandom, the negotiation between self and the idealized other

in the formation of femininity (Stacey, 1994). What is also clear in this text, as in the others, is that Regina's quasi-celebrity status depends on her adherence to modes of femininity touted by contemporary popular culture. She advocates participation in consumer capitalism, self-regulates in order to fit conventional norms of beauty and is empowered in large part due to her involvement in an insulated girl group. As Cady prepares to infiltrate Regina's gang, she is told that the keys to her power are her "hot body, man candy and army of skanks."

Another important point in relation to the celebrity status of the mean girl is her association with denigrated yet pervasive forms of stardom. In *She's All That*, while dancing for a camera on spring break, Taylor attracts the attention of reality television star Brock Hudson (Matthew Lillard), his name clearly marking him out as an imitative version of a superior star. Taylor's act of dancing on film in a bikini at the request of a director while on holiday additionally alludes to such shows as *Girls Gone Wild* (1997-), portraying her as aggressively pursuing the goal of fifteen seconds of fame through the presentation of her only partially-clothed body. The film makes no comment on the exploitative aspect of shows that target intoxicated teenagers. After Mia's true identity as a European princess has been discovered in *The Princess Diaries*, Lana (played by pop star Mandy Moore) and her friends trick her into getting caught in a state of undress by the tabloid press. Here, the girl icon is shown as knowing in her manipulation and perpetuation of the tabloid media and in working to encourage objectification of the female form, her lower-class celebrity impacting on Mia's more worthy stardom in a way that mimics male voyeuristic domination. Mia's visibility here is more worthy because she is associated with royalty, the monarchy, an older institutionalized patriarchal power that supposedly works for good. Her celebrity is accidental and yet also innate, being a result of birthright, so is deemed more authentic than that of the girl idol who has manufactured her own stardom to the detriment of the student body. She is additionally portrayed as deserving of her Princess identity due to her kind, passive and obedient behavior. The mean girls' appearance in a newspaper in *Never Been Kissed* also alludes to tabloid media in its exposure of the hedonistic lifestyles of young and celebrated femininities. The contest of the prom queen, a common climactic scene in these films where the most popular girl is crowned and celebrated, is often a point for commentary on the artifice and worthlessness of the power so coveted by the mean girl. If the protagonist wins the crown, she generally uses the opportunity to spread a message about the need for equality within the school and comforts her peers with insinuations that the distribution of power in the real world is markedly different (*Mean Girls, Never Been Kissed*). If the antagonist wins, this may mark the point where her power is shown to be losing its grip. In *She's All That*, the plug is pulled during Taylor's acceptance speech, her domineering language incomprehensible to the student body. These scenes function as empowering messages to the



victimized, a reassurance that subordination does not last forever, and also work to blame these recognizable Barbie girl icons as sources of oppression standing in the way of an egalitarian society. These antagonists are unveiled to have been circulating an inauthentic meaning to which others unfortunately have contributed as a result of their admiration and devotion. As Cady in *Mean Girls* states as she breaks the coveted prom-queen crown into little pieces, "it's just plastic."

The Barbie antagonists, like the prom-queen crown, are both coveted and reviled, reassuring and familiar but threatening. While this description may be true of most female antagonists in cinematic history (see Mulvey 1975; Haskell, 1974), in the teen makeover film it works in a historically specific manner, exhibiting a close relationship with elements of popular postfeminist representation. In accordance with Sandra Lee Bartky's (1990) theories on the disciplined and practiced female body, the antagonist in the teen makeover film appears to have internalized the male gaze and thus to be completely subjected to patriarchal authority. These bodies are highly gendered ones, schooled in makeup application, feminine movement and dieting, with the mean girls clearly shown to be preoccupied with their bodies. When Shelby (Julie Gonzalo) in *A Cinderella Story* visits the diner where Sam works, she asks for something that has no sugar, no carbs and that is fat-free. In *Mean Girls*, evaluating the body is a ritual. One scene features the core girl group standing in front of a mirror making claims such as "I have man shoulders" and "my pores are huge" before turning to new member Cady, expecting her to make a contribution. Regina's claim that she needs to lose three pounds is followed by an expectant glare, at which point her friends are supposed to remind her of her idealized slenderness. Body shame in these instances is merely a tool in the arsenal of socially powerful women to gain control over their peers and is not shown to result in real stress or anxiety on the mean girl's part. Shelby's line in the diner is meant to show Sam she is beneath eating in such a lowbrow establishment and to send her scurrying to find something to accommodate her; it is not born out of a real fear of gaining weight. These films, in alluding to the near impossible physical standards girls have to work towards in order to be empowered in today's culture, point to a troubling social issue. Yet, in portraying female body shame as nothing but an orchestration of the deviant female mind, the films do not interrogate the real and damaging psychological consequences that may arise from striving to reach these ideals. Furthermore, while teen makeover films depict women's objectification of other women as bullying or the scrutinization of one's body as narcissistic, they may sanction male objectification of the female body as necessary for the elevation of the protagonist. Zack's orchestration of a makeover for Laney contributes to her newfound sense of self-worth. The camera acts as Zack's gaze when she descends down the stairs immediately post-makeover, slowly tracking up from her high-heel-clad foot and bare leg to reveal a red silk cocktail dress. The soundtrack plays the tune "Kiss Me"

as she trips and falls into Zack's arms, the makeover act foreshadowing romantic destiny. Austin (Chad Michael Murray) is frustrated by his girlfriend Shelby's vanity in *A Cinderella Story*, telling Sam he likes a girl with a healthy appetite. Yet later in the film as he tries to locate his "Cinderella," girls parade past him, auditioning their bodies for the role of girlfriend. This is shown to be a natural and necessary step in the romance narrative, just as the auditioning of female feet to fit a petite glass slipper is necessary in the original fairytale. Austin sniggers when an overweight girl proclaims herself to be his Cinderella, though the film has previously praised Sam's healthy appetite. Therefore the message that perhaps comes across for viewers is that one must *naturally* possess an ideally beautiful, slender body as it operates as a marker of one's inner beauty. The makeovers in *A Cinderella Story*, *She's All That* and *The Princess Diaries* are granted to those who are diamonds in the rough; who are humble, passive, gentle and thus deserve the pleasures of objectification. The makeover is not portrayed as feminine artifice so much as an authentication of the protagonists' inner worth, as a natural outer manifestation of their inner beauty. The protagonists' bodies are beautified in the name of romance and reproduction, a correct world order, whereas the antagonists perceive their ideal bodies as assets to be utilized in the quest for social domination, a method advocated by girl power and neo-feminist philosophy. Thus the mean girls' references to dieting and body work highlight the mechanics behind their power and further serve to reinforce the artifice of their idealized images, their carefully constructed "stardom."

### **Plastic Americana, Advanced Consumer Capitalism and the Feminine Waste Product**

The key deviant characters in *She's All That*, *Mean Girls*, *A Cinderella Story* and *Wild Child* are all stiletto-clad, pink-wearing, long-blond-haired "Barbie doll" types. In fact, the core girl gang in *Mean Girls* is tellingly nicknamed "The Plastics," indicating their faked, malleable brand of popular femininity. Cady also describes Regina as like the Barbie doll she never had. The girl-gang members in *Never Been Kissed* all decide, without one another's knowledge, to come dressed as Barbie for the school prom and don a blank gaze as Josie tells them she is dressed as a Shakespeare character. The link to Barbie, made through pastel clothes, convertibles, blonde hair and associations with the fake, is significant. Barbie has for some been deemed the ultimate American girl-power icon (Taft, 2004: 74). Susan Hopkins notes that magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* (significantly the magazine Radner most associates with neo-feminist philosophy), promote Barbie as the most famous icon of femininity because she "promises aesthetic mastery in a world of beautiful things" (Hopkins, 2002: 107). A doll-like image is common to female pop stars, particularly those such as Spears, Christina Aguilera and Jessica Simpson who were most commercially successful when these films were produced. This image is also common to socialites such as Paris Hilton

and Nicole Richie. In fact, many of these stars have dolls made in their likeness that girls can buy. Associated with Barbie is of course blondeness, with the lead antagonist commonly having blonde hair. The films participate in a perpetuation of the dumb-blonde stereotype by taking swipes at the mean girls' lack of intelligence. In addition to the example above from *Never Been Kissed* where the girl gang has never heard of Shakespeare, Shelby in *A Cinderella Story* is forced to cheat in Algebra, Taylor in *She's All That* is described as "a C-minus GPA with a wonder bra," while Karen (Amanda Seyfried) in *Mean Girls* informs Cady she has "ESPN – a fifth sense." Poppy (Emma Roberts) in *Wild Child* even undergoes a hair-color change from blonde to brunette to reflect her less vapid, more English, personality. The films then work to fix order upon the mean girls, to render them simple and knowable (Lippmann, 1956), while engaging in an essentially sexist view of women as irrational beings who in this instance are unfit to be in power.

Hinted at in these depictions of the antagonist adolescent is also a certain anti-Americanism, with Barbie being one of the key symbols of American consumer culture. This is not to suggest that the overarching ideology of the films is anti-American, as "good" American values are restored through the concluding romantic union of the Cinderella and prince characters, who prefigure the creation of the idealized nuclear family. However, through the presentation of the antagonist it is possible to read a commentary on "bad" American values of advanced consumer capitalism and even US global hegemony, so intrinsic to the neoliberal political economy. Because of the presence of these bad American values, the films commonly filter the idealized qualities of the Cinderella protagonists through fantasies of foreignness. Mia's stardom is more worthy than Lana's in *A Princess Diaries* because she is a European princess. In fact, the presentation of Mia towards the conclusion of the film, where she is unveiled as a completely transformed princess, is strongly reminiscent of the presentation of Audrey Hepburn at the beginning of *Roman Holiday* (1953) in dress as well as hair and make-up style. Hepburn was a star associated with a ladylike, upper-class femininity in large part due to her European aristocratic heritage (Moseley, 2002). However, while *Roman Holiday* empowers its princess by allowing her to wander freely around Rome incognito, *The Princess Diaries* promotes empowerment as resulting from the confined, disciplined body, with Mia not only having to undergo beautification but also training in etiquette and posture through the use of restraining scarves. Mia really only attains corporeal grace and dignity when she waltzes with love interest Michael (Robert Schwartzman) and obtains her "foot-popping kiss." The film's makeover is not truly complete until validated by male desire and heterosexual romance. When girls dressed up as Barbie in *Never Been Kissed* appear not to know of Shakespeare, an opposition is set up between English high art and American mass production. In *Wild Child*, the main character is sent to England in the hope that traditional

"English culture," here offered as a boarding school, strict headmistress and highly classed system, will straighten out the corruption to her character that being an American teen particularly susceptible to certain messages of postfeminism has caused. The fact that these messages also have a high degree of cultural currency in the UK and continental Europe is disavowed, as these teen makeover films present two versions of potential contemporary femininity and validate one in part by defining it through a romanticized and nostalgic view of non-American femininity. This is coupled with the resurrection of a lost, passive femininity, hidden beneath the protagonist's undesirable bodily signifiers. Even Cady in *Mean Girls*, who is not passive so much as naive and who is not coded as maternal, is distinctly represented as not quite American because she has been brought up in Africa and therefore has not been privy to the rules of what she calls "girl world." The film has its protagonist navigate the complex terrain of neoliberal femininity in its linkages to consumer citizenship within the space of the American high school and ultimately creates a citizen who, while knowledgeable of the rules of girl world, for the most part shuns them through a privileging of romance as opposed to fame and power.

Martin Heidegger's frequent descriptions of America as a "soulless, greedy and inauthentic force" (in Markovits, 2007: 58) could easily describe the films' girl idols. It could be argued that while these women internalize a gaze that polices their femininity, which is then externalized through a mask of hyperfemininity disguising a will to power, so too does America internalize the vitriol commonly directed at it and project it onto an empty vehicle for consumption within the diegesis, the quintessentially postfeminist pop-cultural figure. The films' varying constructions of United States, British and Europe identity deny and disavow the age of globalization through "mass cultural hegemony" to present a higher cultural state of being for its protagonists, while at the same time displaying a fear of the imperialist threat posed by the Barbie-doll mean girl in her capacity to corrupt the young, naive and susceptible. In a manipulation of the girly-film and pop-group friendship formula, the girl gang in these films operates more as an unsavory government with an imperialist agenda built around consumer practices and sexualization of the body than a group of friends. If the protagonist in the teen makeover film has to be acknowledged and valued for the nurturing inner core beneath the undesirable surface, the antagonist must be recognized for the emptiness beneath the decorative exterior. This in/out configuration essentially dehumanizes the mean girl, the connotations of plasticity and air-headedness rendering her robotic, devoid of feeling. Everything exists to be consumed, and as such she too is consumed. Tasker and Negra's observation that under postfeminism women are subjects only to the extent that they are able to consume here takes on paradoxical and more sinister connotations, presenting a cruel double bind for the contemporary woman.

## The Threat of Consumable Masculinity and the Orchestration of Romantic Love

Postfeminist representation ruptures and falters around the notion of success and what it means to women to be successful today. The Barbie villains of the teen makeover film are so because everything and anything exists to be consumed, because everything is a potentially empowering accessory, including men. In the teen makeover film, the man functions as just another consumable item, although he has to be an idealized man, a coveted object, in order to be worthy of the mean girl's attention. Of utmost importance to the characterization of the consumer-driven teen as villain is her relationship to male teenagers and the way their active power is taken away following involvement with her. Teen makeover antagonists, like girl-power icons, reproduce asexually, replicating through processes of idealization and mimicry. The teen makeover film is thus a seemingly unusual participant in a larger series of films that depict consumer capitalist society as threatening to masculinity. [1]

*She's All That* shows that Zack's reputation is staked on his relationship with Taylor. When she breaks up with him for Hudson because she is impressed by his celebrity status, Zack takes the bet to make Laney prom queen to save face and prove that he has power in the school, or more specifically, the power to raise the social status of girls within the school. Zack has to prove that he does not need Taylor to be admired. It is worth noting here that the name play on Rock Hudson alludes to a well-known homosexual star, lending further credence to the notion that the antagonist's relationships are ill equipped for future reproductive purposes. In *Mean Girls*, Regina George keeps on-off boyfriend Aaron (Jonathan Bennett), with whom protagonist Cady is in love, at her beck and call. She is able to send him away and then lure him back using "feminine wiles." Regina is clearly in control, able to behave however she likes because she is the Queen Bee. Aaron reacts strongly when Cady calls him "Regina's property" in a scene meant to show us that Cady has become a plastic copy of Regina, and yet this is precisely what he is. Poppy in *Wild Child* initially attempts to use Freddy (Alex Pettyfer) to get kicked out of school, despite the fact that he genuinely begins to like her. As she learns the error of her ways, she ceases to act like a mean girl and instead embodies the image of her own deceased, idealized mother, her new and improved self eventually evaluated through the nostalgic gaze of her father. In *A Cinderella Story*, Sam's love interest Austin initially stays with controlling and manipulative Shelby due to her wealth, status and attractiveness, before learning that made-over Sam is a more "genuine" model of femininity – i.e. passive, nurturing and obedient.

These relationships are not built by the mean girl out of love, but by a desire to control a male figure and a social space, with love being an alien emotion to the status-obsessed girl and, by extension, the girl-power icon or postfeminist girl gang. The man's place in the subsequent "romantic"

partnership is somewhat ambiguous, or unintelligible within accepted codes of heterosexual romance, because he becomes an object with no active capacities. As a result, partnerships carefully orchestrated by the deviant female are shown to contribute to a redundancy of active masculinity, to impotence. The teen makeover film aims to correct the power dynamic where the female exerts too much authority. Where the makeover is initiated by a bet, as in *She's All That*, the man is encouraged to turn a voyeuristic eye on the female object of the bet, achieving a symbolic sexual satisfaction in his branding of her and a reaffirmation of his active role. Even in films where the man himself does not initiate the makeover, it is always the male gaze which appraises and bestows value on the new, idealized Cinderella at the conclusion to the film, and this appraisal more often than not comes with a loss of self for the woman, commonly through a reduction of her intellectual capacities. Laney is a political artist at the beginning of *She's All That*, but her work is not valued by her teacher until she uses it as a vehicle to move on from the loss of her mother. Mia in *The Princess Diaries* is initially associated with protest movements and non-conformity via the influences of her activist best friend and artist mother before being removed from these influences to take up her princess post in Genovia. Sam in *A Cinderella Story* can only realize her dreams of attending Princeton once she invites the desire of Austin while attending a ball in a wedding dress, symbolizing her future role as wife and mother. Here the prospect of higher education is seemingly rewarded on the condition of romantic dependence. Cady in *Mean Girls* is allowed to participate in a mathematics competition and receive her prom queen crown in "Mathletes" uniform; however, the film is particularly aggressive in its romantic containment of female characters. Cady's new self has to be approved by Aaron to ensure her happiness, but the film also finds love for divorcée teacher Ms. Norbury (Tina Fey) and, most problematically, Cady's friend Janis (Lizzie Caplan). Until the end of the film, Janis is coded as queer, refusing to take part in the heteronormative space of the school and turning up defiantly at prom in a purple tuxedo despite rumors of lesbianism. However, at the film's end she is coupled with one of Cady's fellow Mathletes. While the makeover and subsequent recognition is in most cases granted to a woman who exhibits idealized gender traits – namely kindness, obedience and humility – these films avoid portraying conspicuous consumption as necessary for physical transformation. In *She's All That* and *The Princess Diaries*, the beautification scene takes place indoors under strict supervision, while *A Cinderella Story*, *Never Been Kissed* and *Mean Girls* invent alternative scenarios to beautify their main characters. Protagonists are never presented with an array of consumer choices, as the act of female consumption is treated with a considerable degree of suspicion and distrust.

## Conclusion

Teen makeover films, despite their surface fairytale simplicity, are complex texts that present two recognizable types of femininity that battle for ideological dominance within the diegesis. The narratives could certainly be seen as regressive, in that they portray women's success as dependent on beautification, male approval and subsequent romance. The woman protagonist is an unlikely candidate to be marked out as special because the social inequalities that exist within the space of the school work to disadvantage her. What is most interesting about this body of films, however, is that these inequalities are shown to result from a seductive, manufactured media philosophy that holds a high degree of cultural currency for today's girls and women. This philosophy, advocating consumerism and the sexualization of the body as key to the achievement of fame and power, is shown in the film to impact negatively on the school society. It is my hypothesis that the teen makeover film highlights weaknesses and irreconcilable contradictions within the mediated messages of postfeminist culture through its female characters, seeking to enter into a dialogue with these messages and present a version of sustainable femininity. While the version of femininity the films vilify presents a limited and problematic avenue of empowerment for young women, the films' solutions can be equally limiting. One interesting question, however, is whether the films can ever really carry out their ideological work given that the bad girls are so recognizable as role models in other aspects of popular culture. It is my hope that this examination of the depiction of villainous teens in the teen makeover film can aid in debates on postfeminist culture as well as in scholarship looking at the denigration of certain forms of female celebrity within the wider media sphere.

## Notes

[1] Sally Robinson (2011) provides an interesting overview on the cultural linkages between consumerism and the feminine and how this is perceived to threaten white masculine hegemonic power.

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