
PRIME TIME ANIMATION

Television animation and
American culture

*Edited by Carol A. Stabile
and Mark Harrison*

"WHAT ARE THOSE LITTLE GIRLS MADE OF?"

The Powerpuff Girls and consumer culture

Joy Van Fuqua

Pictures that move! Drawings that speak! Impossible things! They are constituted to make you happy, these cartoon kindergartners, even while they are knocking the teeth from a villain's mouth.... From the bills in the mail, the boss at your shoulder, the mean kid on the corner, the aphids on the roses, the clog in the sink, and all the various grown-up voices of sensibility nattering in your head. Relief is only a cartoon away.

(Lloyd 2001)

DURING AN ESPN CABLECAST OF A WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) game between the New York Liberty and the Detroit Shock, my attention shifted from the pleasing spectacle of the women's athletic competition unfolding on the basketball court to the area that is, in the parlance of sports marketing, referred to as "courtside signage." Against a backdrop of advertisements for L'Oréal Cosmetics, female athletes such as New York Liberty's Teresa Weatherspoon amazed spectators and viewers in the bleachers and at home with her, as usual, unsurpassed athletic prowess. The WNBA game foregrounded the ways in which female power (in this case, athleticism), at the level of signification and spatial arrangement, is literally surrounded by a dominant, corporate discourse of conventional feminine beauty.¹ However, the traditional feminine beauty imperative was constantly challenged not only by the athletes themselves but also by the spectators. The crowd-scanning camera showed a variety of spectators who had somehow managed to eschew eyeliner and lipstick in favor of tattoos and piercings (with rocker Joan Jett sitting in front of Hillary and Bill

Clinton). In fact, one could surely argue that a significant portion of the strategic pleasures for lesbians and other fans of the WNBA comes not only from watching the game on the court, but in making a game out of watching the spectators, of scanning the crowd for queer faces, styles, and signifiers. While the corporate perspective insists on framing female power and athleticism through the lens of conventionalized femininity, the players and fans – and even some of the commercials – acknowledge the limitations of this perspective. Like the Maybelline commercials – “Maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s Maybelline” – featuring Sarah Michelle Gellar that punctuate *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*’s femme heroics, the intertextual relationship forged between advertising texts and women’s televised sporting events emphasize the friction of the power/puff relation.

In addition to WNBA games on Lifetime or ESPN, children’s cartoons have also begun to attract their share of female fans starved for images of women and girls that represent the multidimensional aspects of female culture. Produced by Cartoon Network (and AOL Time Warner, its mega-media parent company) as an original children’s animated series, *The Powerpuff Girls* engage a series of relationships between power and puff, the home and the laboratory, science and nature, text and context. Moreover, while Ellen Seiter has described the stronghold of “toy-based programs” as founded in children’s cartoons, *The Powerpuff Girls* is one of the few such television texts that was not originally conceived in relation to its merchandising possibilities (Seiter 1995: 169). Given the merchandising cross-promotion imperative of today’s media conglomerates, Cartoon Network reproduces *The Powerpuff Girls* as a multitude of intertextual commodities. Cartoon Network may boast of the gender-bending attributes of its pint-sized super-heroines in terms of viewing audience, but when it comes to consuming the commodity intertexts, this activity is explicitly gendered as female; the merchandise intertexts unequivocally construct young girls as the ideal consumers. In this way, the intertexts re-frame the girl-power message of the primary text in such a way as to equate consumerism with empowerment. It is significant that an executive at Warner Brothers Consumer Products, vice-president of apparel Patti Buckner, has pointed out that while boys comprise 50 percent of the viewing audience for *The Powerpuff Girls*, “no product line for boys has been developed” (*KidScreen* 1999: 42).

This essay places *The Powerpuff Girls* within two interrelated contexts: the apparent generic boom in the cultural products featuring “girl-power” and the construction of ’tween girl markets for those cultural products. Toward that end, this essay attends to the gender-bending characteristics of *The Powerpuff Girls* through close textual analysis and the structure and gendered address of the commercial intertexts. While *The Powerpuff Girls* program calls into question various forms of gender essentialism, it has also been successful in constructing a

vision of girl viewers to the “intertexts” (it does not necessarily consume the (or so the mainstream cross-gender uniformly reject. This phenomenon nor reaction to femininity appear to qu

Butt-kick

Part of the *Angels* and *L* television series and *Witchblade*. *Girls* feature Max (Jessica Wagner) in Bubbles, however, through consumer sport outfit. PpG fan: Powerpuff would not alization, this in way

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vision of girlhood that even XYs can enjoy. Although the relationship of girl viewers to the main program text extends to consumption of *Powerpuff Girls* "intertexts" (merchandise), the relationship of boy viewers with the program does not necessarily include consumption of accompanying commodities. In other words, boys may be encouraged to watch, but they are not encouraged to consume the commodity intertexts – all that shopping stuff is strictly for girls (or so the merchandising suggests). That is, the program text may indeed have cross-gender (and generational) appeal,² but, the commercial intertexts almost uniformly represent girls and young women as the ideal consumers of puff stuff. This phenomenon, in itself, is neither positive nor negative, neither progressive nor reactionary. What it does highlight is the way that conventional notions about femininity and masculinity may work to reframe primary cultural texts that appear to question the very definition of girlhood.

Butt-kickin' babes

Part of the parade of "butt-kickin' babes" represented by films such as *Charlie's Angels* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (based on the computer game) and prime time television series such as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Dark Angel*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Witchblade*, Cartoon Network's prime time and daytime series *The Powerpuff Girls* features prepubescent heroines with curfew rather than cleavage. Similar to Max (Jessica Alba) in James Cameron's *Dark Angel* and Jaime Sommers (Lindsay Wagner) in *The Bionic Woman*, the three Powerpuffs, Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles, have been physically enhanced through scientific experimentation. However, unlike Max and the other enhanced full-grown heroines circulating through current popular culture, the genetically enhanced Powerpuffs do not sport outfits with plunging necklines or form-fitting tights. Figure 11.1 shows PpG fan art representing Blossom as Lara Croft, the transformation from Powerpuff to Tomb Raider accomplished without resort to bust lines.³ Although I would not want to argue that the Powerpuff Girls are beyond or free from sexualization, the context and specificity of the program text seem to mitigate against this in ways that post-pubescent girl-power films and television texts do not.

In fact, its origin story – that it was produced by a 20-year-old animation student at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California – has been incorporated into the narrative world of the program as a means of distinguishing it from its mass-marketed counterparts. A children's prime time cartoon with both child and adult, male and female fans, *The Powerpuff Girls* provides a rich example of the transformation of an "art-school" project into a mass-media product. The story of the "conception" of "The Whoopass Girls" and the three-minute film called *Whoopass Stew* emphasizes its non-commercial, artistic origins. The origin

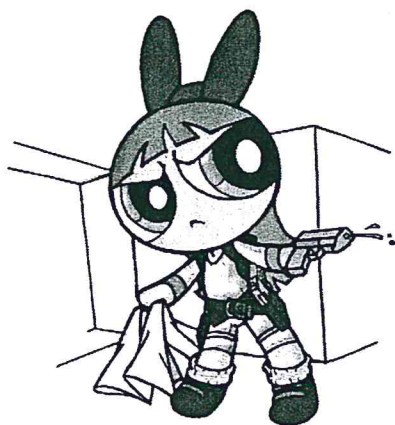


Figure 11.1 Blossom as Lara Croft

story may function as a type of “anti-economism” in which the subversive aspects of *The Powerpuff Girls* depends upon its continued erasure of things commercial.⁴ This tension between the artistic and economic has been emphasized by *The Powerpuff Girls*’ creator Craig McCracken in various interviews.⁵ Another way to read the repetition, in different media forms and sources, of the McCracken origin story is to say that it serves as a way to distinguish *The Powerpuff Girls* from other commercial texts.

The result of a laboratory experiment gone awry, Buttercup, Blossom, and Bubbles owe their power to a variety of factors, not the least of which include the 1990s rise of “grrrl culture” (Kearney 1998b: 285–311). Although *The Powerpuff Girls* is popular with both male and female viewers of various generations and genders, their creators are men.⁶ As the progeny of Professor Utonium’s laboratory and McCracken’s student film project, the Powerpuffs are not your average little girls. Apart from the fact that they have two “dads” instead of a mom and a dad, these three superheroes brandish brawn, brilliance, and cuteness in place of the current filmic and televisual fascination with lips, tits, and ass.

Another way to account for the popularity of *The Powerpuff Girls*, both text and intertexts, is to say that they typify a certain configuration of girl-power both inside and outside of media institutions. In her analysis of mass-media representations of teenage girls, Mary Kearney has suggested that the proliferation of girl superheroes in film and television has as much to do with wider cultural shifts in our ways of conceptualizing gender as it does with an increase in the number of women in decision-making positions within media institutions:

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The emergence of girl power shows are the result not only of changes to dominant notions of femininity and masculinity (which are now being reconfigured in relation to generational identity), but also transformations in the television industry, specifically the increase in female executives, producers, directors, and writers, as well as the introduction of new networks such as UPN, WB, and FOX and the greater expansion of television channels through cable and satellite transmission. In turn, the emergence of these girl-power shows can also be related to the proliferation of discourses about girl empowerment and the proliferation of assertive teenage girls through other cultural media such as magazines, film, and music.

(Kearney 1998a: 480)

Engaging in various interpretations of martial arts and cartoon-specific defenses, the Girls slug it out with the cleverest of mutant "evil" guys (and, with the exception of "Princess Morbucks," "Sedusa," and "Him" — a kind of *Yellow Submarine*-inspired devil-as-drag queen — all of the evildoers are gendered male). Reminiscent of the mutant "Penguin" from Tim Burton's *Batman Returns*, most of the foes in the "city of Townsville" and its surrounding areas have been altered through either environmental and/or scientific events, or some combination of the two. As "freaks" themselves — not of nature, but of science — the heroines of Townsville are unequivocally embraced by the citizenry and its leadership, represented by the bumbling miniature Mayor, while its villains are punished again and again and never seem to learn from their "misdeeds." In fact, the continued existence of the community is dependent upon the maintenance of the strange and "unnatural" characteristics of these three, wee 5-year-olds.

Kearney attributes the linkage of power and puff in the representation of female action-adventure heroines to the "necessity for contemporary females to embody simultaneously both genders if they want to succeed in patriarchal society and male-dominated activities" (1998a: 479). According to this Spice Girl articulation of feminism, "ideologies of female empowerment have merged with conventional feminine practices (the use of cosmetics, body-revealing clothing, high-heeled shoes), to allow for a greater spectrum of female appearance and behavior" (Kearney 1998a: 479). However, this vision of female possibility can also have the effect of further recuperating and accommodating certain feminine ideologies — ones that continue to be oppressive for many women and girls who do not wear a size 4 and a 36D bra.

Cartoon Network executive Linda Simensky has credited the character of Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons* with paving the way for "the world's cutest superheroes" (Loos 2000: 25). Whereas ten years earlier, it was "unheard of to have a female lead in an animation show," Simensky notes that, along with an increase in the

READINGS

numbers of women in positions of power at networks comes a proliferation of female characters. While this relationship is not guaranteed, Simensky's remarks do underscore the material aspects of getting female lead characters on television in animated or non-animated programs.

The marketing frenzy that consumers witness today in terms of the promotion of mass media, film and television texts, is a further result of many factors, not the least of which have to do with product merchandising and licensing. Simensky points out that the proliferation of character and franchise-centered intertexts is a result of, among other things, the mutually reinforcing relationship between the rise of Warner Brothers' Studio Stores in shopping malls in the early 1990s and the revitalization of Warner Brothers' animation through such original animated series as *The Powerpuff Girls*. In 1988, just one year before Warner Communications merged with Time Inc., Warner Brothers studio began a "new animation division to produce daily and later weekly television series" (Simensky 1998: 176). Steven Spielberg was a moving force behind such original animation series as *Steven Spielberg Presents Tiny Toon Adventures*, which became syndicated in 1991 and, according to Simensky, was soon followed by *Taz-Mania*, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Steven Spielberg Presents Freakazoid!*, *Steven Spielberg Presents Animaniacs*, and others. Indeed, this branding of the WB as, specifically, "WB Kids" began with its first broadcast in 1995. It is not as if broadcasters had never before recognized youth as a market: Nickelodeon has also promoted itself as the "kids-only network." According to Henry Jenkins (1998: 29), one way of understanding the branding and structuring of television networks as specifically for kid consumption is to see this as an effort to "erect a sharp line between the realms of children and adults." While earlier television programming from the 1950s, for example, has been described by Lynn Spigel as offering "a dissolution of age categories" (1998: 110), today's emphasis on ever-younger consumers (with *Teletubbies* probably being the youngest in terms of audience address) tends to define childhood as, first and foremost, a consumer category.⁷

Usually reserved for Hollywood-produced blockbusters – the ur-texts within mass media – franchises can also refer to specific mass-media products that can be reproduced, in varying forms, across a variety of media sources (Schatz 1997: 75). In this sense, Cartoon Network's most recent hot property, *The Powerpuff Girls*, can be understood as a case-study in the process of, as Eileen Meehan has described it, the production of the "commercial text and the product line that constitutes its commercial intertext" (1991: 61). *The Powerpuff Girls*' popularity and commercial profitability needs to be placed within the context of Cartoon Network's attempts to carve out and expand its ideal audience as well as a wider cultural framework within which particular genders are commodified in many ways. The commercial text and product lines work to construct a seamless loop of reception and consumption.

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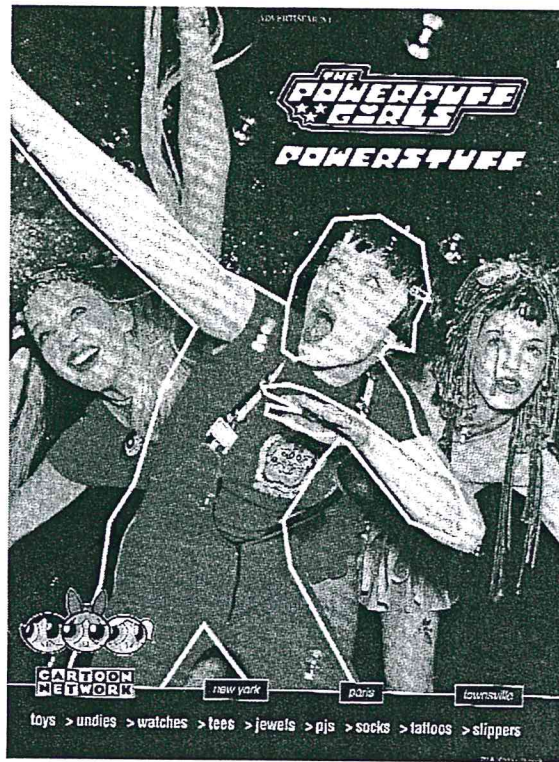


Figure 11.2 Powerpuff-inspired Rave Wear (Courtesy of The Cartoon Network)

From children's magazines such as *Kid Power* to Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls Powerzine*, girls are shown in Figures 11.2 and 11.3 consuming candy, carrying Powerpuff backpacks, dancing with Powerpuff Girl-inspired rave clothing. The cartoon's creator, Craig McCracken, is photographed surrounded by Powerpuff stuff – various plushies (stuffed dolls), T-shirts, a thermos, pillows, watches, hats. McCracken's wallet, full of dollar bills, signifies the financial rewards of such ubiquitous, intertextual commodification.

Although *The Powerpuff Girls Powerzine* (the official magazine of the Powerpuff Girls) uniformly depicts young girls as the preferred consumers of the commercial intertexts, Cartoon Network's Linda Simensky has remarked that the official breakdown of the *Powerpuff* audience is "two-thirds kids, one-third adults" (Lloyd 2001: 4). Moreover, *Powerzine* appropriates both the non-commercial style of "DIY" zine culture through the simulation of "diary" writing and the commercial style of teen beauty/fashion magazines.

Powerzine is divided into two clearly designated sections: one for the Powerpuffs and one for their arch rivals. Like the official fan magazines of boy bands such as The Backstreet Boys, *Powerzine* includes "big pictures of the Girls!"



Figure 11.3 Consuming the *Powerpuff Girls* (Courtesy of Cartoon Network)

that fans are encouraged to rip out and hang up. This audience connection between popular boy bands and the Powerpuffs, however, is not only obliquely incorporated: the trio appear as a band even as they deny “tenacious rumors to the contrary.” An additional musical reference includes an article discussing Bis, the “techno-punk” Scottish trio which performs “The Powerpuff Girls (End Theme)” on a compact disc collection of Powerpuff Girls tunes.⁸

A survey of Powerpuff Girl commodities shows an emphasis on manufacturing utilitarian, yet inexpensive items such as hair clips or lunch-boxes that can be displayed. In addition to various kinds of Powerpuff Girl dolls, consumers can buy backpacks, handbags, metal boxes, T-shirts, jeans, socks, underwear, pajamas, talking key chains, PEZ dispensers, luggage tags, mouse pads, beanbag chairs, pencil boxes, animated watches, picture frames, foaming bath crystals, diaries, chalk and chalk boards, posters, stickers, coloring books, videos and DVDs. Almost all of these commodities are – at least in their representations in magazines – gendered feminine. Other products such as skateboards that are advertised in the magazine *Kid Power*, are gendered masculine with images of Bart Simpson from *The Simpsons*, male characters from *Dragonball Z*, *Digimon*, *Gundam Wing*, *X-Men*, and stars from the *WWF* (World Wrestling Federation).

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Powerzine includes advertisements (although there are stylistic similarities between advertisements and editorial content), episode guides for fans, features that encourage active participation by readers and test the knowledge of viewers about the show (through a variety of games). They further facilitate distinct identities for each character, and address readers as devoted fans. The 'zine may invoke some of the trappings of 'zine publishing, but it also has many similarities in form as well as content to other girl magazines such as *YM*. These similarities include features such as "Powerscopes" (horoscopes), "Ask the Professor" and "What's Your Power Pulse?", that encourage readers to participate in official Powerpuff Girl consumer culture. Readers get to decide, among other things, which Girl they are closer to in terms of personality. Moreover, the 'zine is full of posters that readers may cut out and place on walls, etc. Among the females that have made it into the Powerpuff Girl pantheon are a mixture of real-life and fictional heroes including Eileen Collins (the first woman to command a space shuttle mission), Ms. Keane (the Girls' kindergarten teacher at Pokey Oaks), Tasha Schwikert (an up-and-coming young gymnast), Joan of Arc, Ms. Sara Bellum (the pun on "cerebellum" nicely emphasizing the intelligence of the Townsville mayor's female assistant in *The Powerpuff Girls*), Sylvia Earle (an underwater explorer and environmental activist), Binti Jua (an 8-year old gorilla who protected a 3-year-old human boy when he fell into pen in the zoo), and Princess Leia. The 'zine also includes a classified section that is full of fake classified advertisements and personals asking for dates for the Professor.

Even though the advertised Puff stuff and *Powerzine* tend to assume that girl-children between "diapers and driver's permits" are the ideal consumers of these products – and, by extension, the ideal *fans* – the program text displays a knowing sense of gender play through its story lines, characters, and audience address. Some of this gender irony also marks the consumerism of the intertexts, but it is important to see how the texts and intertexts engage viewers and consumers in different ways. While many of the episodes focus on dislodging assumptions about gender and girl-childhood, others thematize the processes of cross-promotion and (inter)textual commodification.⁹ For example, in "Super Zeroes" (20 October 2000), "Powerpuff Professor" (9 February 2001), and "Film Flam" (20 April 2001). McCracken both distances himself from and legitimates the production and consumption of the various texts of *The Powerpuff Girls*.

At the center of the magazine is a "Special Product Preview!" section that introduces the female readers to new Puff stuff. On the first page, the preview includes a description of the intertextual merchandise that encourages viewers to extend the reach of the program through commodity consumption:

Electronica music? Vertigo graphics? Folders and pens? Cartoons have come a long way since a hefty side of ribs toppled Fred Flintstone's car – and riding the edgy, fast and often loud cartoon revolution is *The Powerpuff Girls*, a blend

READINGS

of whimsical girlishness, crime-fighting and graphic design, dedicated to saving the world before bedtime. (Which is, given the abundance of nighttime crimes on the show, pretty loosely enforced.) But the Powerpuff revolution hasn't stopped with a TV program. There's goodies, too. The superhero supergroup have unleashed a whole line of Powerpuff stuff, from key chains to clothing, on kids nestled somewhere in between diapers and driver's permits. Products you'll find in this section can be purchased at your local retailer.

(*The Powerpuff Girls Powerzine* 2001: 49)

The items included in the "Special Product Preview!" section are gendered not only in terms of product specificity (hair clasps, cosmetic mirrors, etc.); they are also color-coded pink.¹⁰ While their specificity in terms of nature of product and color-code does certainly not limit their consumption to females, it is worth noting that the descriptive text attached to each item of Puff stuff explains how to use the item and who should use it. For example, the card "It's Good to be a Girl" includes the instructions: "Send a salutation to friends and family with a Powerpuff card or two. So slap on a stamp and write on." While I would not want to quibble about the extent to which it is "good to be a girl" and think that everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy being a girl (no matter what one's particular gender), the commercial intertexts tend to collapse – rather than open up – consumerism and girlishness. This questioning of the nature of girlhood seems to be central to the primary text, with specific episodes thematizing this issue (for example, "The Rowdyruff Boys," "Slumbering with the Enemy," and "Bubblevicious").

Moreover, one of the defining characteristics of *The Powerpuff Girls* is the way that it references contemporary popular culture. Hardly the only animated program to engage in such referencing practices, it nonetheless displays a highly self-conscious understanding of its own status as a cultural text. Perhaps only superseded by *The Simpsons*, in terms of generic reflexivity *The Powerpuff Girls* can be understood as providing a running commentary upon the nature of textual commodification and consumption. In "Powerpuff Professor," Professor Utonium worries about the extent to which he spends enough time with "his girls." One morning he tells the Girls that he wants to take them to see *The TV Puppet Pals Movie*. Remembering that *The TV Puppet Pals* is "the Girls' favorite show" and that "they watched it every night before they went to bed," the Professor takes them to see the movie version of the television program. However, their viewing experience is interrupted by a "slimy monster" that tears through the movie screen. Fortunately, the Girls switch from spectators to superheroes and defend the rest of the movie audience from the attacking creature. Professor Utonium decides that the only way he will be able to spend quality time with the Girls is if he becomes a superhero too.

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In "Film Flam," however, the issue of textual cross-promotion is made even more explicit when a "big time Hollywood producer/director/agent" named Bernie Bernstein comes to Townsville to make a movie about the Girls. Reading about their superhero feats in a newspaper, Mr. Bernstein develops an elaborate caper in which he only pretends to be making a movie in Townsville. Along with a host of accomplices, Mr. Bernstein convinces the Mayor, the Girls, and Professor Utonium to let him film a portion of the movie in a bank supplied with real money. The episode presents the media industry as a collection of scam artists out to take advantage of the Girls, the Professor, and, at least potentially, the program's creator, Craig McCracken. The Professor is the one who "saves the day" by dressing as a woman. Disguised as a woman, he gains access to "the set" (the bank) where the robbery sequence is being filmed. Looking a lot like Dustin Hoffman dressed as "Tootsie" (from *Tootsie*), the Professor interrupts the pending robbery and tells the Girls about the scam. They respond that it wasn't really a good idea to make a Powerpuff movie anyway. However, in a display of uncharacteristic glee, the Professor replies that the "Powerpuff Girl movie about the making of a Powerpuff movie" would however be a really great idea. Given that an actual Powerpuff movie was released in the summer of 2002, this episode may be seen as a commentary on the marketing of this franchise and, perhaps, McCracken's role in the marketing imperative.¹¹

"Weak, helpless, and scared": (un)doing gender in *The Powerpuff Girls*

While gender-bending seems to be thematized, to greater or lesser extents, in each episode of *The Powerpuff Girls*, there are a few episodes that stand out as particularly interesting in their treatment of the power/puff relationship. In "Slumbering with the Enemy," for example, a slumber party, one of the social activities most closely and readily identified as part of girl culture and girl friendships, is represented as providing a space in which the Girls and their "normal little girl" friends can have fun. If it is the case, as Simon Frith (1981) and Angela McRobbie (1991) have argued, that the home and, in particular, girls' bedrooms, have been a center for various kinds of girl subcultural activities (focused on feminine forms of consumption: beauty products, heterosexual romance, and pop music), then "Slumbering with the Enemy" acknowledges this site as especially significant for the formation and negotiation of girls' subjectivity. Further, this episode features a context within which the commodities featured in *Powerzine* might be consumed. The episode thematizes the bedroom as not only the ideal space for one of the enactments of girl friendship but also for commodity consumption.

In both "The Rowdyruff Boys" and "Slumbering with the Enemy," the villain Mojo Jojo tries to defeat the Powerpuff Girls through forms of gender trickery. While serving time in prison for his latest attacks on Townsville, Mojo Jojo figures out how to concoct a boy version of the Powerpuff Girls. He combines "snips and snails and puppy dog tails" and a bit of Chemical X (that he finds in the toilet in his prison cell) and – voila! – the Rowdyruff Boys are born! Appearing in the bold color version of the Powerpuff Girls' pastels and donning backwards baseball caps, the Rowdyruffs proceed to try to "kick the butts" of the heroines. Ms. Sara Bellum intervenes with some gender commonsense and assists the Powerpuffs in their battle. She tells the Girls to "try being nice" rather than fight the Rowdyruffs. Indeed, by going against their nature (by acting in stereotypically girlish ways), the Powerpuffs defeat the Rowdyruffs.

This tension between "normal" girlish behavior and Powerpuff characteristics is highlighted in "Slumbering with the Enemy." In yet another attempt to foil the Powerpuff Girls, Mojo Jojo dresses up as a little girl (with blond wig and pigtails) and joins the slumber party. Renamed "Mojeesha" (a reference to the sitcom *Moesha*, featuring an African-American teenage girl as the lead character), the villain arrives at the party just in time to partake of the girlish festivities. Only the Powerpuff Girls figure out that "Mojeesha" is really the evil simian genius, Mojo Jojo. In a montage sequence set to music, all the "girls" (normal and otherwise) play games, pose as fashion models, look through *Dreamboat* magazine and then go to sleep.¹² Mojeesha seizes this moment of slumber to throw Antidote X on the Powerpuff Girls. Antidote X counteracts Chemical X (the element that makes the girls into superheroes), giving Mojeesha/Mojo Jojo a short-lived victory. Yet, as Mojo Jojo reveals his true identity to the girls, he says that Antidote X has made the Powerpuff Girls "just like your friends, you are the same as they are: weak, helpless, and scared!" Mojo Jojo continues to berate the Powerpuff Girls by saying that they are now "normal little girls – useless normal little girls who can't do anything because they are normal." However, the "normal little girls" respond with menacing stares and arms akimbo. They grab Mojo Jojo and save the day as the announcer yells, "Go! Normal Girls! Go!" While the episode focuses on some of the more traditional elements of girl consumerism, it nonetheless provides an alternative way of understanding contemporary girl culture by contesting the normative assumptions regarding girls and power. It is telling, then, that the contest between the normal little girls and Mojo Jojo occurs in the girls' bedroom, the apparent domestic center of girl subcultural consumption and production (Kearney 1998b: 286). Indeed, the kinds of girlish pleasures that brought the Powerpuffs and their friends together enable them to save the day (again). In spite of the program's content, which represents girlhood as power-ful rather than power-less, the commercial intertexts tend to reframe this power in terms of consumerism.

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- 1 The emphasis on beauty is male and white, and the bottom left schedule. Gendered early interest in liberation studies.
- 2 In an interview, 20 January 1998, the program. / Pathfinder, promises "1
- 3 Fan artist "over" scan over-the-s for more F
- 4 My thanks

While it is the case that *The Powerpuff Girls* is enjoyed by fans of all genders, and across the child–adult generational divide, the commercial intertexts depict the consumption of *Powerpuff Girl* items as a distinctly female thing. This disjuncture need not mitigate the power of *The Powerpuff Girls* and I do not want to suggest that watching the television show is somehow liberating while consuming *Powerpuff Girl* items is not. Rather, what an analysis of the texts and intertexts makes possible is a richer way of accounting for the sense that viewers make of this commercial product. However, as television texts overflow their designated positions in the program schedule and circulate in different, consumer-friendly incarnations, how does this process redefine the engagement of viewers with the program? Attending to texts and intertexts enables – whether in the form of television programming and commercial or television programming and tie-in merchandise – the opening up of the ways that specific media products are produced, circulated, and consumed. Consideration of both kinds of texts may illuminate not only the marketing imperatives of media conglomerates, but the various ways in which consumption occurs.

The texts of *The Powerpuff Girls* represent a contradictory view of girl-power. On the one hand, the primary program text calls into question structuring assumptions regarding the nature of girlhood. On the other hand, the commercial intertexts relocate certain activities, namely shopping and consumerism, as uniquely feminine pursuits. While Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup eschew the apparent pleasures of shopping malls in favor of reaping the rewards of “saving the world before bedtime,” the commercial intertexts still emphasize that the thing girls do best is buy.

Notes

- 1 The emphasis on power surrounded, if not contained, by signifiers of conventional, feminine beauty is made explicit in ESPN’s 2001 promotional campaign for the WNBA. Shot in black-and-white, a WNBA player shoots baskets on a court. At the close of the commercial, in the bottom left-hand corner, the text reads: “Basketball is Beautiful” followed by a cablecast game schedule. Given that many of the WNBA players are African-American, this seems a particularly interesting slogan with its re-articulation of a key phrase (“Black is Beautiful”) from Black liberation struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s.
- 2 In an interesting acknowledgment of the cross-generational appeal of *The Powerpuff Girls*, the 20 January 2002 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* published an advertisement for the program. Appearing amongst advertisements for such posh products as the 240-HP Nissan Pathfinder, the Acura RL, and financial consultants Solomon Smith Barney, Cartoon Network promises “the best fights on TV” with *The Powerpuff Girls*.
- 3 Fan artist “Marcos” uploaded the image “Blossom as Lara Croft” on 30 July 2001. As a “cross-over” scanned pencil art drawing, this image offers Blossom equipped with hiking boots, over-the-shoulder holsters, and water-gun weapons. See: <http://fanstuffs.ppginstitute.com> for more PpG original fan art.
- 4 My thanks to Carol Stabile for making this point.

READINGS

- 5 See Robert Lloyd, "Beyond Good and Evil," *LA Weekly*, and Jen Fried, "Puff Daddy" (2001: 46–50).
- 6 Some of the most popular girl-centered television programs have been produced and written by men (*My So-Called Life* by Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick; *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* by Joss Whedon; *The Powerpuff Girls* by Craig McCracken) demonstrating that primary textual authorship is not necessarily a determinant of a given program's meaningfulness for female viewers.
- 7 For differing views of the implications of this phenomenon, see Kline (1995) and Seiter (1995).
- 8 *The Powerpuff Girls: Heroes and Villains* compact disc was produced by Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh and includes songs from artists such as Frank Black, Shonen Knife, Apples in Stereo, and David Byrne.
- 9 In addition to the proliferation of networks, programs, and stores specifically addressing children as a preferred market, industry-specific publications such as *KidScreen* document the ways that mass-media conglomerates construct and shape genres and audiences. A brief survey of the magazine's Web site indicates the degree to which children's markets are integral to mass-media conglomerates' profits. Identified as an "international trade magazine serving the information needs and interests of all those involved in reaching children through entertainment," *KidScreen* functions as a database of the most recent trends in the corporate construction of children's markets. In relation to *The Powerpuff Girls*, articles detail how, as early as 1998, Cartoon Network used various promotional vehicles – including sponsorship of the "Wacky Racing NASCAR" at the Winston Cup races in Rockingham, North Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia. Painted "shocking pink complete with shimmering stars and decals depicting the Powerpuff Girls," the NASCAR was included in the first part of Cartoon Network's marketing campaign. Fully aware of, and indeed playing on, the apparently ironic juxtaposition between the "paint job and the gritty high-testosterone racing world," this embodies the central conceit of the cartoon: the power is in the puff! Hoping that the ideal viewers would identify the program as "not a girls' show" but a "super-hero show that happens to feature girls," senior vice-president of marketing for Cartoon Network, Craig McAnsh, says that what he really wants to "drive is the fact that the episodes are full of action sequences and power" (emphasis added). The success of the race car as promotional vehicle, then, depends upon the audience (watching live at the race track and on television) reading against type or the turning of cultural signifiers of passivity and weakness into activity and strength.
- 10 For an analysis of the history of product design and color, see Sparke (1995).
- 11 Although interviews with McCracken have emphasized his positive response to the film project, it is significant that Cartoon Network has allowed him to maintain most of the creative control and rights over the production.
- 12 Nestled in the pages of *Dreamboat* magazine is a drawing of Craig McCracken wearing an E-Bay T-shirt.

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THE POWERPUFF GIRLS AND CONSUMER CULTURE

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