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Girls Consuming, Girls Creating:  
Teen Films of the 1980s and Third-Wave Feminism

by

Anthony Charles Bleach

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

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Tony Bleach  
Bedlam, PA  
December 3, 2003

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation ultimately reassesses the relationship between popular film and feminism. I take as my theoretical foundation a second-wave feminist claim that most representations of young women in teen films from the 1980s articulated backlash sensibilities. As a third-wave feminist who came of age during the 1980s and came to feminism in the 1990s, I challenge this claim by exploring the feminist pleasures that come from consuming 1980s teen films, as well as how depictions of young women in these films promote a nascent third-wave feminism. Each chapter examines one discourse of the third wave that certain 1980s teen films both anticipate and dramatize: postfeminist discourses circulating in the John Hughes / Molly Ringwald “trilogy” of *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Pretty in Pink* (1986); Girl Power and the manifestations of Valley Girl in popular songs, journal articles, mass-market paperbacks, and the 1983 film; the activist Riot Grrrl subculture and *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (1981). I ultimately argue that, in their negotiations with feminism, girl-centered teen films of the 1980s contributed to the third-wave feminist discourses of the 1990s.

CHAPTER ONE:  
Introductions

Never has there been so much attention on girls. The '80s were very female, and about females' desire to do everything a man could do. In the end they realized that it wasn't such a brilliant idea, because what men do is mostly stupid. To wear trousers, carry briefcases, and be in jobs – most of it's rubbish, really. It's all replacement for men's inability to go fishing. So women look to change men in the only way they possibly can – and that's to make them more feminine. It's a more feminine world that will ultimately preserve the planet. . . . I think the '90s are going to be a period when men are going to realize that they are not as interesting as women. (19)

Malcolm McLaren, as told to Ariel Swartley

I am a feminist, born during the third wave, who finds it difficult to describe his feminism without first telling an abbreviated story about his life with popular culture. When I was growing up, our house consumed it. We were a music-eating house first and foremost. My mom's stereo system (a turntable and a reel-to-reel tape machine flanked by enormous wooden and gold-metal speaker cabinets) took over a whole quarter of our living room. I was always in awe of her LP collection, which lived under this monstrosity, and which spanned Mahalia Jackson to the Beatles; my dad's records, which lived in the same place, were mostly dustily classical. And this stereo was always on when any type of chore needed to get done, so I heard more music than I can easily remember. When a VCR entered our house, the stereo was moved first into the basement, and was transferred later to the rickety shed outside. It, along with the rest of the shed's contents, was loudly destroyed when a freakish hurricane-strength storm slammed our small Connecticut town, but this event came too late; I had already caught my mom's pop-music disease.

One birthday, my grandparents gave me a combination radio/turntable – smaller, although no less functional – than my mom’s machine. I used to spend hours sitting cross-legged in front of my radio receiver with my dad’s tape recorder, spinning the radio dial from left to right and back again and recording with a detachable microphone whatever spewed forth on the Top 40 stations that dominated our area at the time. I scrawled faithfully in my painful penmanship on lined loose-leaf the song titles and artists:

“Beat It” - Michael Jackson  
“Cum on Feel the Noize” - Quiet Riot  
“Lucky Star” - Madonna  
“Yah Mo B There” - Michael McDonald & James Ingram

When word got out to my English relatives about my obsession with popular music, Mum-Mum and Uncle Jan began sending me English pop music magazines like *No. 1* and *Smash Hits* for birthdays and holidays. It was there, along with clandestine late-night glimpses of TV’s *Night Flight* that I began seeing the faces behind the more obscure artists that I heard on the radio. I mean, sure, everybody knew who Michael Jackson and Madonna were, but what about Howard Jones or Dale Bozzio?

It was the female singers who fascinated me the most. Who were that pair of polka-dot-lace-and-mascara women, looking and sounding like they just didn’t give a flying fuck even for the perimeters of fashion then being widened by Madonna? – Strawberry Switchblade. Who was that German woman fronting the all-boy band with that incredible authority in her voice? – Nena. I had a poster of Nena in my room, and remember wanting to hang out with her in the video for “99 Red Balloons” and walk through the bomb-blasted remains of that unidentified European town. Even the bubble-

voiced, gum-snapping Cyndi Lauper, who was everywhere at the time, intrigued me with her tough and savvy stance.

But music was only half of my pop culture immersion. Our house also devoured movies. In fact, one of my earliest memories ever is of a newspaper clipping hanging on our refrigerator, a photo of Dustin Hoffman and his cinematic son, from *Kramer vs. Kramer*. My parents put this there because I wanted to know what they saw one night when they went to the movies. We were fortunate in these pre-cable days to have loads of local channels (this was also well before the networks started buying up affiliates) that programmed after-school movies every afternoon. Each week would be a theme week: the *Planet of the Apes* series, every day at 4 pm; Godzilla (or Gamera, the flying turtle) movies Monday through Friday; or cruddy Technicolor westerns. Our town's public-access station even showed cheapjack horror movies on Monday nights. My friend Matt and I loved *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*: we used to drive our parents and bus drivers and friends bonkers singing the theme song while marching around our living rooms or bouncing around in our seats. Saturdays and Sundays were the movie motherlode, though: 1950s cold war / nuclear monsters crushing New York and Los Angeles, 1960s Hammer witches and vampires terrorizing English villagers, and 1970s eco-horror killer animals stalking campers.

Birthday parties were themed around movies: my dad would borrow a VCR from the community college where he taught, and my friends and I would thrill to the movies on tape we could now watch *whenever we wanted to!* When the middle-class families of my friends actually started buying VCRs in the late 1980s, I would go over Matt's house

after school to watch the slasher movies and teen dramas we were too sheepish to watch with our parents, because movie nights were family nights, after all.

My fascination with female pop music stars became connected with the young girls in these teen movies. I always wanted to know more about Molly Ringwald's character in *Pretty in Pink* and *Sixteen Candles*, Ally Sheedy's character in *The Breakfast Club*, Ione Skye in *River's Edge*, Mary Stuart Masterson in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Winona Ryder in *Beetlejuice* and *Heathers*. What happened to them when they weren't in front of the cameras? What were their non-cinematic lives like? Did they worry about friendships and grades and complexions and school hierarchies as I did?

In many ways, these teenage girl characters in movies were role models for me. Their strong attitudes, iconoclastic world views, and idiosyncratic, vaguely punky styles were the ones I was intensely conscious of trying to adopt and emulate when I entered high school, an upper-class private hellhole, where I felt no more welcome in my middle-classness than they often seemed to feel in *their* fictional high schools. My school didn't break the mold shaped by the familiar narrative about the raging conformity and materialism in private high schools. But I do think that much of what I do now, who I am now, was shaped by my reaction *against* what I saw and experienced then: that is, the sense that ownership and connections were the key to social advancement; that money greases the world's axles; that being beautifully WASPy (in both the literal and figurative senses) is the most that anyone could ask for.

I do consider myself fortunate, though, because I had something to act favorably *toward*: the ideology (reinforced by my parents, who reminded me that there were always alternatives to the way that everybody else did things) that I read in these representations

of the strong young women in pop music and movies. I identified with and attached myself to their way of looking at the world, where difference is accepted and can be cool, where identity is connected more with personal qualities instead of material goods, and where small personal resistances can help you survive high school and the wide world beyond.

I need to apply a heavy finger on the fast-forward button, and move to college (1992-1996), in order to finish telling how this pop culture consumption connects with my being a feminist. In college, I found the punk rock scene, which became not only an outlet for expressing my anger at the world I saw in high school, but also for doing something about this anger. This anger transformed into reading and discussing environmentalism and vegetarianism, going to and setting up punk rock shows, and thinking about matching how I lived with the ideology of nonconformism and political-mindedness I experienced in the punk rock scene. Around that time, I remember reading an article in *Spin* that discussed the current bi-coastal Riot Grrrl movement. These were young women, many of whom I was seeing at punk shows, who were frustrated with the way they were expected to defer to punk boys in the male-dominated world of punk rock. While bands like Bikini Kill demanded that a safe space be cleared at the front of the venues they played, the girls in their audience would write about their anger through self-photocopied and -distributed zines, or in the more radical move of Sharpie-scrawling “BITCH” or “CUNT” on exposed arms, bellies, and legs.

What struck me about this article was that I saw myself in the Riot Grrrls. I had embraced punk rock culture because its ideology of non-conformism and alternative, politically-informed thinking seemed like a natural fit, an extension of my mindset during

high school. The non-mainstream popular culture that surrounded these young women and myself had spurred us into certain “real-world” actions. In my case, it was actions against the mainstream culture, while for the Riot Grrrls it was against the inequities they saw in the supposedly non-mainstream subculture of punk. What, for me, was most amazing of all was that I saw Riot Grrrl “theory” in practice; young women were acting on their frustration, their anger, and their joy in practical ways. This *Spin* article on Riot Grrrls may have been my first exposure to the word “feminism,” since the writer made the point that there was a connection between the Riot Grrrls’ strategies and those of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s.

A second article that shaped my feminism came from *Esquire* magazine’s notorious “Do-Me Feminism” issue in 1994. I bought the issue because Drew Barrymore was on the cover.<sup>1</sup> Inside, though, there was an article about a young woman in high school who reminded me both of the female musicians and young women in movies whose attitudes and styles inspired mine: I saw a kindred spirit in her. More importantly, though, there were pop profiles of the so-called “new breed” of feminists, young women like Susie Bright, Rebecca Walker, and Naomi Wolf. While I hated one implicit assumption here that screamed from the cover – that these were mostly non-lesbian feminists who actually liked heterosexual sex, so that they were good pickings for educated and stylish young men who might be looking for partners who were smart *and* attractive – I was fascinated that here were politically active people a few years older than I who were working for social change in venues more mainstream than the punk rock world in which I was submerged.

I found out much later that feminists from the 1970s onward spoke of feeling a “click” when they came to feminist consciousness.<sup>2</sup> I felt a pretty heavy click after reading these articles. I saw some kind of invisible, indelible thread between Nena, the nonconformist characters played by Ally Sheedy and Mary Stuart Masterson in teen movies, the Riot Grrrls’ transformation of anger into action, and the young feminists highlighted in *Esquire*. It was around this time that I identified myself as a feminist.

I’m not sure that I could have enunciated it then, but I know now that my coming to feminism was a process. This process first began with my reacting against mainstream ideologies that I saw then – and still do – as being complicitly capitalist and rigidly patriarchal, upper-class, white, and heterosexual. But this process continues today, whenever I take conscious *action* against these ideologies. Feminism is recognizing and (re)acting against the workings of (capitalist, upper-class, white, heterosexual) male supremacy in order to empower or liberate anyone who suffers under it. For example, I would see the following as expressions of my feminism: marching with YAKCASS (Young Academics Kicking Conservative Ass) on Washington in support of NOW, playing drums in a Marxist-feminist female-led band, reading mainstream and academic feminist journals, and, most especially, teaching courses about gender and popular culture. It’s through teaching that I feel as if I’ve come full circle with popular culture: I always ask my students to try and consider looking differently at the products of dominant culture that they take for granted, in the hopes that they will be able to look more seriously and critically at the ideology behind the façade of dumb entertainment. Seeing the workings of ideology, I’ve found, is an empowering strategy for my students.

And if this strategy can help change the (capitalist, upper-class, white, heterosexual) patriarchy, then it's an even more important one.

To bring my story up to date, I'm now in my late 20s, a graduate student in English who is studying film and popular culture. I'm still obsessive about listening to (and collecting) music, especially that of female musicians. And I still watch (what friends call either "shitty" or "just baaaad") teen films. I knew when I started graduate school that I wanted to write my dissertation on movies. What I didn't know when I started was what my dissertation would ultimately become: my project is my attempt to trace an invisible thread running through my story. I want to connect the representations of female characters in teen films from the 1980s with feminist discourses from the last two decades of American culture, a 20-year span during which my feminism shaped itself into what it is today.

The Riot Grrrls and their politics are just one of the manifestations of what feminist scholars have come to understand as "third-wave feminism." This name, as I'll show, implies a break from the second wave of feminism – the theory and activism that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Part of me, the well-trained academic part, wants to scream out in frustration with my dissertation, "Where's the third-wave feminist theory?" I identify myself as a third-wave feminist, so shouldn't I be able to use some theory to help ease this dissertation along? For example, if there were some comprehensive theoretical overviews of the third wave written by persons more intelligent and rhetorically savvy than I, it would probably be easy to rehash what they have said about the third wave, and thus provide a sharp overview of its major facets. However, this simply isn't possible considering the myriad ways that third-wave feminism has

manifested itself. It might be easiest to claim, initially, that third-wave feminism defines itself against *perceptions* of the second wave. Although, as we'll see, this claim is potentially unfair and reductive.

The term “third wave” seems to have been used first in a feminist context as the title of a small-press anthology in the mid-1980s. *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism* attempted to address what its editors and authors perceived as missing in second-wave feminist discussions: women of color, multicultural alliances, and theories that explored the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Although it was never published (although scheduled and rescheduled to be so), the anthology may have given Third Wave Direct Action, the multicultural network of young feminist activists co-founded by Rebecca Walker in the early 1990s, its name.<sup>3</sup> At this point within feminist circles, the emphasis on race, multiculturalism, and sexuality implied by the term “third wave” imperceptibly shifted to the same term’s emphasis on *age*.<sup>4</sup> Two popular-press anthologies that appeared in 1995 – Walker’s own *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* and Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* – helped shape the perception that third-wave feminism was young people’s feminism.

Walker’s and Findlen’s introductions are explicit about the ways in which expressions of their feminism are somehow different from those second-wave feminisms practiced by their foremothers. Walker claims her early life was like “a feminist ghetto” where she was constantly “saying no to many elements of the universe, and picking and choosing to allow only what I thought should belong” (“Being Real” xxix,xxx). As she explains, she was torn between the feminist ideals that were already part of her and her

family and the ways in which she was living in the world and applying these ideals. Similarly, Findlen says that she is part of “the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives”; at the same time, though, she makes the point that several of her writers struggled with “ingratiating their feminist identities with ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, regional, class, and other identities” (“Introduction” xii, xiv). In the essays and stories in these two anthologies, the same dichotomy arises again and again: second-wave feminism as a theory is different from, and more importantly, incompatible with, third-wave feminism as a lived practice.

What is potentially problematic about the development and eventual use of the term “third wave” is that, in *both* of its incarnations, its concern is with correcting the perceived shortcomings of second-wave feminism. Granted, the unpublished *The Third Wave* does challenge the perception that all feminists of the second wave were middle-class, white, and heterosexual by reminding readers that second-wave feminism did extend all the way across the racial / social / sexual spectrum, from Gloria Anzaldua to Betty Friedan to bell hooks to Audre Lorde to Gloria Steinem. However, in the two third-wave anthologies that followed, the emphasis is on coming to terms with – and often rejecting – a perceived-of-as-monolithic second-wave feminism, one that doesn’t allow for the “contradictions and messiness and lusts for power and luxury items” (Walker “Being Real” xxxi) that young women have in their lives. So while third-wave feminism is interested in thinking through second-wave feminism and scrutinizing it, it can also come dangerously close to voicing the same stereotypes of feminism that characterize the conservative mainstream media’s perception that is based on the second wave.

As an example of one of these troubling third-wave feminist perceptions of second-wave feminism, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards' otherwise stellar *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* provides the following dueling passages. On the one hand, they take pains throughout the book to explain that feminism is not associated with "spooky stereotypes about feminists and their freaky excesses" (62). It's one of the book's strengths that it unveils as lies the mainstream representations of feminism: "*some feminists think all sex is rape, all men are evil, you have to be a lesbian to be a feminist, you can't wear Girlie clothes or makeup, married women are lame, et cetera*" (62-3; emphasis authors'). Later, though, Baumgardner and Richards compose a hypothetical "Letter to an Older Feminist," which tells their second-wave feminist addressee: "Before criticizing young women for their lack of feminism, or yourselves for what you think you didn't achieve, take a good look at what's out there. Read our books, buy our records (and read the lyrics), and support our organizations" (233, 234). While the tone of these two passages are different, the impact is, unfortunately, the same: Baumgardner and Richards are both exploding the stereotype of the second-wave feminist as an anti-sex, anti-pleasure lesbian, at the same time that they are reinforcing the (ageist?) stereotype of the second-wave feminist being out-of-touch with the concerns of younger women in today's world.<sup>5</sup>

What is often offered in third-wave feminism as a solution to the perceived dogmatism of second-wave feminism is an embracing of, as Walker puts it, the "contradictions and messiness" ("Being Real" xxxi) of everyday life.<sup>6</sup> Her hope is that young women and men of the third wave will be "accepting of contradiction," that they will start using "*and* much more than [they] use *either/or*" to define themselves as

feminists (“Being Real” xxxv). As illustrations of this type of non-binary thinking, the many essays that comprise Walker’s and Findlen’s anthologies attempt to do just this: they show versions of feminism working in the complicated and contradictory lives of their young contributors.<sup>7</sup> For example, Walker asks, in an interview with Veronica Webb, “How Does a Supermodel Do Feminism?” (“An Interview” 209). Anna Bondoc wonders if she has “sinned politically” by being an Asian feminist who loves a white man, comes from an upper middle-class family, and isn’t a full-time activist (169). Jason Schultz questions the assumptions that, as a heterosexual male, he is either “vanilla” or a “breeder” (120). Donna Minkowitz asks, “Is it horrible to say that reading about real-world rape and torture sometimes turns me on?” (79). Alisa L. Valdés says in her “Ruminations of a Feminist Aerobics Instructor,” “[p]eople think you just can’t” be both of the two identities given in her title (12). And Sonia Shah negotiates her multiple, overlapping, identities by announcing, “an Indian American feminist girl doesn’t have to choose between American patriarchy and Indian patriarchy. She also doesn’t have to lose her culture” (118).

The point of mentioning all of these examples – with their various emphases on love and sex, identities and careers, labeling and mis-labeling – is to demonstrate one compelling aspect of third-wave feminist thought. In fact, the emphasis on the lived aspects of feminism, and the way that third wavers attempt to deal with the contradictions of their lives in thoughtful, playful, and political ways, are things I find valuable about third-wave feminism. One of the first things that drew me to this project was the ways in which third-wave feminist women and men are explicit about the difficulties reconciling ideological stances with lived practices. Unfortunately, there are two things creeping

behind these aspects of third-wave feminism that I find problematic. The first is connected with the third wave's relationship to the second wave. Behind the embracing of contradiction, multiplicity, and difference is a hidden assumption that second-wave feminism followed some lockstep feminist party line. This view wouldn't even acknowledge that there were second-wave heterosexual feminists who chose to raise a family rather than return to work, or second-wave lesbian feminists who chose sex work in a straight-owned, straight-serving venue – or even see these women as anomalies. This third-wave interpretation of itself as more inclusive and varied than second-wave feminism is unfortunate and more than a little ignorant.

The second thing I don't like about the third wave's stress on its own position of contradiction, multiplicity, and difference is something that Michelle Jensen discusses in her critique of *Manifesta*. She envisions a third-wave feminism that's informed by a *complete* history of second-wave (and first-wave) feminism, not detached from it or reliant on stereotypes of it, as Baumgardner and Richards' text sometimes is. But she also wants to see third wavers "abandon the personal essay with its fetishization of contradiction and get on with elaborating a political program" (24). This is the idea that being conscious of your own identity, and how it is informed by feminism, is somehow enough, that a retelling of your personal story is the final step in political awareness. Being self-conscious is, I think, only the first step towards political awareness. In other words, it takes another step to realize that your position in society – whether based around gender, race, sexuality, or class – is shared by many others besides you. And, as Jensen claims, the final step is the need to base our personal arguments "in a larger understanding of the conditions that oppress us – all of us" (32). It's only by collectively

analyzing and acting on the conditions of oppression that we can hope to achieve any political gain.<sup>8</sup>

One feature of third-wave feminism that does attempt analysis *and* action is in its negotiations with popular culture. Here is where I see an attempt within the third wave to get beyond both its adversarial relationship with the second wave, and to move beyond a focus on the personal. Thus far, however, there hasn't been a serious and lengthy study (academic or otherwise) of the relationship between popular culture or film and third-wave feminism.<sup>9</sup> What seems to distinguish a third-wave feminist view of popular culture is twofold. First, third-wave feminism is at pains to acknowledge the pleasures as well as the "politics" of popular cultures. As I discuss above, this attempt to come to terms with sometimes "messy" pleasures is a typical marker of third-wave feminist thought. And second, one crucial aspect of third-wave feminism is the ways in which its critical analysis of popular culture often accompanies lived feminist practices. This twofold definition is articulated well in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's chapter in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. They say, "we take critical engagement with popular culture as a key to political struggle . . . we're pop-culture babies; we want some pleasure with our critical analysis" ("We Learn" 51). In their formulation, the relationship of third-wave feminism with popular culture is one of constant negotiation: pleasure and critical analysis are possible, and are equally important to a larger political struggle:

[W]e inhabit that contradictory space between critiquing what various movies, videos, songs, ads, and fashion say and do to uphold structures of domination, even as we're into these same hip cultural productions, *knowingly* . . . spending money on them, consuming them, and making them. ("We Learn" 51-2; emphasis authors')

It should come as no surprise, then, that both Walker and Findlen's anthologies – as third-wave documents – feature essays that discuss their writers' obsessions with various forms of popular culture. For example, Eisa Davis' "Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance" discusses the writer's equivocal relationship with Queen Latifah and the majority of misogynist (male) rappers, while Nomy Lamm comes out as a fat punk rocker, acknowledging the emphasis placed on skinniness in punk rock culture in "It's a Big Fat Revolution."

Lisa Miya-Jervis' piece "Bitch on Heels: Confessions of a Pop Culture Junkie," in *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, is a great representation of the way in which third-wave feminism is a constant negotiation between pleasure and pain, and between passive consumption and critical analysis, in relation to mainstream popular culture. Her piece begins, "Everything sucks. Every fucking slick, glossy, gorgeous movie, TV show, magazine, and ad. They all suck. I hate them." But she continues, "I hate them so much I can't look away" (283). She also confesses, "I love every minute of my immersion in the sick world of pop culture" (284). Her vitriol against pop culture's manifestations is tempered by a feeling that it's her "capacity for feminist analysis and/or recuperative interpretation" to find something intelligent to say about them (285). This, though, is where Miya-Jervis hits an inescapable contradiction about third-wave feminist uses of popular culture: she asks, "What's the difference between buying something to critique it and buying something to consume it?" (285). The answer for her is that there is no difference, even if the ultimate *use* of the popular culture is mindless joy or mindful analysis: buying is buying to the creators of popular culture.

Perhaps this is why yet another strand of third-wave thinking about popular culture moves away from its consumption to its *creation*. After all, the thinking goes, how progressive is a feminist strategy that ultimately relies on and promotes capitalist consumerism? But this reemphasis on the creative act over the consumptive one doesn't erase the reality that, as many third wavers – myself included – have discussed, one way we discovered feminism was through seeing as “consumers” strong or progressive pop cultural representations of women or girls. In its simplest (and most potentially progressive) articulation, third-wave feminism's consumption of mainstream popular culture can sometimes lead to the creation of a feminist popular culture. This is the type of thinking articulated by Debbie Stoller, co-editor of *Bust*: “we know that we can effect change through pop culture; that it's worth our while to channel our efforts through TV channels” (267). Baumgardner and Richards argue along similar lines in *Manifesta*. Being raised in a popular culture-saturated environment is what led to the third wave's emphasis on popular culture venues:

For the Third Wave, politics was superseded by culture – punk rock, hip-hop, zines, products, consumerism, and the Internet. Young women in the early nineties . . . were growing up and beginning to take responsibility for their lives and their feminism. (130)

It's important to note that, in this view, feminism for young women begins with them taking “responsibility” for their own actions. In other words, the mindful consumption and use of popular culture – as Heywood and Drake put it, “knowingly” consuming goes hand in hand with “critiquing” – can lead to a potential political awakening (“We Learn” 52).

The idea that all third-wave feminists feel that consumption can serve feminist purposes might be somewhat reductive, but it is a source of an important second-wave feminist critique of third-wave feminism. Having said that, though, the second and third wave might actually be *united* in their interpretations of popular culture, especially in the ways they assume that representations of women might be anything but progressive. Despite this, though, there *is* a conflict inherent in my discussion of the third wave and popular culture. Ultimately, a third-wave feminist's call for either the feminist use or creation of popular culture is problematic for many second-wave feminists. As Heywood and Drake note, the second-wave criticism of third-wave feminism says that third-wave feminists have exchanged the investigation of and attack on "institutional and economic inequities" for a less conventionally-political type of politics that critiques and consumes popular culture ("We Learn" 52). This is also close to the argument that Jensen, a third-waver, makes about the third wave's concern with the personal – individual consumption of popular culture just isn't *political* enough. Yet, as Catherine Orr reminds us in the 1997 "Third Wave Feminisms" issue of *Hypatia*, "popular culture [is] the medium through which feminism captured the popular imagination – and thus political clout – in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (41). In other words, second-wave feminists should perhaps reconsider third-wave feminism's use of popular culture, since second-wave feminism (granted, a mediated version, and not always a positive one) was broadcast through the various media (television, newspapers, magazines, books) of popular culture. What's more, it is exactly the argument of my project that popular culture is increasingly and powerfully intertwined with feminist politics.

However, what's noticeable by its absence from third-wave feminist discussions of popular culture is that little space is spent carefully analyzing the 1980s popular culture that third-wave feminists grew up on. There is a great deal of discussion about pop culture of the 1990s, and how it helped further formulate or express third-wave feminism – magazines like *Sassy* (1988-1995) or *HUES* (1992-1999); musicians like Me'Shell NdegéOcello or Alanis Morissette; television shows like *Living Single* (1993-1998) or *Roseanne* (1988-1997) – but there is little being said about the pop culture from the 1980s that future third wave women and men grew up immersed in. Baumgardner and Richards aver that they “came of age politically amid the backlash,” but never seriously discuss the popular culture that was produced during the backlash of the 1980s that helped along their political coming-of-age (77). I kept asking myself, what were young feminists like me consuming in the 1980s?<sup>10</sup> Were they, like me, devouring teen films? Pop music? What was it in 1980s popular culture that could have helped foster a vibrant, creative and politically-informed third-wave feminist discourse in the 1990s? While doing the background research for this dissertation, I came up with very few specific references in feminist texts to popular culture from the 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps this is because, as Baumgardner and Richards claim, the feminist backlash of the 1980s seemed to offer little in the way of potentially-feminist popular culture. What's interesting about this claim is that it implicitly acknowledges a second-wave feminist argument *against* the potentially progressive effects of popular culture. This position is perhaps most intelligently and informatively elucidated in Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. As she explains in her introduction:

The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall. (xviii)

It's notable here that Faludi specifically names popular culture as one of the venues through which the backlash was broadcast. In this formulation, there exists little space within popular culture for feminist politics or representations; if pop culture brought feminism to the masses in the 1960s and 1970s, as Orr claims above, then it's pop culture that would ultimately retract this feminism through various insidious means in the 1980s.

According to Faludi, 1980s popular culture trapped women in a circular prison. She explains that the "prevailing political currents" of Reaganism – a movement in politics toward conservatism and an upholding of the dominant capitalist, patriarchal, and racist ideology – trickled down into all aspects of the media (77). For example, articles in mainstream journals blamed women for their miserable status in politics and society because they strove for equal footing with men in the first place. Their purported miseries included such things as an "infertility epidemic," a sense of "burnout," a countrywide "man shortage," and, scarily, a "profound crisis of confidence" (ix). Ultimately, though, whether it was in the specious claims trumpeted in these journals, the backlash in fashion that called for a return to sexy underwear and feminine dresses, the rise and ubiquity of beauty culture, or the less-than-positive representations of women in music, television, and movies, the ultimate message to women was the same.<sup>12</sup> This message went, "You may be free and equal now . . . but you have never been more miserable . . . it must be all that equality that's causing all that pain" (ix, x).<sup>13</sup>

Faludi's argument is a compelling one, and I certainly base many of my own arguments in this dissertation on her claims about the 1980s and its anti-feminism. What I find frustrating about her argument, however, is that she overlooks four important points. First, she at times overestimates the power of the media to disseminate only its anti-feminist messages. If we take her argument to its logical conclusion, we would probably find no remaining shred of feminism – in any form – in the 1990s after the Reagan / Bush era ended. Obviously, the entire existence of the third wave gives the lie to this argument. While her polemic is attractive, it's at times too depressing to imagine its (unrealized) implications. Second, despite the lip service given to the consequences of the backlash for teenage girls in her sections on television and the beauty industry, she doesn't ever consider the larger effects of the backlash on the *younger* women who were coming of age and consuming this popular culture during the decade. While she would probably agree that these young women would be affected just as equally as the (older) women about whom she is implicitly writing, this seems too essentialized a conclusion. The third omission is that Faludi doesn't consider the ways in which some young women *could* have extracted – and obviously *did* extract – proto-feminist readings from the anti-feminist popular culture. And finally, her view of popular culture is simply too monolithic; she never once considers the existence of a potentially feminist popular culture.

These four oversights are also symptomatic of feminist film criticism that discusses the films of the 1980s. Young women – or more specifically, representations of young women – are largely ignored in feminist film criticism of the backlash. Instead, critics approach the films in one of two ways. One way discusses representations of what

Sidney Blumenthal calls “the ultimate Reaganite cultural hero” (276). The other, its corollary, imagines what representations of this male hero might mean for the representations of women in the films. Both feminist approaches, while not considering teenage girls, agree that the 1980s did not produce a particularly feminist-friendly body of mainstream films. Blumenthal argues that, in films like *Iron Eagle* (1986, Sidney J. Furie), and *Top Gun* (1986, Tony Scott), what was narratively staged again and again was the hero’s struggle with and “anxiety about his potency” in warlike or wartime settings. Importantly, this hero was “always obsessed with the American defeat in Vietnam, and tried to erase the past and alter the present by subduing savages on the frontier” (276). In other words, male heroes in 1980s films got to metaphorically restage Vietnam and win it.

Susan Jeffords has done extensive work on the “resmasculinization of American culture” in film and literary representations of the Vietnam War (*Remasculinization* xi). She claims that, accompanying the hero’s anxieties about his own masculinity, and the films’ warlike obsessions, was a sense that, in order for him metaphorically to become victorious, the “feminine” should be controlled. Hence, she outlines the ways in which films like the *Rambo* series (1982, 1985, 1988) feature an aggressive, hypermasculine hero battling and beating a feminized enemy (or, in some cases, a feminized superior officer). Her later work, on the “hard-bodied” heroes in popular and violent films of the Reagan era, argues along similar lines; namely, that Hollywood masculinity, while fraught with contradictions, largely conformed to the same set of ideals – military and technological strength, power over the family and the female / feminine – as did the male heroes in films that imaginatively refought Vietnam (*Hard Bodies* 22). Marxist critics

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner add in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* that this Reagan-era hero is not only militarily strong – as in the films cited above – but he also has “entrepreneurial power” – perhaps as best seen in the character of Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* (1987, Oliver Stone). What’s more, this hero uses his powers to solidify his role as “a patriarch, someone who dominates women” (220).

The analysis of patriarchy gone wild and its attendant shaping of representations of women is what dominates the other feminist approach to film in the 1980s. Most of these feminist critics follow Andrew Britton’s argument in his important article, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” one of the first studies to deal seriously with the ideological import of 1980s films. A major trend in films from the decade, he claims, is that “‘patriarchy’ is very much the term to describe what gets reaffirmed in Reaganite entertainment.” He goes on to explain that, in 1980s film narratives, with “unremitting insistence and stridency, it is the status and function of the father and their inheritance by the son that are at stake” (24). Britton goes on to outline what he notices as one frightening trend: the ways that the father-son bond in cinematic narratives is constantly upset or impeded by the figure of the mother, as in the dramas *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979, Robert Benton) or *Ordinary People* (1980, Robert Redford).

Robin Wood’s *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* follows Britton’s lead, claiming that one of the major ideological projects of 1980s cinema was the metaphorical “Restoration of the Father” (172). True, one facet of this restoration was the repetitious narrativization of the father-son bond, in films as diverse as the family drama / comedy *Author! Author!* (1982, Arthur Hiller) and the science-fiction / fantasy *Return of the Jedi*

(1983, Richard Marquand). But an accompanying facet, however, was a “corresponding restoration of women, after a decade of feminism and ‘liberation’” (172). In Wood’s interpretation, we see a similarity with Faludi’s claim that the 1980s backlash painted feminism as the source of all women’s ills. This restoration of women, in a patriarchal sense, leads to their narrative subordination; as Wood claims, two plot archetypes follow this theme. First is the plot “about the liberated woman who proves she’s as good as the man but then discovers that this doesn’t make her happy and that what she really wanted all the time was to serve him” (172). And second is the plot “that suggests that men, if need arises, can fill the women’s role just as well, if not better” (173). The former plot redomesticates the woman, while the latter rejects them.<sup>14</sup>

What this amounts to, according to Wood, is a pervasive “Hollywood antifeminism” (206). Just as in Britton’s estimation, the woman who ultimately *refuses* to accept her subordinate status in the patriarchal order – in other words, the woman who could be read in the narrative as potentially feminist – is often ominously “expelled from the narrative” in different ways (173). Wood suggests two ways in which the antifeminist expulsion of feminist women from the narrative gets expressed in these films. In mainstream cinema, antifeminism is expressed either in “the shameless grossness of the mad slasher movie” or in “the far more insidious reinstatement of compliant women to their safe, traditional roles” (208).

So one tendency in these anti-feminist representations is either to kill potentially-feminist women off, as in the slasher genre – typified by the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* films (1980-2003) or the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films (1984-2003) – or to redomesticize them, as in the romantic drama of *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982, Taylor Hackford) or *Terms of*

*Endearment* (1983, James L. Brooks). Ryan and Kellner fall in line with Wood here, identifying a corresponding theme in 1980s representations of potentially-feminist women:

Many neoromance and family films of the late seventies and early eighties project positive representations of mothering males while portraying women as in need of a strong male arm to lean on. At the same time, independent women are depicted negatively as neo-*noir* spider women or stigmatized as homewreckers. (137)

In this estimation, the feminist woman who can't be domesticated or killed is turned into a nightmare woman, bad for patriarchal home, hearth, and health. This is perhaps best seen in Glenn Close's character Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1987, Adrian Lyne), the career-minded single harridan who is destroyed by attempting to destroy the family of the man with whom she's having an affair.

It's around *Fatal Attraction* that Faludi frames her analysis of how "Hollywood restated and reinforced the backlash": in typical Hollywood fare, "women were set against women; women's anger at their social circumstances was depoliticized and displayed as personal depression instead; and women's lives were framed as morality tales in which the 'good mother' wins and the independent woman gets punished" (*Backlash* 113). In keeping with what Wood and Ryan and Kellner have claimed, Faludi, too, notices similar themes: potentially feminist women, when they do appear, are marginalized or expelled from the narrative, or are made to see the error of their feminist ways. But another way in which feminist women were made to rethink their independence, Faludi claims, was that the backlash claimed that "liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood"; as a result, films tried to make "motherhood as alluring as possible" (*Backlash* 113,132). In films like *Baby Boom* (1987, Charles Shyer), and

*Three Men and a Baby* (1987, Leonard Nimoy), independent women who have babies follow the narrative trajectory of placing their careers over their offspring, only to reconsider their choice and get refolded into domesticity. As Molly Haskell claims, in films like these, “gurgling, picture-perfect newborns arrive to rescue selfish, work-oriented men and women from the evils of feminism and the me-decade” (84).

Among feminist film critics, then, discussions of women in 1980s films is limited to a consideration of women as domestic bond-breakers, redomesticized ex-feminists, invisible women, dead weapon-fodder, evil careerists, or reconstituted wives and mothers. The closest that any of these critics get to exploring representations of youth in these films, let alone teenage girls, are Faludi and Haskell, with their discussions of babies. This seems to me a gross oversight on the part of these critics. As I explain below, one reason for this oversight might be the fact that teen films are seen as somehow unworthy of serious study, and teens are perhaps perceived of as “girls,” i.e., not women. But not to seriously consider teen films of the 1980s is to ignore a genre that many young women – and future feminists – would undoubtedly have been influenced by.

So compared to the feminist film criticism discussing representations of women in 1980s films, there is a paucity of feminist film criticism about representations of teen girls in 1980s films. Although, frustratingly, even those extended studies of this genre that are available are largely silent about the ways these representations might be read as feminist.<sup>15</sup> As representative of this silence, I want to touch on Jonathan Bernstein’s 1997 book *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*. Despite its title’s allusion to a Molly Ringwald film, Bernstein devotes only one chapter to girls in teen films. Even here, he only has one important thing to say before he relegates teen girls to the margins:

Sometimes, in the T & A category, [teenage girls were] perky bikini filler. In splatter, it was cold, prone, and full of holes. If they weren't on hand to quell any suspicion that the hero was gay, the function of girls in teen movies . . . was to display good-natured tolerance in the face of stalking, voyeurism and fumbled attempts at seduction. . . . The girls in these films were either receptacles or they were about to be knocked off pedestals. (173-4)

It appears, then, in this interpretation, that representations of teenage girls are similar to those of their mothers, that teen films of the 1980s follow the same pervasive antifeminist line that critics like Wood, Ryan and Kellner, Faludi, and Haskell critique elsewhere.

There is more of the same in individual reviews and articles about teen films. One critical thread in these articles claims that girls in teen films, when they do appear, are merely objects for boys to look at or have sex with – Bernstein's "receptacles" judgment of them above. For example, Susan Dworkin, writing in *Ms.*, claims that teen films in 1984 have successfully resurrected the "ghost" of the fifties' cinematic girl: someone who is "stupid and helpless and had no life other than her sex life – no purpose, no ideology, no values" (14). And one year later, Sarah Crichton noted in the same publication that "teen pics . . . are all, when you get down to it, about sex. Or more specifically, they're about Boys Getting Laid" (90). Armond White, writing in *Film Comment*, says of these teen films, "there emerges a pattern of American male fantasy securely linked with Hollywood convention . . . the majority of adolescent movies constitute a white boyish perspective, with phallogentric, blonde-chasing the point of most of the pictures" (9, 15).

What's interesting about criticism like this is that I think it does two things at once. It berates the films and their depictions of the teenage girls, seeing only negative answers to what these representations might mean in a larger political – or even feminist

– sense. In this way, most of this criticism sees the 1980s teen film as either a largely harmless, mostly unserious, genre or one that represents girls in a limited, generally negative, way. There’s an unspoken acknowledgment among all these critics that the films are merely entertainment, and thus not particularly notable, even as objects of study. But at the same time, there’s a sense of panic in these reviews, that the films in many ways validate critics who voice frustration at the shallow or one-sided representations of teenage girls. It’s almost as if these critics are afraid to take the films more seriously than they do; after all, taking them seriously might require an engagement with their regressive political content, which is a step these critics might not want to take. This seems like a huge oversight, and one that – in the critics’ silences – is complicit in not questioning the ideologies of these films.

Notably, Elayne Rapping is one feminist critic who takes these films seriously in order to engage in a discussion of the political import of 1980s teen films. She claims that contemporary teen films pick up on one aspect of James Dean’s character in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955, Nicholas Ray): the “part that wanted to belong more than he wanted to destroy middle class life” (16). Rapping sees the teenagers in 1980s films as politically “declawed,” devoid of an ideological awareness of a world outside their small suburban ones (18). In this way, the films aren’t depoliticized; but the teenagers within them are. And this, according to Rapping, can’t be a progressive message for the films’ teenage audiences.

It’s Rapping’s concerns with the effects of the political content of teen films on audiences that connect her with Robin Wood, perhaps the savviest critic of the political ramifications of the representations of teenagers and teenage girls in films of the 1980s.

What makes Wood an important critic for me is that he points out the dual impulse that the teen film genre has. Interestingly, he allows teen films a potentially progressive reading, one that – on the surface at least – seems to contradict his claim that films of the 1980s are intent on the restoration of patriarchy. On the positive side, as he says in a review of *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* (1981, Ronald F. Maxwell), “What progressive potential the youth movies have is clearly centered on their exploitation of the desire to flout or overthrow authority” (24). Unfortunately, as he later explains in the same review, this rebellion is a superficial one, as it is usually enacted by straight white male teenagers who are “destined inevitably” to become, one day, the same parents they are rebelling against. What’s more, he adds that while the films appear as if they are “celebrating the overthrow of patriarchal authority,” they are more interested in “its reinstatement and perpetration, always at the expense of women” (24).

In his later *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, however, Wood proposes that another teen film, Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), goes a long way towards “rectifying the cycle’s sexist imbalance” (220). Indeed, Wood’s discussion of the film contradicts Bernstein’s claim that “concerted efforts to contrive features that subverted male wish-fulfillment fantasies were doomed from the outset” (174). Wood claims about the female audience for teen films in general:

Any satisfaction the films offer the female spectator seems at once marginal and perverse; she is invited to contemplate, as something at once funny and desperately important, male initiation rites; or she is invited to contemplate reiterated punishment for sexual pleasure, with a special emphasis on female pleasure. (217)

At first glance, this seems to fall in line with Bernstein’s claim that girls are marginal figures in teen films; and, as such, girls in the audience can laugh at the wacky hijinks of

the boys or are punished for their cinematic stand-ins having and enjoying sex. However, what makes *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* an exceptional film for Wood is that it “construct[s] a position for the female spectator that is neither masochistic nor merely compliant” (219). Both in its representations of female sexual desire and its forward teenage girl characters, as well as in its demystification and debunking of teen male sexuality, Wood argues that the film is a “rare” one, in that it “reflect[s] . . . the progressive tendencies in one’s culture, not merely the reactionary ones” (221).

While I’m not as concerned with the specifics of female spectatorial pleasure as Wood is, I am interested in exposing and exploring the cracks within the antifeminist ideology of 1980s girl-centered teen films in order to find potentially progressive aspects within them. I want to extend the work of feminist film critics, and seriously consider representations of teenage girls in these films as promoting conservative political ideologies. But I also want to claim that there are progressive aspects in these films that *could* have had a hand in shaping the third-wave feminism of their teenage girl audiences.

In his article “Girls on the Edge of the Reagan Era,” film critic Chuck Kleinhans offers the claim that the women’s movement “seldom spoke well to the issues of teen girls” (88). Part of its inability to reach girls, according to him, was the fact that “second-wave feminism often negated key concerns of 1980s and 1990s girls becoming women in areas they wanted to explore: dress, cosmetics, grooming, heterosexual activity, and teen culture” (88). In this view – which I see as a third-wave perspective, since it is founded on an essentialized view of and reaction against second-wave feminism – the second wave was just as insidious as Faludi’s backlash in that it ignored teenage girls and their uses of popular culture. Yet, as Kleinhans suggests all-too-late at the end of his article,

three girl-centered teen films released in 1980 – *Foxes* (Adrian Lyne), *Little Darlings* (Ronald F. Maxwell), and *Times Square* (Alan Moyle) – were potentially instrumental in helping girls negotiate both their own comings-of-age as well as their own nascent relationships with feminism.

As a third-wave feminist whose own relationship with feminism began with watching teen films, I recognize and want to explore the assumption which Kleinhans hints at: namely, that young girls were first exposed to feminism in part through the representations of teen girls in 1980s teen films. I take as my theoretical starting-point the second-wave feminist interpretation of popular culture as feminist backlash elucidated by Faludi and combine it with my third-wave view that considers the potentially feminist pleasures that can come from (and do come from) consuming these 1980s teen films. So I'm claiming that young people – boys as well as girls – could construct potentially feminist understandings of certain aspects of the generally regressive teen films that dominated the decade. This approach both acknowledges the backlash antifeminism of 1980s films and reconsiders them for their feminist impulses. I'm not interested, however, in wholly recuperating these films. As my discussions will illuminate, I find much of their representation of their teen girl characters hopelessly anti-feminist. What I am interested in doing is considering how they could be read as valuable cases that contained nascent third-wave feminist discourses for their audiences, as Kleinhans seems to hint in his article. I'm ultimately claiming that girl-centered teen films from the 1980s had a hand in fostering third-wave feminism. To borrow a phrase from Susan Douglas' *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*: "growing up . . . with

the mass media helped make me a feminist" (7). I hope to show that teen films could have helped other third wavers become feminist, too.

Before I discuss the individual chapters of this dissertation, I want to make two things clear. First of all, the John Hughes / Molly Ringwald "trilogy" I discuss in Chapter Two (*Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*), are the only films covered that I actually saw on television when I was growing up, and, as such, are the films whose teenage girl characters actually *did* have a hand in shaping my feminism. However, my retrospective look at these three films has informed my approach to the two others that I discuss, which I saw only when I was much older – *Valley Girl* and *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains*. Regardless of when I first saw any of these films or their effects on me at the time of seeing them, I'm speculating that all of their teenage girl characters *could* have had a hand in shaping the third-wave feminism of others.

The second thing I want to make clear here is that, in the progression of my discussion of the films, there are two distinct movements that I make from chapter to chapter. As I mention above, and as I hope to make clear in what follows, I am still a fan of these teen films. It would be difficult, then, to completely remove the current pleasures I take in watching, laughing at, and groaning at these films from my critical analyses of them. Given my feminist sentiments, it should be no surprise that I like *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* much more than I like *Valley Girl*, which I like even more than the three John Hughes / Molly Ringwald films combined. Not that my pleasures are apolitical, but the degree of a film's progressive content and the nature of its production do influence my enthusiasm as a fan. So one movement I make in my dissertation is a theoretical one about the progressiveness of the film narratives – and I

move from those that I find the least progressive to the one that I find the most progressive. This movement is an important one, for, while I remain largely pessimistic about the feminist content of all of these films, I do want to emphasize the *potential* of these films to broadcast feminism.

The second movement I make here went into the structuring of my project. As a third-wave feminist who is obsessed with popular culture, and deeply interested in the ways in which feminism can be transmitted through venues of popular culture, I trace the ways in which different discourses of third-wave feminism connected with popular culture have been broadcast through representations of girls in these teen films. Here, too, I see another type of progression: I discuss third-wave feminist discourses that are first, *defined* by popular culture; second, that are about *consuming* popular culture; and, finally, that insist on the importance of *creating* popular culture.

I start by looking at the ways in which postfeminism – an early manifestation of third-wave feminism in some ways defined by the mass media – appears in the three John Hughes / Molly Ringwald films. I open Chapter Two, “John Hughes, Molly Ringwald, and the Postfeminist Teen Film” by discussing the relationship of postfeminism to second-wave feminism. I look at the mainstream press’s backlash construction of postfeminism in the 1980s as a type of feminism practiced by, and perhaps only applicable to the desires of, upper-middle-class young white women. I then compare this construction to the academic Marxist-feminist view, which considers middle- and working- class women’s feminism. In both versions, postfeminism comes across as the “simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the goals of second-wave feminism” (Stacey, “Sexism” 339). In other words, postfeminism appears

in its media representations as both pseudo-feminist – since it applauds the individual woman and simultaneously valorizes her economic achievements (which I see as close to the backlash ideology of the Reagan 1980s) – and non-feminist, since these economic achievements often come at the expense of collective relationships with other women across class (and other) lines. I first demonstrate how postfeminism is expressed in representations of women in the advertising media in the 1980s in order to show how the representations of young women in the Hughes / Ringwald films – *Sixteen Candles* (1984, John Hughes), *The Breakfast Club* (1985, John Hughes), *Pretty in Pink* (1986, Howard Deutch) – are similarly culturally articulated. What’s more, I argue that all of these films are obsessed with issues of class and that they present a conflicted view of it – Hughes wants simultaneously to destroy the wealthy as much as he celebrates them. I discuss how competition between, and hostility towards, women of similar and different classes are constructed as non-feminist narrative elements in *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*; both narratives seem to take great pleasure in verbally or physically destroying wealthy women at the same time that they reward their middle- or working-class female protagonists with a heterosexual romance. While I grant that *Pretty in Pink* shares these narrative characteristics, I also discuss how individualism, economic achievement, and the issue of women working in this film are represented as pseudo-feminist elements. While I do note a slight progression among the three films, I remain largely skeptical about the suggestion of feminism in *Pretty in Pink*. At the same time, however, I note that the mainstream media’s obsession with proclaiming the rise of postfeminism – or, for some, the death of feminism – ignores other ways in which feminism was alive in the 1980s.

One such way is explored in Chapter Three: “Valley Girl Power?” I use Baumgardner and Richard’s definition of the third-wave discourse of “Girlie” feminism in *Manifesta* to define Girl Power third-wave feminism as the consumption of patriarchally-defined popular culture, as well as the simultaneous reclamation / co-opting of this popular culture (80). I point out the shortcomings inherent in their reading of Girlie / Girl Power, in order ultimately to claim that this third-wave feminist practice, which relies chiefly on consumption, is highly problematic; in this case, what’s being encouraged is consumption of an ideology, without questioning what that ideology might entail. From there, I draw on Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s work with subcultures and girls, and the third-wave feminist writers Naomi Wolf and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s discussion of economic-driven individuality to claim that there are two *potentially* progressive elements to be found in the focus on consumption in Girl Power third-wave feminism. One of these is the focus in Girl Power on girls bonding over shared consumption practices, while the second is the issue of girls’ sheer excessiveness. I argue that the all-girl subculture of Valley Girls that surfaced on the country’s radar in the mid-1980s is an older sister of Girl Power, and thus, a nascent third-wave discourse. By examining primary and secondary sources that feature Valley Girls – the popular song, mainstream journal articles, mass-market paperbacks – I show that the Valley Girl, like the practitioner of Girl Power, is an equivocal figure, demonstrating the same shortcomings (as typified by her obsessions with consumption) and potentials for feminism. Finally, I examine the film *Valley Girl* (1983, Martha Coolidge) to explore the ways it completely undercuts the potential sources of feminist power to be found in the other popular manifestations of Valley Girl. More specifically, the film, while seemingly

privileging its female characters and their excesses ultimately polices these excesses and closes on a note of female antagonism and heterosexual coupling.

While I implicitly acknowledge one second-wave feminist critique of third-wave feminism in Chapter Three – namely, that consumption in Girl Power leads to a feminist politics that is neither feminist nor political – I show in Chapter Four that, contrary to another second-wave feminist critique, the potential for positive political effects regarding the consumption and, importantly, the creation of popular culture cannot be overlooked. To this end, “Riot, Girls: *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* and Third Wave Cultural Production,” focuses on the more empowering uses of popular culture within third-wave feminism. I trace the history of the teen girl activist subculture of Riot Grrrl from its beginnings in the summer of 1992. In this discussion, I explain that its effortless joining of “theory” and “practice” is what I find to be its most potentially utopian quality. At the same time, I suggest that the reason why Riot Grrrl didn’t survive in any notable form in the public arena might have to do with the nature of girls’ cultures. Drawing on the subcultural theories of Simon Frith, Mary Celeste Kearney and Angela McRobbie, I trace the “bedroom culture” aspect of Riot Grrrl and its concomitant separatist leanings (Kearney, “Producing” 285). I argue that Riot Grrrl, as a third-wave feminist practice, is both helped and hindered by its being a subculture-within-a-subculture, as well as by its insular, non-mainstream approach to broadcasting feminism. This is, ultimately, where I make the connection between Riot Grrrl and the film *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains*. Not only does the film treat what would become Riot Grrrl’s potential shortcomings, but it also shows the ways in which, even in a wider cultural (as opposed to subcultural) setting, its third-wave feminist politics might not be

completely erased. I trace the way the film dramatizes the all-girl band the Stains' rise and fall within the music world, their relationship with the patriarchal music industry and their co-opting of masculine musical forms, and their galvanizing effect on their female fans through their explicitly pro-girl political message. What's more, I also look at the way the film treats the relationship the Stains have with the mainstream television media, in order to claim that the film anticipates in specific ways the problems that Riot Grrrl has had in its use of and relationship to the media machine. The film even envisions a future for the Stains, in which their mainstream exposure hasn't diluted their anti-mainstream ideals. I conclude this chapter, and my dissertation, by showing that it is ultimately through young women taking responsibility for their own uses of popular culture – and through their creation of popular culture – that third-wave feminism can flourish.

In a way, I see my dissertation as embodying what is an important progression that third wave feminism makes in its negotiations with popular culture. Personal narratives, such as the one about popular culture that begins this introduction, must lead to informed and serious analysis of the various pieces that make up our individual stories. I see the bulk of my chapters – where I take a step forward into analyzing the popular culture that I consumed and continue to consume – as making the crucial jump towards informed and serious analysis. I would hope that reading this dissertation will encourage others to think about the popular culture we consume. But more importantly, I would hope that we could move beyond our simple practices of consumption and analysis into the realm of real-world activism.

CHAPTER TWO:  
John Hughes, Molly Ringwald, and the Postfeminist Teen Film

The 1980s, as I discussed in my introduction, were characterized predominantly by a backlash against second-wave feminism, perpetuated most insidiously by the media. During this decade, media representations of feminism among young women ultimately distorted feminist discourses for mass audiences. In this chapter, I will be looking at media-constructed feminist discourses of “real” and fictional young women in the 1980s. I’m calling all of these discourses “postfeminist” because they, generally speaking, embody the relationship between young women and second-wave feminism.<sup>16</sup> While the term “postfeminist” implies a temporal break from feminism, I am not claiming here that postfeminist discourses are always *opposed to* feminist ones. Rather, postfeminism might best be understood as a feminist discourse that’s either equivocal or hostile towards second-wave feminism. To this end, I divide postfeminism into two separate discourses: pseudo-feminist postfeminism and non-feminist postfeminism. Both discourses, in the way they incorporate, revise, or depoliticize discourses of second-wave feminism, privilege individualism and class advancement, often along economic lines. What distinguishes the two, however, is that, while pseudo-feminist postfeminism encourages *competition* between women of different classes, non-feminist postfeminism encourages outright *hostility* toward differently-classed women.<sup>17</sup> And it is precisely issues of class that hang over the three popular girl-centered teen films from the 1980s – directed or written by John Hughes – that I discuss in this chapter. Despite the evidence of potentially progressive moments in each film, all three circulate both types of postfeminist discourse in their representations of their teenage girl protagonists (usually

played by Molly Ringwald). More explicitly, though, competition between and hostility towards women of similar and different classes are constructed as non-feminist postfeminist elements in *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985), while individualism and economic advancement along class lines are represented in *Pretty in Pink* (1986) as pseudo-feminist postfeminist elements.

One piece of the 1980s backlash against feminism was that, according to Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, it perpetrated a “Big Lie” about feminism, that “the very steps that have elevated women’s position have actually led to their downfall” (xviii). This “Big Lie,” as articulated within popular culture and the mass media, loudly proclaimed either anti-feminist or anti-woman sentiments. Faludi elaborates on one of many pop cultural manifestations of this falsehood:

Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-‘80s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared the advent of a younger “postfeminist generation” that supposedly reviled the women’s movement. (xix)

So at the same time that one reality of young women’s lives pointed to a climate that was feminist-receptive, the media painted a different picture. It’s important to note here that Faludi is talking about – and is largely concerned with – the mainstream media and its broadcasting of this anti-feminist message. What is perhaps most insidious about the “Big Lie” is the fact that, while postfeminism serves as an anti-feminist manifestation of an anti-feminist decade, it nonetheless traffics in potentially feminist discourses.

I want to look first at one mainstream media construction of postfeminism to show how postfeminism can perhaps be seen more specifically as pseudo-feminist

postfeminism. In the first mainstream journal in which the term “postfeminism” appeared – the October 1982 *New York Times Magazine* piece called “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” – author Susan Bolotin mourns the fact that “‘feminism’ had become a dirty word” among the young, upwardly-mobile professional women she interviews (30). While the climate of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s undoubtedly gave her interviewees certain socio-economic advantages in their respective worlds (college degrees, managerial positions, and the salaries and respect that often accompany high-powered jobs), they are all the same largely opposed to second-wave feminism.

One manifestation of this pseudo-feminist postfeminism is the perception of second-wave feminism, among her interviewees, as a monolithic practice. Bolotin offers Diana Shaw, who claims, “the one [issue] that did [feminists] the most harm was lesbian rights” (30). She tells Bolotin that she doesn’t label herself a feminist because she’s afraid “the lesbian connotation” will alter people’s perceptions of her as an author (30). And later in the article, Rachel Flick, the editor of a conservative journal, observes, “Look around and you’ll see some happy women, and then you’ll see these bitter, bitter women. The unhappy women are all feminists. . . . Feminists are really tortured people” (31). For both women, feminism is something that only angry or lesbian women can engage in, not to mention something that can potentially interfere with your career.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps a more nuanced view of pseudo-feminist postfeminism – and one that seems to typify Bolotin article’s overall sentiment of it – comes from Julie Rothman. At the same time that Rothman (a recent college graduate) expresses pity for feminists, she applauds the political effects that feminism has had on her life. As she says, “I feel badly for them. . . . It’s all right to be independent and strong, but a lot of these women are

alone. They've set goals for the ideal male, a male they've fabricated in their minds." She continues, "I *do* feel gratitude toward these women in terms of the actual political changes that have taken place. I'm just sorry that so few had to fight so hard to get what they got for so many" (30). Winston Churchill-isms aside, Rothman does at least acknowledge that her socio-economic position as a woman in the American 1980s would have been near-impossible without her second-wave foremothers' achievements.

To her credit, I think, Bolotin attempts to historicize this bashing of second-wave feminism. She notes with resignation that the scapegoating among her interviewees is nothing new in American society; she claims that periods of feminist change are always followed by periods of backlash.<sup>19</sup> She does, however, explain that the stress placed on economic advancement prevalent in the climate of the 1980s does make this particular decade different from decades past. In other words, only in the 1980s is "working . . . not a luxury" as it may have been in the 1960s and 1970s: "it is a fact of life for most women." The thinking goes, of *course* women will have to work in the 1980s, since the pre-feminist traditional modes of "employment" for women, "reproduction and homemaking . . . are no longer economically valued" (31). What is missing from this explanation, though, is the fact that women are often expected to do both paid and domestic work.

This pseudo-feminist postfeminism, then, attempts to claim that feminism is somehow passé, not at all appropriate for the swim-with-the-(male)-sharks-or-stay-out-of-the-water times of the decade. The reality for women who worked and lived in the 1980s, though, perhaps anticipated this slight revision of feminist goals. Feminist scholar Johanna Brenner claims that in the 1980s, "the disparities in the lives and life chances of

women have grown” (113). As an example of this disparity, Bolotin quotes a contemporary *Mademoiselle* magazine survey of 10,000 young women (aged 17 to 30) which reveals that “half [of the women] plan to earn over \$25,000 at the peak of their careers, a salary earned by only 2 percent of working women” (qtd. in Bolotin 107). This disconnect between reality and expectations is something that Faludi touches on in *Backlash*, too: she claims that, in the 1980s, the “breathless reports about droves of female ‘careerists’ crashing the legal, medical, and other elite professions were inflated” (366). The reality of women’s economic status, she claims, should have been announced in the following three headlines:

It’s Back! The ‘50s Pay Gap  
More and More, Women Stuck in Secretarial Pool  
Now More than Ever! Inequity and Intimidation (364, 365, 368)

As Faludi sums up the 1980s, “Reaganomics, the recession, and the expansion of a minimum-wage service economy . . . helped, in no small measure, to slow and even undermine women’s momentum in the job market” (363). In the face of all these statistics and claims, the question remains: if women wanted to advance financially in the face of declining economic prospects and the gendered division of labor, then why wouldn’t they be receptive to feminist women, who “were helping other women to achieve economic equality” by claiming that women’s’ economic lives didn’t have to begin and end in the domestic sphere (Bolotin 31)?

Well, for one thing, the pseudo-feminist postfeminists of Bolotin’s article, as feminist critic Rayna Rapp astutely notes, are “young, predominantly white, highly privileged female doctors, lawyers, and business executives” (35).<sup>20</sup> In other words, the question I ask above about economic advancement is a moot one. Postfeminism is

incompatible with second-wave feminism (or feminists) because, in the *Times Magazine* article anyway, the young women interviewed are financially beyond “the philosophical core of [second-wave] feminism – equality of economic opportunity” (Bolotin 103).

These are young women from socio-economic backgrounds who, while they may have been influenced by second-wave feminism, no longer find a need for it. For example, Rachel Flick flicks off feminism as if she were tossing off last year’s coat: “The reason I don’t support feminism is that it simply does not speak my language. It’s a matter of style, of attitude” (31). In this estimation, feminism is depoliticized, stripped of meaning so that it becomes a disposable personal choice of style.

Indeed, there’s an overwhelming sense of class privilege broadcast by the young professional women in the article; Jennifer Moses (an editorial assistant) typifies this with her rhetorical question, “When you get out of school and immediately get a high-paying job, why shouldn’t you think you can have it all?” (106). Another woman – a tennis tour coordinator – doesn’t recognize the class bias inherent in her response to Bolotin. She says that, despite the fact that “feminism *has* made men more flexible,” her husband “grew up in a very traditional family.” She explains that he “has this very funny thing: He wants me to be independent at work, but he wants his laundry to be done. So a woman comes in to clean” (116). We’re left wondering what this woman who comes in to clean thinks about feminism – or her employer, for that matter.<sup>21</sup> Given the economic conditions of the decade, then, upper-class young women might have had every reason to savor the privileges of their class positions; anything that might jeopardize them, such as feminism – with its perceived-as-annoying focus on *other* women’s socio-economic needs – was therefore seen as out-of-touch, or even dangerous.

If the atmosphere of the 1980s explains why pseudo-feminist postfeminism – with its emphasis on economic advancement – might have been appealing to upper-class young women, what about middle-class or working-class young women? Do we find the same kind of pseudo-feminist postfeminist rhetoric that simultaneously welcomes and waves goodbye to feminism? Marxist-feminist critic Judith Stacey’s important article, “Sexism by a Subtler Name? Postindustrial Conditions and Postfeminist Consciousness in Silicon Valley,” attempts to answer these questions by further historicizing feminism in the American “postindustrial” economy (339). Stacey notes that second-wave feminism disrupted the ideology of the nuclear family by making plain the problem of enforced female domesticity: it “helped promote the newly normative double-income . . . middle- and working-class families” (340). At the same time that this happened, though, there was an attendant fear, present among the conservative right, of society’s fabric being ripped apart by the lack of traditional familial structures; as Faludi explains, this right-wing fear oozed down to the mainstream media in the demonization of feminism that characterized the backlash.<sup>22</sup> So what happened, according to Stacey, was two-fold. On the one hand, there was the visible presence of women in the workforce, a money-earning faction that helped support the nuclear family, especially economically. On the other hand, these same working women were potentially dangerous to the very families they were ostensibly supporting; now that they were making money, the criticism went, what was to stop them from turning their backs on domesticity altogether?

Stacey claims, “Because of its powerful and highly visible critique of traditional domesticity, and because of the sensationalized way the media disseminated this critique, feminism has taken most of the heat for family and social crises” (341). In the American

postindustrial economy, this cultural fear of feminism became the postfeminism that Stacey notices among the two working-class women and their teenage daughters about whom she writes in her article. For Lanny and Lyn (daughters of Pam and Dotty) she sees that, despite the transformations in their lives that feminism made possible (Lanny's conscious rejection of a traditional marriage, Lyn's single working motherhood), the two are still wary of calling themselves feminists, despite the important effects that feminist social and educational services had on their mothers' lives.

“Lanny and Lyn do not conceptualize their troubling . . . family problems in political terms,” Stacey continues. “To them, feminism and politics appear either irrelevant or threatening” (352). But she also notices that their feelings ultimately translate into a strain of individualism that manifests in the women's lives as a set of personal choices about careers, men, and children. As Lyn says, she will “help the neighbor next door whose husband is beating her to death . . . but I do it my way. My way is not in a public form” (350). Stacey explains that she considers Lyn closer to her definition of postfeminist “because of her thoroughly individual and depoliticized relationship to feminist issues” (350). Stacey is not claiming here that postfeminism acted in the 1980s like Reagan's economic policies. In other words, postfeminism was not a trickle-down feminist strategy enacted by the upper classes that the working or middle classes ultimately adopted to help them survive in the postindustrial economy.

More importantly, perhaps, the way second-wave feminism became postfeminism did not differ along class lines. For both upper-class as well as middle- and working-class young women, postfeminism is – as Stacey claims – the “simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the goals of second-wave

feminism” (339). One example of the revision or depoliticization of these goals is the way that Lyn sees social problems in individual terms. Within pseudo-feminist postfeminist discourse, the achievements of the individual woman are key; where a second-wave feminist might stress collectivity, young pseudo-feminist postfeminists would stress individuality. Another example of this tendency comes from one of Bolotin’s interviewees, prelaw student Marian Briffa: she explains, “It’s the individual woman’s responsibility to prove her worth” (31). Collective political action for any of these women is rejected for personal action on issues that the individual woman finds important.<sup>23</sup> This is especially true of economic issues, because accompanying this stress on the individual is another inescapable fact of life in the 1980s: the sense that financial achievement is the key to personal growth and individual worth. This focus on economic advancement might then be seen as another revision that pseudo-feminist postfeminism has made to the goals of second-wave feminism.

Where might this individualism, with its concomitant valorization of economic achievement, have come from? One interpretation, supported by Faludi, Bolotin and Stacey, seems to claim that it was the climate of the 1980s that did it. As feminist media critic Susan Douglas puts it, those “were the years when we were supposed to put the naive, idealistic, antimaterialistic 1960s behind us and, instead, go to polo matches and wash our hair with bottled water from the Alps” (*Where* 246). But this sarcasm doesn’t go quite far enough in explaining why postfeminism, according to Faludi, seemed to be all over the American socio-cultural map. Another interpretation suggests that not only was one symptom of postfeminism the media’s interviews with “real” young women in mainstream center and leftist academic journals, but one cause of postfeminism was the

collection of fictional representations of women in other mainstream media. I want to now turn to examples of these representations in 1980s advertising media before discussing the representations of young women in the John Hughes / Molly Ringwald teen films, since feminist critics of 1980s advertising elaborate on the ways the focus on economic achievement inherent in pseudo-feminist postfeminism was culturally articulated.

One example was the media's propensity to appropriate feminism to line its pockets, selling "commodity feminism" in representations of "liberated" women. Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith claim that feminism in the 1980s took on a "plurality of faces in the mass media, its potentially alternative ideological force thus channeled through the commodity form in ways that may modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony" (336). In doing so, they argue, "feminism in its 'new' commodity form forgets its origins in a critique of unequal social, economic and political relations" (336). Advertisers, then, rather than signifying "femininity" through bodily poses and codes, instead take the signs and symbols of feminism – like "independence, participation in the work force, individual freedom, and self-control" (337) – and sell them to consumers as a new kind of femininity. The end result, the three claim, is "commodity feminism" (336), where what's left unquestioned is a capitalist encouragement to spend.<sup>24</sup> So at the same time that second-wave feminist practices were being revised and recast by young women living in the 1980s, the mass media projected images of women with words that spoke a similarly revised and recast feminist language, one that ignores the socio-economic conditions outside of the world of the

advertisements. Pseudo-feminist postfeminism finds one articulation in the media under the banner of this type of commodity feminism.

Susan Douglas argues further in *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* that in the 1980s, the second-wave goal of “women’s liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires” (246). As she explains, in ads aimed at “women in the age of Reagan, elitism and narcissism merged in a perfect appeal to forget the political already, and get back to the personal” (247). The ads she analyzes – innumerable ones, for quasi-scientific skin toners and beauty products and body-sculpting machines –work by claiming that other women’s problems don’t matter. In the end, what *does* matter is your own life, and how soon and how well it can conform to the plush upper-class Ralph Lauren silk lifestyles of the women represented in these ads. This sounds similar to the individualism expressed by Bolotin’s interviewees and to Lanny’s and Lyn’s claims, although infused with materialism. Ads such as the ones Douglas analyzes represent what I think is frightening about this pseudo-feminist postfeminism of the 1980s: it seems to *want* its consumers to ignore other women; it claims that if everyone paid attention to their own personal needs and desires, everyone in society would be much better off.

This mainstream media articulation of pseudo-feminist postfeminism stresses a focus on the self and the self’s own materialism. But there is one more dangerous aspect about the ads from the 1980s that Douglas analyzes. This aspect is what sometimes shifts the expressions of this discourse from pseudo-feminist postfeminism toward non-feminist postfeminism. Often, in both postfeminist representations of women, other women *do*

enter into the picture, although always in a spirit of less-than-healthy competition. As Douglas claims, “the mark of upscale female achievement” in the 1980s was always “the ability to indulge oneself, pamper oneself, and focus at length on oneself without having to listen to the needy voices of others” (246). She goes on to say that one other important thrust of this “narcissism as liberation campaign” were representations of a “war between women.” As she says, in ads that trumpeted commodity feminism, “sisterhood was out, [and] competitive individualism was in” (257).

Of course, representations of women being hostile toward one another are nothing new. Douglas argues that the media had always trained women to think of themselves as forever in competition with other women: “We had been raised to compete over men and to scrutinize ourselves and other women to see who was thinner, younger, sexier, nicer, prettier.” The difference, though, and how this ultimately got translated in postfeminist representations of women is that a hierarchy was created, “in which some women – the WASPY, wealthy, young, and beautiful – were at the top of the pyramid and other women – the poor, the dark-skinned, the ugly, the old, the fat – were at the bottom” (224). What Douglas makes explicit here – and what makes her take on postfeminism useful – is that she looks at this competition in terms of socio-economic class. And, in a way, we find here a strange concordance between the real-world conditions of women and their fictional representations. In other words, as the economy was sorting real women into different classes, the ads reflected this by representing women as being from irreconcilable classes. One message that these ads were more than happy to repeat and foster, Douglas claims, is something like the following: “To feel [sisterhood] with those ‘above’ you [in class] – hey, that little insecure, catty voice kicked in, those weren’t your

sisters, they were the competition, the ones getting more than you got, the ones who had won, the ones you could never beat” (225). Douglas eloquently says that ads featuring representations of women competing along class lines “nurtured this worm burrowing through the apple of sisterhood, personifying and dramatizing female competition wherever possible, erasing or simply refusing to represent . . . the power of female friendship, cooperation, and love” (225). This particular aspect of postfeminism – an aspect that stresses the individual woman’s economic advancement at the expense of other, differently-classed women – as articulated in the media, seems closer to an ultimate *rejection* of second-wave feminism’s goals than it does to a revision or depoliticization of them; it would be fitting, then, to call this non-feminist postfeminism.

To summarize: one tendency of postfeminist discourse in the 1980s – pseudo-feminist postfeminism – decries second-wave feminism at the same time that it incorporates a goal of economic achievement and/or class advancement for women with a depoliticized and individualized attitude toward other women. This tendency, I’m arguing, was mostly articulated in media articles with “real” young women. But there’s also the postfeminist tendency – non-feminist postfeminism – that stresses the individual woman’s economic advancement, through the purchase of consumer goods or through the accompanying entrance into an upper-class lifestyle, at the same time that it encourages rejection or overt hostility towards other women, especially women who are differently-classed than you. This tendency was articulated in, and nurtured by, the mass media’s fictional representations of women, especially women in advertisements. What makes both tendencies postfeminism is their relationship with second-wave feminism. The

former seems to incorporate, revise, or depoliticize second-wave feminism's goals, while the latter seems to reject them.

The teen films of John Hughes and Molly Ringwald, which emerged in the postfeminist 1980s, articulate both of these aspects of postfeminism. Indeed, as critic Ann De Vaney claims, Hughes' films played an important role in the shaping of postfeminism: they were "an important part of political and popular discourses that articulated a backlash against women's rights" (211). The wildly popular (and influential, I would argue) trilogy illustrates well the pseudo-feminist and non-feminist tendencies in postfeminism.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, I'll be looking at the ways postfeminism is articulated in *Sixteen Candles* (1984, written and directed by Hughes), *The Breakfast Club* (1985, written and directed by Hughes), and *Pretty in Pink* (1986, written by Hughes, directed by his protégé Howard Deutch). While all three films stress individualism, class advancement, and competition between or hostility among women of different classes, my analysis of each film is largely confined to the one aspect of postfeminist discourse that is especially prevalent in each respective film. More specifically, I'll be looking at the ways in which competition between, and hostility towards, women of similar and different classes are constructed as non-feminist postfeminist elements in *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*. I'll also consider the ways in which individualism and economic advancement along class lines are represented in all three films, although especially in *Pretty in Pink*, as pseudo-feminist postfeminist elements. While I do see a slight progression between and among the films, all three, to be sure, circulate in both pseudo-feminist and non-feminist postfeminism.

The fact that these teen films traffic in these discourses might come across as strange, considering the relationship that Hughes and Ringwald apparently had during the filming of *Sixteen Candles*, their first film together. In an interview from the time, Hughes said he wanted to write a teen film “from a female point of view,” since the genre at that time was “generally about males” (Barth 46). So Hughes wrote the film for Ringwald, “with an eight-by-ten glossy of Molly taped above his word processor for inspiration” (Johnson 103); he also apparently wanted to cast Ringwald for her Norman Rockwell-ian qualities after seeing a Rockwell painting of a girl looking at herself in the mirror. In an article from *Seventeen* in 1986, Ringwald even interviews Hughes, wherein he admits that he “was a little bit of Samantha [Baker, Ringwald’s character in *Sixteen Candles*]” growing up (228). This collection of tidbits about the film’s production history is not completely free of troubling overtones – in the same Ringwald-Hughes interview, he has trouble reconciling his 1986 film *Weird Science* (where two teenage boys create the perfect woman, who is, not surprisingly, a bombshell) with his desire to expose the faults in media’s representations of women; a 1986 interview with Ringwald calls Hughes a “Svengali” (Corliss 71) – but they do at least point to three films that could have ended up being slightly more progressive than, or at least a corrective to, the rivers of T & A teen films that clogged the theaters in the decade.

As it stands, though, these three films and their star were hugely popular. For example, in *Variety*’s weekly lists of the 50 Top-Grossing Films, all three remained in the top 20 highest-grossing films for five to ten weeks in certain months between 1984 and 1986 (Top 50 Chart).<sup>26</sup> As one critic claims about this ubiquity, “one might say that during 1985 and 1986 at least one John Hughes film was always screening at a movie

theater somewhere across the country” (De Vaney 201). Ringwald herself had cover stories in *Life*, *People*, and *Time* magazines in the banner year of 1986; appeared as the subject of feature-length articles or fashion spreads in *Cosmopolitan* (1984), *Interview* (1985), *Rolling Stone* (1985), and *Vanity Fair* (1985); and appeared in *Seventeen* at least three times in the 1980s, the earliest being 1982.

This popularity of the films and Ringwald continues even today. Well-designed, content-rich and informative web sites devoted to Hughes, Ringwald, and the films they made together abound on the Internet. *Sixteen Candles* was the subject of an episode of the E! Channel’s “True Hollywood Stories” series in 2001. The films and Ringwald currently feature in VH1’s 2003 “I Love the 80s” series. Contemporary teen film directors such as Kevin Smith and Kevin Williamson have paid tribute to Hughes and *The Breakfast Club*. Famously, Courtney Love has claimed that this film was “the defining moment of the ‘alternative’ generation” (qtd. in Daley). Ringwald herself was on the cover of the first book-length exploration of 1980s teen films, Jonathan Bernstein’s 1997 *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*. She also made the cover of *Us* magazine in 2001 again, as the lead in a cover feature on “80’s Ladies,” and she continues to star in Broadway and Off-Broadway plays. In fact, while working on this project, when I mention to friends and strangers that I was writing on 1980s teen films and third-wave feminism, the films that people continue to ask me about are *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*.<sup>27</sup>

The point of mentioning these films’ contemporary and continued popularity is to claim, ultimately, that no other director and actor in the teen film genre achieved as much popular or critical attention as did Hughes and Ringwald in the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this is

why both of them are still being remembered, imagined, and invoked in ways today, even ways that may be invisible to our public, popular culture. Now, while I don't have any information to support this claim, other than the fact that the teenage audience has always made up a large part of the contemporary movie-going audience, I do know that Hughes' and Ringwald's presence in our collective imaginations today would have been unthinkable if teenagers, both boys and girls alike, hadn't been watching these films. So, like the ubiquitous ads that Susan Douglas analyzes above, these films helped foster certain widespread ideological viewpoints and subject positions. They shaped (and perhaps continue to shape, since these films are still being watched) a generation's views of class and gender roles. It's troubling to me that teenagers were (and perhaps are) being exposed to both types of postfeminist discourses through these films.

Before I look at the specific ways that postfeminism is articulated in the individual films, I want to look briefly at what Marxist critics have said about the depictions of class and class differences in Hughes' teen films, since what links all three of these films – and, indeed, their articulations of postfeminism – is the inescapable presence of social class. However, what I'm doing with this chapter is considering what these critics sometimes leave out – that is, the ways in which young women enter into the class politics of these films. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, argue that Hughes' teen films “make class differences the basis of their romantic plots” (120). What his films actually accomplish with these openly class-based plots, according to them, seems to be equivocal. On one hand, Ryan and Kellner claim that his films appear to “mobilize persistent populist anger against unjustifiable differentials in the distribution of wealth”

by the ways that their romance narratives show teenagers from different classes superseding class differences in order to join together (120). On the other, these same films can't seem to think outside of these class differences: "none of [them] overtly advocates a levelling" of them. What Hughes seems to be saying in his films is that "the metaphor of romance . . . promotes the persistence of class differences by suggesting that they ultimately make no difference." However, his films do express "a desire for such levelling" of class differences, although on a "personal/emotional" level rather than on a "structural/rational" one (120).

Jon Lewis' *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* also discusses the way Hughes' teen films stress the importance of personal solutions to class differences: "Hughes's little dramas of class warfare end . . . with the triumph of individuality" (138). But what Lewis adds to Ryan and Kellner's discussion is the fact that it's often the romance of the *female* protagonist that upsets, momentarily anyway, the social order of things. He argues that, in the protagonist's romantic triumph, her "populism . . . [her] democratic benevolence, coordinates a victory of romance over cynicism" (139). Furthermore, he claims that Hughes' teen films insist "on the clairvoyance and persistence of the feminine" (141). In other words, as we'll see, Ringwald's character – especially in *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink* – is aware of the class differences that she has to live through and eventually overcome. And, at the end of the narrative, after struggling against these differences, she's rewarded (romantically) with a male partner. Unfortunately, the class structure of the film is left largely untouched by her individual efforts.

One could argue that, through the figure of a young woman who struggles against class differences, we find a potentially progressive impulse in Hughes' films. I would argue, however, that the three films I'll be discussing are less than progressive in two ways. First of all, the films are absolutely content to uphold status quo ideas of class. True, Hughes does offer personal and emotional alliances between different classes as potential – if romanticized – “solutions” to class difference, but what's left standing uncritically are the same old class structures. In other words, personal class issues might be addressed, but structural class differences are never overcome, much less critiqued. As Ryan and Kellner claim, the romance plots of these films seem to say that class differences make no difference as they can be worked out between individuals through heterosexual coupling. But the fact that they are left intact and uncriticized in the end show that they do make a difference – perhaps more than Ryan and Kellner are comfortable admitting.

If class differences are always present and shape relationships among the characters, what happens when gender enters the picture in Hughes' teen films also makes these films less than progressive. In his ideological project of exposing class differences, Hughes sets up a young woman protagonist (for example, Ringwald in *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*) as a model of a strong young woman who can lay bare the mechanisms of class. What makes this protagonist a postfeminist figure (whether pseudo-feminist or non-feminist) in all three films is the fact that Hughes doesn't ultimately want to critique class differences. His films evade this critique in two ways. First of all, in many ways, Hughes' film representations could be seen as selling a pseudo-feminist postfeminist “commodity feminism,” where feminism “bow[s] to

capitalist hegemony” (Goldman et al. 336). Indeed, none of his protagonists want to upset the capitalist order of society that requires different classes of people to work in different sectors of the economy. But second, running alongside this in the films is another type of pseudo-feminist postfeminism, where the young women protagonists are often constructed around the *symbols* of feminism: “independence, participation in the work force, individual freedom, and self-control,” although these symbols are never named as such (Goldman et al. 337). Like Lanny and Lyn, too, these protagonists have an “individual and depoliticized relationship to feminist issues” (Stacey, “Sexism” 350).<sup>29</sup> Hence, while we may have an individual who seems coded as feminist, in her representations and the representations of her relationships with other women, she is, at best, a pseudo-feminist postfeminist figure, and at worst, a non-feminist postfeminist figure, when class enters the picture. To put this another way, just as the representations of women in postfeminist advertisements from the 1980s show class differences and foster class competition, Hughes’ representations of his young woman protagonists do the same.<sup>30</sup>

I want to mention before I begin my analysis that, with the exception of *Pretty in Pink*, the Hughes films perform an imaginative recasting of class. In other words, the films explicitly code markers of real world class status (degrees of conspicuous consumption, types of jobs or careers, levels of education, presence or absence of certain social groups) as markers of high school class status (extent of ownership of consumer goods, types of jobs of parents or peers, quality and type of parental/sibling relationships, types of conventional ideas of attractiveness). As Alan Nadel notes in his *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan’s America*,

the world portrayed in all of Hughes' films is suburban and white; this world is divided into the realm of the insiders and the realm of the "invasive strangers," who often violently expose the class positioning of the insider (142). In his teen films, we can see a similar thing happening: class position in these films translates, more or less, into classes of insiders and outsiders. Someone's class is never explicitly named as such in these teen films (again, *Pretty in Pink* is the exception), although their position on the line that separates insiders from outsiders is always obvious from the film's mise-en-scène.

In *Sixteen Candles*, Ringwald plays Sam(antha) Baker, who wakes up on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday hoping that her parents remember that it is her birthday. Because her older sister Ginny's wedding looms on the horizon, Sam is left hoping. All day, she pines after Jake Ryan (Michael Schoeffling) – who's dating the school "queen" Caroline (Haviland Morris) – while fending off the amorous advances of the appropriately-named Geek (Anthony Michael Hall) at a school dance and enduring two pairs of grandparents and one Asian exchange student at home. That night, wackiness and mawkishness at the school dance ensue for Sam. Geek, meanwhile, has made a deal with Jake at a party at Jake's house: he offers information about Sam, while Jake loans him Caroline and his car. The next day, Jake meets Sam outside the church after the wedding and, later that night, the two share a birthday cake and a kiss.

Hughes' class project is immediately apparent in what is first shown of Sam's and Jake's house, and what happens to the latter. The Baker house, from the film's opening sequence, is situated among many other houses just like it along a tree-lined suburban street.<sup>31</sup> This uniformity between houses is stressed by the gag of the paper-delivery truck tossing papers across both sides of the street, seemingly oblivious to where they'll

land. Sam lives with her two parents, Ginny, and two younger siblings. With the exception of sequences in her bedroom, where she's alone, or Ginny's bedroom, where the two talk about the wedding, the sections of the film set in the common areas of the Baker house are frantic and crowded. From what we can tell, the family drives a station wagon, and the children take the bus to school. Mr. Baker carools and works a white-collar office job while Mrs. Baker presumably stays at home, orchestrating her kids' and her husband's movements during the day. Although each child seems to have their own bedroom (Sam's is a converted attic space), and Sam has her own telephone line, there's no evidence of the family engaging in conspicuous consumption of material goods; three notable exceptions are the television in the kitchen, the dictionary in the living room, and the younger brother's Walkman. In other words, this is a solid middle-class Hughesian family.

All of this contrasts with the world of Jake Ryan. We only see his house on its own, never in the context of any other houses around it; while the Baker house has a small front yard, small enough for the paper boy to toss his wares onto, the Ryan house is large enough for a cul-de-sac out front for trees to grow on and cars to park on. And just as a vehicle provides commentary on the sameness of the Baker home to those around it, a vehicle – driven by the exchange student – shows us just how isolated and large the Ryan house is: its tires squeal as it smashes into another car around the cul-de-sac. Jake is an only child. Although we're not told what his parents do for a living, we get the hint that one or both of them trade on the New York Stock Exchange (the NYSE license plate gives it away); they're undoubtedly white-collar professionals. This class position is further transmitted through the markers of consumption that are all around their house: a

stereo with turntable and tape player; a kitchen with food processors and huge refrigerator; an exercise bike and set of weights; a well-stocked wine cellar; a piano; and central air. Of course, there's also the matter of their three-car garage with the Rolls-Royce with its car phone (in case we don't get it, Geek exclaims to Jake that the grille alone costs "5 grand"); Jake's sporty red roadster; and the furs, pearls, and jewels that Caroline's drunk friends wear around the house.

Hughes' approach to the rich and their markers characterizes what happens to the Ryans' house during and after the party: toilet paper adorns the trees; a lawn jockey wears red panties; the tape player spits out its contents while a pizza spins on the turntable; the weights crash through two floors, destroying the contents of the wine cellar; the vents spew something soapy; Caroline's friends snap a long string of pearls when they totter down the stairs; and Geek plows the Rolls through a set of trash cans. Most telling perhaps of Hughes' seeming attack on the wealthy, there's a Visa card poking out on the table in the living room: even the means by which the goods are bought gets destroyed.

But working alongside this gleeful celebration of the destruction of upper-class wealth is a sense that being a member of this class would be wonderful. In this way, *Sixteen Candles* reaffirms Hughes' conventional class ideology, as Ryan and Kellner outline above: despite wanting to explore class differences (and even appear to criticize the rich), Hughes wants also to leave them intact. And what's more, he seemingly valorizes the upper class at the same time.<sup>32</sup> In a telling convergence of class and gender, Sam has a short conversation with her girlfriend Randy about class consumption and heterosexuality. Keeping in mind her class position, Sam could be read as expressing to

her girlfriend a desire to be a member of a class higher than their own. She tells Randy she wishes she could have the sweet sixteen party of her dreams, which is spoken of partly in terms of consumer goods: she wants “tons of people,” a band, a cute guy, and a black Trans Am.<sup>33</sup> Randy suggests Sam remind her parents that they forgot her birthday; as she claims, the “massive guilt” could be “highly profitable.” It’s important that Randy speaks in a financial register: not only would having a big birthday party be good for Sam’s psyche, it would also be good for her class image. (This financial element of her birthday arises later on, when Geek tells Sam that everything should be “platinum” at sixteen.) So at the same time that Hughes enjoys messing with class – whether in the destruction of the signifiers of upper-class wealth, or in the way the narrative resolves itself into a cross-class romance between Sam and Jake – he shows advancement to the upper class (through consumption or through a cross-class romance) as an important matter.

Working alongside this class project, though, is the film’s pseudo-feminist postfeminism. We could see Sam and Randy’s friendship as potentially feminist, since they seem to share a strong relationship that no other females in the film have. Sam (and Randy, to a lesser extent) is a potential model for a feminist young woman. She’s able to express tentative sexual desire for Jake when she and Randy pass notes, she’s quick-witted when verbally sparring with Geek, she’s independent and freely speaks her mind to her parents and grandparents; she’s definitely the person who’s given the best lines in the film. However, Sam’s qualities as a “liberated” young woman don’t quite jibe with the class divide that exists between her and Caroline. In fact, Sam and Randy watch Caroline showering, complaining about her perceived perfection. What’s done about this

class divide among women, as we'll see, is what makes this pseudo-feminist postfeminist film perhaps closer to misogynist non-feminist.

The film goes to astonishing lengths to celebrate the destruction of Caroline, the woman who, because she's dating Jake, impedes Sam's progress to a happy ending with him. Read in class terms, this could be an actualization of Sam's (and Hughes') middle-class yearning for upper-class status. In other words, Sam achieves metaphoric economic parity with Jake by becoming his girlfriend. Sam's achievement, however, comes at the cost of Caroline's expense. One reason for Caroline's emotional and physical destruction might be that she is unappreciative of or unreflective about her class position. During the school dance, we find out that Jake has gotten upset at her because at parties in the past, she's had a hand in wrecking his parents' house. And when she's dancing with Jake, she tells him, "God, I love it when your parents are out of town. I fantasize that I'm your wife and we're like the richest and most popular adults in town. I owe all my great weekends to you." When he's not as receptive to this fantasy, she reminds him that she is, in a sense, a wanted commodity by the other males in the school. These instances paint a portrait of someone who might appreciate the popularity that consumer goods can provide, but not the goods themselves.

But this reason – this critique of upper-class privilege because it's *blind* – doesn't quite explain the lengths to which Hughes' film goes to ensure that Caroline is out of Sam's way at the end. At the party, Caroline gets smashingly drunk and manages to get her hair caught in a door; her friends take great drunken pleasure in chopping off the back of it to free her. This destruction of her personal appearance mirrors the widespread destruction of Jake's house. As if to push this second parallel further, the film has Jake

trade Caroline and the Rolls-Royce for Sam's panties, which Geek, unbelievably, had managed to coerce from her. Caroline is also carried to the garage, dumped into the Rolls, driven off and made to pose for a compromising photo by Geek for the benefit of his dorky friends. What happens to her in the narrative (whether her sloppy drunkenness, her scalping, or the potential for sexual coercion – brought up in a “day after the night before” scenario in a parking lot with Geek)<sup>34</sup> seems to be both a projection of Sam's desire to achieve upper-class status and a project of Hughes' desire to harm the upper classes, or at least rich women. This is where the non-feminist postfeminism of this film comes the closest to misogynist.<sup>35</sup>

However, there might be a potentially progressive reading of Sam's romance with Jake, in the terms outlined above by Lewis and Ryan and Kellner. For, by the end of the film, class differences have been (temporarily, at least) overcome (even if only on the level of an individual relationship). Sam and Jake are a couple at the end, but so, too, are Caroline and Geek.<sup>36</sup> But even if the resolution of the narrative seems to point to Hughes' desire to supersede class differences through a heterosexual romance, this resolution also leaves competition between women of different classes and hostility towards women of the upper class as cultural givens, absolutely necessary if some middle-class women are to supersede their class barriers. In this film's articulation of postfeminism, Mr. Baker's smiling thumbs-up at Jake reinforces the film's belief that finally the highest goal of middle-class women like Sam is to gain upper-class status by finding a partner above their class, regardless of the cost to other women. Ironically, upper-class women like Caroline, even in their broken and disheveled state, continue to

provide models for middle-class women to strive for at the same time that they must compete, often viciously, against them.

While not as overtly misogynist as *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club* traffics in similar non-feminist as well as pseudo-feminist postfeminist discourses. But what it says about gender is similar: women from the upper classes suffer, by and large, the brunt of most of the film's hostility and valorization, as women from different classes are uncritically shown to be hostile towards one another. This film also narrativizes one woman's metaphoric economic advancement; unlike the previous film, though, this woman is not Ringwald's character. In this film, five high school students spend Saturday detention in their library together: Allison, "a Basket Case" (Ally Sheedy); Andy, "an Athlete" (Emilio Estevez); Bender, "a Criminal" (Judd Nelson); Brian, "a Brain" (Anthony Michael Hall); and Claire, "a Princess" (Ringwald). The plot of the film is really that simple: after eight hours of sharing soul-baring dialogue about sex, parents, school, and the future – not to mention dope smoking, spontaneous dancing, and evading and insulting the principal – the five go home. As in *Sixteen Candles*, social class in this film is coded through markers of high school class status; the five are divided into upper-class insiders (Andy, Claire) and middle- or working-class outsiders (Allison, Bender, Brian).

*The Breakfast Club's* mise-en-scène more clearly represents its protagonists' class positions than the earlier film, especially in such sequences as the opening. Claire seems to arrive first, driven to school in a stylish grey BMW by her Burberry-scarved father. In a Hughesian moment of awe at the upper classes, the car is shot hood-on, from a low angle, emphasizing the car's logo. Claire sits in the front seat next to him, and is told,

“Ditching class to go shopping doesn’t make you a defective.”<sup>37</sup> Brian arrives next, crammed in the front seat of a red family car with his nagging mother and sister. Both of them are ganging up on him to “find a way to study” during detention. Andy and his father pull up behind Brian’s family in a big truck; Andy sits in the front seat, too, as his father browbeats him, reminding him not to “blow [his] ride” to college on an athletic scholarship. Bender strides across the drop-off area, almost getting hit by Allison’s car. Unlike the other passengers, though, she is perched in the back seat of her unseen and shadowy parent’s blue car. When she makes a tentative step toward the front seat to say something to her parent, the car squeals off, leaving her alone on the asphalt. In the world of the film, riding shotgun in the front seat of a luxury or utilitarian car are signs of the upper-middle or upper classes. On the other hand, the cramped family car, the uncommunicative parent, and walking to school are this film’s signifiers of the middle or lower-middle classes.<sup>38</sup>

As in *Sixteen Candles*, one project of the film is to engage in (upper) class-bashing through a female character. Like Caroline in the earlier film, Claire is the focus of most of the film’s vindictiveness. Working-class Bender seems, at first, the most hostile towards Claire’s class position. Early on in the film, when he gets up from his seat to insult Claire, he moves to her right, so that he’s framed directly behind and slightly above her; he’s usually filmed from below eye level here. This serves to overdetermine his antagonism towards her, as he threatens to “impregnate” her, attacks her seemingly virginal and “pristine” character, and tells her that she’s destined to become fat. But in the key long sequence where Andy and Brian tell why they are serving detention, where all five talk about their families and friends and respective roles

in the school, it's Allison and Bender who relentlessly assail Claire; their attacks on her more or less bookend this scene. In the beginning moments, Allison taunts Claire with stories about her nymphomania, trips her up verbally, and ultimately makes her loudly admit her virginity to the group. Near the end, Bender laughs at her ability to apply lipstick with her cleavage, hollers at her own judgmental behavior towards his friends, and makes her cry by pestering her about her daddy-bought diamond earrings and her "poor, rich, drunk mother in the Caribbean." Read through the lens of class, this is Hughes' way of knocking at the barriers of class: another instance of the lower classes bashing at upper-class privilege. Read through a gendered lens, though, this is another unfortunate example of the film's articulation of a distinctly non-feminist postfeminism. The upper class isn't being critiqued here (as it is in *Sixteen Candles*); rich women are. In its postfeminist way, the film constructs Allison's hostility towards Claire along ostensibly class lines.

How, then, to explain Claire's making over Allison at the end of the film? This doesn't make sense in light of the two women's being at odds for much of the narrative. Claire says that the reason why she is being nice to Allison is because Allison is *letting* her be nice, but this doesn't quite work for me. I think that this is where the film circulates more in pseudo-feminist postfeminist discourse. Claire is quick-witted, independent, sophisticated, and powerful: a potentially feminist character, just like Sam Baker. Yet Claire, unlike Sam, is from the upper classes. And as such, then, keeping Hughes' class project in mind, the upper-class character of Claire can be read as considerably less progressive than the class-leveling Sam. But she ultimately motivates the utopian conclusion of the film, where the class positions of the students are

undermined by the plot device of the cross-class romance. Claire is the one who sneaks out of the library to rendezvous and smooch with Bender, who's been forcibly removed to a storage room. She later gives him one of her diamond earrings. She gives Allison new makeup, a new hairstyle, and new clothes, so that she becomes magically irresistible to the smitten Andy. And she's the one that reminds Brian that he's the smartest one, so he should carry out the detention punishment of writing a group-approved essay for the principal, thus letting everyone else off the hook. We could perhaps see Claire as a different version of the heroine that Lewis and Ryan and Kellner construct: she's interested in leaving class positions intact at the same time that she attempts to struggle against their constrictions, since, as a member of the upper class, she can only stand to benefit from remaining in class power.<sup>39</sup>

Just as it's tempting to read the two cross-class romances at the film's conclusion as progressive, it's similarly tempting to read Allison and Claire's bonding over eyeliner as a feminist move on Hughes' part. But it's ultimately difficult for me to see the film's treatment of the lower-middle-class Allison as anything but a pseudo-feminist postfeminist move, despite her and Claire's momentarily making nice. Her makeover sticks in the mind as the most egregious example of the film's pseudo-feminist postfeminist message, where capitalist class hegemony is kept intact through consumerist tactics that *seem* to empower women and level class barriers.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Allison's advancement into the upper-class insider echelon populated by Claire and Andy is metaphoric only and comes with the simple application of Claire's beauty products. It is, in short, a case of pseudo-feminist commodity feminism.<sup>41</sup> Rather than tolerating or celebrating the differences between women of different classes, the film literalizes the

promises made by the ads made for women in the 1980s, saying that anyone can become a member of the upper classes as long as they have the right products.

What is more annoying about this makeover is that, in the character of Allison, I see a more potentially feminist character.<sup>42</sup> While Claire may be independent, she complains about the pressures put on her by her friends; this makes the friendless and free-spirited Allison seem less tied down by social pressure, which, in turn, makes her an even more independent a character than Claire (she even tells the group she's in detention because she has nothing better to do). While Claire may be quick to tongue-lash Bender, she's certainly bested by Allison. Allison seems more aware of the world outside of her suburban existence than any other character in these Hughes films, when she talks of running away to Israel or Afghanistan. She, too, is given the most politically-aware line in any of these films when she talks of the "double-edged sword" of adolescent female sexuality: "If you say you haven't, you're a prude. If you say you have, you're a slut."

So what happens to this potentially feminist young woman? Two things: first, we're encouraged to read her as "crazy" in the world of the film, and, second, she essentially becomes another clone in the class of students populated by Claire and Andy. I think her appeal makes the first easy to forget.<sup>43</sup> But the narrative progression of the film leaves the second lingering in our minds. In a way, the film treats the theme of competition or hostility among women of different classes through Allison's makeover. Differently-classed women become, metaphorically, the same class, and any differences between their classes are erased (and conveniently forgotten) by the workings of the upper class. As I mention above, while *The Breakfast Club* isn't as misogynist as *Sixteen Candles*, its message is considerably less progressive than it initially seems. This film

perhaps most typifies how postfeminism, while being of a piece with the antifeminist 1980s, does indeed traffic in feminist discourses. However, the two seemingly feminist characters seem considerably *less* feminist when their socio-economic class comes between them.

*Pretty in Pink* continues with the two other films' construction of advancement along class lines for young women. There are, however, three things that separate this film from the other two. As I mention earlier, this film is different in that it doesn't perform a recasting of class issues into high school class issues. To be sure, the insiders and outsiders in this film are just as carefully constructed as the insiders and outsiders in the previous films, but more is made of their actual class status. We could even see this as the expected conclusion to the John Hughes / Molly Ringwald trilogy, in that, finally, class is being spoken of as social class, and not as high school status. Perhaps because of this – because the film makes class a more explicit part of the narrative – it also deals with economic advancement on a tangible level, through the reality of young women working. Since work and working are important parts of the narrative, there is a stronger progressive reading possible for the film. What's more, Ringwald is allowed to bond (and not just via consumerism) with a strong female character, her friend Iona.

Ostensibly, *Pretty in Pink* could be seen as the most feminist of Hughes' films with Ringwald. Unfortunately, his class and gender representations ultimately fall in line with pseudo-feminist postfeminism, and, as such, any potential for a progressive reading is cut short by the film's push to join together the couple from opposite sides of the class divide.<sup>44</sup>

Andie Walsh (Ringwald) and her father (Harry Dean Stanton) live in a poor section of the city. While attending a private high school, she's mooned over by friend Duckie (Jon Cryer) and moons, in turn, over "richie" Blane (Andrew McCarthy), Andie works at her friend Iona's (Annie Potts) record store. One day, Blane comes to the store and the two start dating. While dealing with a cross-class relationship, Duckie's unrequited love and jealousy, and Blane's friend Steff's cruelty, Andie also confronts and tries to motivate her father to get a job and get over his wife's abandonment of them. Blane asks Andie to the prom, but because of Steff's pressure and his own self-doubt, he backs off and eventually stops calling her. Andie decides to go stag to the prom with a dress made from one given to her by Iona – who has gone from punky to yuppie with a different boyfriend – where she sees Duckie. The two hug and walk into the prom together, where, at Duckie's urging, Blane and Andie declare their love and reconcile their relationship.

There are two potentially progressive facets of this film: Andie's relationship with (and the character of) Iona, and the fact that the film addresses the real-world issue of women working. I want to look at Iona first because it's here that we, unfortunately, have a near-repeat of the treatment of Allison in *The Breakfast Club*. To be sure, female hostility along class lines is present in *Pretty in Pink*, although Andie's economic advancement across the class divide isn't as strongly impeded by the "richie" women in the film, as Sam's is in *Sixteen Candles* – although Steff's girlfriend Benny (notably, another conventionally attractive blonde) is a constant nagging presence, seemingly everywhere that Andie doesn't want her to be. For example, Benny makes fun of Andie at school (she asks at one point if Andie got her clothes at a "five and dime"), wonders

aloud to her if her presence at a party is a drunken nightmare, and unknowingly scares her out of an expensive formal wear shop. The way in which Benny always appears to confront Andie would be laughable, a serious ideological problem with the film (a leftover ghost, perhaps, of the hostility between Ringwald's Sam and Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*) if their relationship wasn't contrasted in the film with Andie's important relationship with Iona.

The film does two crucial things with Iona. First of all, it sets her up, like Andie, as a potentially feminist character: like Andie, she's strong, sassy, and speaks out against what she notices are injustices. What's more, she owns her own business, and certainly provides a role model for Andie's eclectic aesthetic sense (this is one notable trait that most obviously makes Ringwald's character stand out from the others she played in previous Hughes films). Secondly, the relationship between the two women is a rare blast of female bonding in this trilogy of films that seems to demand that women be kept in competition with or hostile toward one another across class lines. For example, Andie goes to Iona when Blane jilts her; Iona gives her advice on dealing with the lovelorn Duckie; and it's Iona's prom dress that becomes Andie's creation for the final sequences of the film. But, despite this progressive characterization, Iona is closer to a pseudo-feminist postfeminist character than a feminist one. She, like Andie, is caught up in a narrative in which class "progress" becomes more important than gender issues.

Perhaps this is why what happens to Iona is just what happens to Allison in *The Breakfast Club*: she's moved into a higher socio-economic class with a simple makeover. On a date with square pet shop owner Terry (in a strange moment of snobbery, he calls himself "Terrence"), she goes through a total physical transformation, shedding her wigs,

decade-specific (and decades-old) outfits and nontraditional makeup to wear a blazer and blouse. As she says of her change, she's either become a "mom" or a "yuppie." But the reason for this change rings as narratively hollow as the reason for Allison's makeover. She claims that she's "ahead of the game" in love because she's with someone who is both "employed" and "heterosexual." We've been told that Iona's been in relationships where she was the one with the money, the one who was running the show. However, these relationships are portrayed as negative ones, where the men were "deadbeats" who couldn't pull their own weight; as she says at one point before leaving her store, she's enjoying a "terrible relationship." So a relationship with someone like Terry makes certain sense, along class lines: Iona has made herself over to look and act more like the class of business owners of which she's a part. She's also made herself over to be with someone whom she won't have to support financially. As with Allison, what makes Iona a potentially feminist character initially makes her an appealing character, at least for liberal and/or progressive audiences. This appeal, I think, disappears once she conforms to the class of which she's seemingly contemptuous, yet to which she also aspires. As we'll see, Iona's makeover is part of the film's non-progressive class and gender projects; it broadcasts the message that, at heart, what women want – even strong women like Iona – is to conform to capitalist patriarchal hegemony.<sup>45</sup>

Keeping this capitalist hegemony intact is what makes *Pretty in Pink* like the previous two films. Hughes' class and gender position is clear: Andie overcomes class barriers and is rewarded for her efforts with a wealthy partner. As with Sam in *Sixteen Candles*, this is what makes Ringwald's character a pseudo-feminist postfeminist: she struggles against the restrictions of her class position, only to ascend to the upper classes

without finally questioning or rejecting the class structures in society. But the film adds an interesting element to its class message: by and large, the upper classes are made to seem simply unappreciative of their own wealth and what it can bring them.<sup>46</sup> It's hinted that, when Andie and Blane come together as a couple, she will present a *corrective* to this way of thinking and appreciate the trappings of her newly-inherited class status; in his suburban way, Hughes seems to claim that the only change that the rich really need to undergo is to be more thankful for their economic blessings. This sentiment is made explicit when Andie says of Steff's house (before she attends a party there), "I bet the people that live there don't think it's half as pretty as I do." Later in the film, when Blane and Steff are arguing in Steff's library about Blane's dating Andie, Blane asks him, "Is money all that matters to you?" Steff replies as he's rolling a joint on a desk, "Would I treat my parents' house like this if money was any kind of issue?" In other words, money doesn't matter to this class because money is something that comes easily to them. Money for Andie hasn't come so easily, the film's logic goes, so she should appreciate the wealth that dating someone from the upper classes would bring. In fact, she's set up here as morally better than the "richies" since she would be thankful for her new class position. But the idea that she should strive, alone, for wealth remains part of the film's compromised class and gender politics.

To confuse matters further, the film sets up an important alternative to the kind of Cinderella fairy-tale ending the narrative ultimately achieves: the reality and bonding potential of women working. In a strangely progressive way, the sensibilities of *Pretty in Pink* do make room to address the issues of women, work, and financial achievement.<sup>47</sup> While the device of the cross-class romance finally muddles the issue of economic

advancement for women in the film, by and large, the representations of women working in this film can be read as feminist, as they seem part of women's move toward independence and self-sufficiency, both financial and in other ways. As Faludi, Bolotin, and Stacey remind us, working was a fact of life for women in the 1980s. And indeed, Andie's (and Iona's) "participation in the work force," according to Goldman, Heath, and Smith, might be one way in which the film circulates more positive codes of feminism (337). But there are two ways in which even this potentially feminist source of power is undercut by the narrative, turning it into a pseudo-feminist postfeminist element.

One way is through Iona's complaints about working. Early in the film, she's decorating the window of her store, moaning about how she's really good at decorating, although she feels like it's going to "waste" because she's stuck being the owner of a "lovely retail outlet." Andie replies that her artistic prowess isn't a waste, since she's "good at it." Iona snaps back, "If I were good in bed, should I be a whore?" Andie doesn't answer. This is a brief piece of dialogue, but an important one for the reading of the film's gender position. Iona is a rare character in Hughes films: an unmarried working woman who is financially stable. But she's portrayed in this exchange as someone who is unsatisfied with the fact that she's a business owner. What's more, she's also dissatisfied with the disconnect she notices between her own artistic skills – whether these skills help her decorate her store, her apartment, or her own appearance – and the ways these skills are being used in the economic sphere. Her question to Andie seems to claim that, in her mind, she's unhappy with the fact that women's employment is something unconnected with pleasure or a sense of well-being or empowerment, but is rather encouraged as something that is a fact of life, something done for financial reasons

and defined in heterosexual terms: in terms of being a “whore,” no less. Her attitude about working, I would argue, both undercuts the important position she’s given in the film as a role model for Andie (and teen girl viewers) as a female business owner who is artistically-inclined. As in Stacey’s interviews with Lanny and Lyn, working becomes understood here as a pseudo-feminist postfeminist strategy for financial gain, not a feminist strategy to gain independence or self-satisfaction. Indeed, read this way, Iona is already a part of the capitalist patriarchal hegemony well before her makeover, as she demeans her own accomplishments here as an independent working woman by ultimately associating what she does to being a “whore.” What she – and Hughes – forgets, however, is that whores are working women, too.

The other way the film’s potential feminist reading is undermined can be found in what Ryan and Kellner claim about Hughes’ class project in the film. Andie knows the importance of working: she’s constantly pestering her father in the beginning of the film to get a full-time job, asking him if he’s “perfectly happy” with being employed only part-time. And she explodes at him later for not keeping her appointment with an employment agent. We could read Andie’s desire for her father to work as an indicator of her desire for him to snap out of his depression; when she confronts him about her mother’s abandonment, it appears that this is the reason why he’s been avoiding work: he’s wallowing in his own self-pity.<sup>48</sup> It’s never clear whether she’s the primary breadwinner in their family, but we come to understand that her father stays out late, sleeps late, and hangs out on his front lawn drinking beer. Andie could be read, then, as a good capitalist worker: the narrative sets it up as a positive thing that she knows the importance of working for financial stability and self-esteem (not to mention consumer

goods, as she owns a second-hand car). Moreover, what happens, in typical Hughesian fashion, is what happens to all class relations, according to Ryan and Kellner: nothing. At the end of the film, despite the fact that he's potentially seen the light, Andie's father is presumably still jobless, while Andie is given a cross-class romance to lift her out of her class position and perhaps, the work force. Working can help you achieve economically, but, for a woman, making time until your rich Prince Charming arrives is presented as the way to get you out of your class position.

So, ultimately, in its pseudo-feminist postfeminist way, the film claims that the surest path towards economic well-being for a woman isn't working – which, after all, is unsatisfying since it's usually in the service of something you don't like; not to mention demeaning, since it turns you into a prostitute – it's partnership with a man from a higher class than your own. This underlying theme is supported, I think, by a small, albeit important detail in the film. Our first view of the hostility between Andie and Benny happens in a classroom where their teacher is talking about the New Deal. Its purpose, she claims, was not to “implant socialism,” but to “save capitalism.” And later, when Andie is doing her homework for this class on a primitive computer, the monitor reads something about men, women, and employment. However, this sentence (and Andie's work) is erased and interrupted by some fancy computer tricks that Blane does on the school's network: he talks to her electronically and then displays side-by-side electronic photos of the two of them. This seems to be the film's message: capitalism is left intact, at the same time that employment for women becomes null and void, erased by the workings of the upper classes, when these women have boyfriends from higher classes

than their own. The film, then, tantalizes its young female viewers with the promise of a road to rich(i)es, but not through their own work.

Even so, there does remain a slight progressive movement in the three John Hughes / Molly Ringwald films I've examined here. *Sixteen Candles* traffics in pseudo-feminist postfeminism in its depiction of middle-class Sam and the fulfillment of her dreams of upper-class economic advancement with a partnership with Jake; at the same time, Sam and Caroline are set up by Hughes' as being in competition with one another. The narrative's hostility – which slips, I argue, into painful misogyny – towards Caroline is evidence of its non-feminist postfeminism. This fact makes it ultimately difficult to see the film as broadcasting a progressive message. *The Breakfast Club* makes a narrative movement from the non-feminist postfeminist hostility between Claire and Allison to a pseudo-feminist postfeminist ending, where Allison's metaphoric advancement to an economic class higher than her own comes at the hands of the upper-class Claire. As in the previous film, the capitalist class hegemony is kept intact. However, this film does have a potential feminist in Allison; her "alternative" characterization has her descendent in Iona in *Pretty in Pink*. On its surface, this final film in the trilogy seems like the most feminist: the strong bond between Andie and Iona, as well as the issue of women working, are definitely two progressive aspects to it. But the pseudo-feminist postfeminism in this film comes to the fore in the way the film characterizes cross-class romance for the two women as a viable alternative for women working. Coming from a filmmaker like Hughes who seems in love with the idea of social classes and class privilege in America, it's not surprising that these three films constantly sacrifice gender for class.

It's important to note that, by dwelling too long on the pseudo-feminist or non-feminist postfeminism in these films, we can lose sight of the fact that, in the 1980s, third-wave feminism was alive in other ways. As critic Rayna Rapp claims in an article in which she asks, "Is the Legacy of Second Wave Feminism Postfeminism?," "we must never wallow in the mistaken and nostalgic view that if certain aspects of organized second wave feminism are declining, *all* forms of activism which will enhance women's interests are dead" (36; emphasis author's). The next chapter examines the somewhat more positive 1990s third-wave feminist discourse of "Girl Power" and its anticipation in the equivalent commodity-driven pseudo-feminist postfeminism of "Valley Girl." While it will be clear that I don't find Valley Girl (or Girl Power, for that matter) an activist strategy, I do find it an important nascent third-wave feminist discourse that can potentially empower young women.

### CHAPTER THREE: Valley Girl Power?

“Girl Power” is a term that entered the media’s lexicon in the mid-1990s with the explosion onto the scene of the Spice Girls, Great Britain’s all-girl, all-singing, all-dancing music sensations. Combining girl-centered lyrics and in-your-face attitudes with shiny pop sensibilities, the group sold an estimated 10 million albums worldwide on the strength of their 1996 single, “Wannabe.” As with anything enormous in popular culture, they were the focus of intense debate in the American media, a debate whose terms were accurately outlined by Susan Douglas in a 1997 article:

Are they a group of no-talent, flash-in-the-pan bimbos whose success comes primarily from a highly calculated and cynical marketing strategy that has fused bubble-gum music with a pseudo-feminist message? Or are they a refreshing fusion of politics and music that debunks antiquated stereotypes about feminism and helps empower young girls as they enter the treacherous process of discovering their sexuality? (“Girls”)

With this statement, we can infer that the Spice Girls’ message of Girl Power can be read in two ways. On one hand, Girl Power is something created by faceless media giants, something accompanied by a handy phrase that can lure young women and their disposable income to the malls, something stripped of any real political meaning or message. On the other hand, Girl Power can teach a kind of feminism, emboldening these same young women to strike out on their own and make their own choices about existing as women in the world.

This dichotomy was reflected well in media coverage of Girl Power, which often emphasized the numbers of willing consumers who devoured girl-centered popular culture. For example, *Fortune*, never a periodical to get lazy about money-making trends, got in the game with an article from 1997 that reminded its readers that “it’s girls

who move markets” (Munk). The article goes on to briefly profile big players in the teen-girl market, like Delia’s Inc. (1997 sales: \$70 million), Zoe, and AirShop, catalogue companies aimed at girls that sell equal doses of hipness and smug attitude along with their shoes, pants, and makeup. In a similar vein, Nadya Labi’s 1998 *Time* article, “Girl Power,” is full of numbers that would make any budding media mogul drool. She quotes some astounding figures: young women ages 12 to 19 spent \$60 billion in 1997; *Teen People* has (as of 1998) 500,000 subscribers; girls made up 30% to 40% of the total \$580 million U.S. gross of the film *Titanic* (1997, James Cameron). And Jancee Dunn, in a *Rolling Stone* feature called “The Secret Life of Teenage Girls,” quotes a *New York Times* article which claims that the average teenager goes shopping 54 times a year (111). With coverage like this, is it any wonder that feminist scholars like Delanie Woodlock claim that the selling of Girl Power amounts to selling “slave merchandise?”

But zeroing in on the ways in which the handlers of Girl Power disseminate their products to consumers and the numbers of consumers who buy them is to ignore the ways in which those very consumers use these products. As Cynthia Fuchs reminds us in an article about the Spice Girls, even a pop phenomenon as big-selling and as well-known as them can be “read at sundry signifying levels.” She explains that young girls “can believe they want to be like the Spice Girls, their older brothers or fathers can believe they want to do the Spice Girls, and their older sisters and mothers can debate the Spice Girls’ place along a feminist continuum” (345). In this half of the dichotomy, the marketing of the Spice Girls – as representatives of Girl Power – seems not to matter as much as what audiences can actually do with them, what meanings they can make of them.

In media discussions about the meaning of Girl Power for its consumers, then, we find that commentators are perhaps a little more hopeful about what Girl Power can offer young women. And some of the commentators even use the f-word to describe what it can offer. In the article quoted above, Douglas concludes the Spice Girls are “a decided improvement” on girls’ culture of the past because they give important voice to young girls who are “telling us that they want a voice, that they want someone to take them seriously, that they want to be worldly wise and optimistic at the same time.” For her, the Spice Girls are important because they say that “feminism is necessary and fun” (“Girls”). Joy Press, writing in *The Village Voice*, also picks up on the feminist impulses of Girl Power, calling it “softcore feminism.” While remaining largely pessimistic about its role as a product of the media (at one point, she calls it “a defanged politics that’s about being active instead of activist”), though, she sees media culture’s ability to co-opt political messages for financial gain as “worth the price” of its potential commercialization. And Labi claims Girl Power’s lure for consumers is not necessarily its commercialization, but rather “the image of girls kicking ass” in such movies as *Mulan* (1998, Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook) and television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003); although she, too, is concerned about how effective such representations are—in the real world, anyway.

So what can we make of the real-world effects of Girl Power *on its audiences*? To recast Douglas’ quote above, are the girls who consume the Girl Power message and representations of strong women in Girl Power-influenced pop cultural texts apolitical pawns, whose potential for strength is anticipated and neutralized by a well-oiled patriarchal capitalist media machine? Or are they highly political feminists because they

consume and use these Girl Power-broadcasting products of patriarchal capitalism in feminist ways, ways that might be unintended by the patriarchy?

In order to discuss this second question and, by extension, Girl Power as a third-wave feminist practice, I'm going to be using Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's definition of "Girlie" feminism from their 2000 book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. In their formulation, what distinguishes Girlie from other third-wave practices are the ways that the consumption and uses of popular culture are central to its existence as a practice. And in this way, I see a useful parallel between Girlie feminism and Girl Power.<sup>49</sup> Here is their definition:

Girlies are girls in their twenties and thirties who are reacting to an antifeminine, antijoy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun. (80)

Two important things stand out in this definition. One, there is the unspoken aspect of the consumption of patriarchally-defined "girlish" popular culture. And two, there is an explicit reclamation of this pop culture.

As Baumgardner and Richards hint at above, they argue that one of the biggest differences between second-wave feminists and young women of the third wave is that, for the former, "politics was . . . the culture of the time – Kennedy, the Vietnam War, civil rights, and women's rights." On the other hand, for the third wave, "politics was superseded by culture – punk rock, hip-hop, zines, products, consumerism, and the Internet" (130). This difference between the two eras means "that feminism is no longer limited to areas where we expect to see it . . . means that young women today have really reaped what feminism has sown" (130).<sup>50</sup> In this view, the (serious) politics of the 1970s

influenced the (fun) pop cultural products of the 1980s and 1990s and injected that popular culture with healthy doses of feminism. Madonna, Naomi Wolf, Kathleen Hanna, Roseanne Barr, magazines like *Sassy* (1998-1995) and *Bust* (1993-present), films like *Bring it On* (2000, Peyton Reed) and *Go Fish* (1994, Rose Troche), musicians like Courtney Love, Tracy Chapman, Ani DiFranco: all combine fun and feminism.

What's more, Baumgardner and Richards make clear that, unlike cultural feminism of the 1970s, which "promoted a gynefocal aesthetic (as a form of politics) . . . sometimes in the service of a 'separate but equal' alternative world," (the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a good illustration of this), *Girlie / Girl Power* doesn't offer a "separate ghetto (or utopia) for women" (134). Rather, it is "feminism for a culture-driven generation" (134) and can therefore be integrated into one's own pop cultural tastes, practices, and purchases. They ultimately claim that "it is a feminist statement to proudly claim things that are feminine" from within the detritus of patriarchal popular culture (135). And once this reclamation is made, *Girlie / Girl Power* hollers, "we're not broken, and our desires aren't simply booby traps set by the patriarchy" (136). The young women who consume the *Girl Power* message, then, in such "girlish" things as Sanrio lunchboxes, Salt-N-Pepa, and bubblegum-flavored lip gloss are feminist because of the fact that they make this mindful reclamation; to put this another way, they are actively using popular culture in feminist ways.

However, here's where I think Baumgardner and Richards' reading of *Girlie / Girl Power* doesn't quite cohere. At one point they claim that "some cultural objects that girls consumed/read/loved contained feminism simply because of the political atmosphere in which they were created. The feminism was organic" (142). This seems

to mean that some pop culture is inherently feminist, made consciously so by its creators or producers – as in the case of *Sassy* magazine<sup>51</sup> – or, unconsciously, by dint of the socio-historical era in which it appeared – as in the case, perhaps, of the Spice Girls. This ignores two important facts. First, by claiming that feminism is simply organic in some pop cultural products of the 1980s and 1990s, they’re ignoring the majority of pop cultural products in which feminism is, at best, less easy to detect or, at worst, absent. And second, by putting emphasis on the creation of popular culture, they’re ignoring the important fact that it matters what consumers of popular culture actually *do* with it.<sup>52</sup>

As for the first shortcoming of their reading of *Girlie / Girl Power*, Baumgardner and Richards are silent, as they restrict their analysis of “The Stuff that Girls Are Made Of” (142) to the feminist creators of *Girlie* magazines – such as *Sassy*, *Bust*, and *HUES* (1992-1999) – that “were the result and manifestation of a nineties version of consciousness raising” (151). But nowhere do they consider what, for example, the managers/producers of TLC or Brandy, the writers/directors/producers/etc. of *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) or *The Gilmore Girls* (2000-present), or the CEO of Hard Candy cosmetics might have wanted to instill in the production/depiction/marketing of their pop cultural creations. This is not to say that the folks behind these supposedly feminist artifacts of pop culture didn’t have some potentially-feminist vision in mind. But claiming that feminism is only what’s put into something forgets what consumers get out of it.

On this second issue – one having to do with the consumption of popular culture by its audiences – Baumgardner and Richards are more explicit. They do claim that, while it may look like a feminist move, “embracing the pink things of stereotypical

girlhood isn't a radical gesture meant to overturn the way society is structured" (136).

This statement contradicts their argument that feminism *might* be potentially organic in these pink things. What's more, the two aver that Girlie / Girl Power isn't a strong feminist force for change; they explain that it "stops short of being the path to a forceful movement" in the ways that it often privileges the consumption and uses of popular culture over actual involvement in politics (138). So while the two recognize feminist practices in audiences' consumption and uses of popular culture, these audiences don't necessarily go far enough into the realm of the political. As they say, "there is [the] danger that the Spice Girls Pencil Set Syndrome will settle in: girls buy products created by male-owned companies that capture the slogan of feminism, without the power" (161). Or without the feminism.

At the core of Girl Power is the practice of consumption: young women who consume the Girl Power message are always pawns of the patriarchal capitalist media machine, since they're literally buying into it. It's difficult to imagine any real room to maneuver within the imaginary spaces erected by this machine; if there is movement within it (for example, reclaiming feminine clothes or makeup as empowering), this fact is always overshadowed by the fact that what is being consumed is a product of patriarchal capitalism, and thus infused with both hidden and not-so-hidden ways of keeping young women in their place.

This, to me, is what is most frustrating about Girl Power as a third-wave feminist practice. It's thrilling to imagine young women getting turned onto feminism by buying "Boys Lie" t-shirts at the mall or listening to t.A.T.u. online. In this model of feminism, finding out about it is easy and fun. And with the ubiquity, even today, of Girl Power

rappers like Lil' Kim and rockers like Avril Lavigne, Girl Power magazines like *Teen Vogue* (2003-present) or Girl Power companies like Wet Seal, feminism is potentially everywhere for the receiving. But the next step, the step to finding out more information about feminism, to reading more about it, to making connections between personal feelings or political stances and real-world action, to being a conscientious consumer (in a way that goes beyond comparison shopping) is much more difficult and, I think, much less likely to occur. So what initially looks like a vital and important (and, let's not forget, fun) feminist practice, at heart, really isn't, if in fact what's only happening is the first step, typified by a consumer buying into a "lifestyle." As Baumgardner and Richards themselves resignedly claim, "The feminist transformation comes from the political theory *and* the cultural confidence. We can't afford to overlook the real barriers to women's liberation" (165).

But the question remains: what is potentially feminist about a practice that encourages young women to remain passive consumers of culturally-branded "feminine" popular culture? Keeping in mind that, as I will explore below, I don't see much efficacy in Girl Power as a third-wave feminist practice, I do want to look at two ways in which there seems to me to be the potential for real feminist girl power to maneuver within patriarchal capitalism.<sup>53</sup>

The first of these ways comes from subcultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's work with girls and subcultures. From their perspective, girls who consume the almost completely commodified "teeny-bopper culture . . . negotiate a different leisure space and different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys" (11,14). As they explain, this culture is marked by its taking place in "private,

inaccessible space” (bedrooms, dens, living rooms, bathrooms) – space where girls are free to hang out with their friends, talk unhindered about whatever they please, gaze in awe at pin-ups of their favorite teenybopper stars, listen to music, and, in the end, enjoy the myriad fruits of conspicuous consumption (14). It’s important to note two things here. McRobbie and Garber are, first of all, clear about the girls’ active role in all of this: the girls actively consume, they actively talk about their choices of consumption, they actively construct fantasies. And secondly, they are explicit about the role that groups of girls play: the girls consume, talk, and construct fantasies *together*. Because of this focus on the collective, this conception of girls’ subcultures offers the girls who are part of it “different possibilities for ‘resistance,’ if indeed that is the right word to use” (14).

However, McRobbie and Garber are tentative about what kind(s) of resistance their girl subjects actually engage in, since for all intents, as they admit, these girls are acting out “traditional gender stereotypes with the girl as the passive fan, and the star [the object of their affection] as the active male” (14). Not to mention the fact that, in their view, girls are confined to private, usually domestic, spaces. And that, while they are, for the most part, expected to remain invisible in public life, they are paradoxically allowed to congregate and spend money in stores and malls, in order to have an active imaginative life at home. So while this may look like a resistance, especially in the ways that they are acting outside of patriarchally-sanctioned notions of female passivity, they are, in fact, literally and figuratively buying into the patriarchy at the same time: they are literally buying the consumer goods that encourage their passive role as girls, and they are figuratively buying into the idea that girls should remain in the private realm with these consumer goods.<sup>54</sup>

Having said that, though, the fact remains that it is within groups of girls that resistance is possible. If Girlie / Girl Power is stuck in the realm of the consumption of popular culture, and in practice is about making reclamations of this culture, what is potentially feminist about McRobbie and Garber's theories of girls and subcultures – subcultures that also revolve around the consumption of popular culture – is that the consumption and use of popular culture is a collective, not individualistic, practice. If there is a tentative resistance taking place in private, domestic, spaces, then, as we'll see, there could be a more definite resistance when this consumption and use takes place in public spaces. I'll be exploring the potentially resistant aspects of this in more detail below.

Consumption and female bonding are also important parts of third-wave scholar and Girl Power icon Naomi Wolf's version of "power feminism," as preached in her 1993 book *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In her vision, women are seen as "human beings —sexual, individual, no better or worse than their male counterparts"; all women have a "regal, robust, healthy, self-regarding 'will to power'" (xvii, xviii). Besides the fact that her "power feminism" is set up in opposition to a monolithic version of second-wave feminism,<sup>55</sup> what's ultimately problematic for critics of Wolf is her own observation that women have "embraced the use of money" (xviii) in a way that empowers them. As she says, "When women have money, the opposition has no choice but to listen. When they have equity, they have influence—as sponsors, shareholders, and alumnae" (304).

Despite being well-researched and convincing, this part of Wolf's argument falls apart in that the women whom she claims are grabbing the reins of power are largely

powerful already. With her calls for “alliances based on economic self-interest and economic giving back” (53), she’s omitting the difficulties that non-white, non-middle or -upper class, and non-American women might have gaining power through the dollar. Not to mention the fact that, in the end, the alliances she calls for are alliances that can be easily bought into (for those, presumably, who have the funds to do the buying), without fear of making connections beyond the economic. Baumgardner and Richards also pick up on Wolf’s elitist tendencies as they appear in *Girlie / Girl Power* practices: “The fact that most of the Girlies are white, straight, work outside the home, and belong to the consumer class provides some explanation for why they choose to promote certain issues” (138).

A further problem in Wolf’s argument is that she sets up her economic-driven power feminism in opposition to “a sentimental and workable fantasy of cosmic sisterhood” (53). In this binary, where economic “self-interest” comes first, females can bond together not along cosmic “sisterly” lines, but only along realistic economic lines. When seen in tandem with McRobbie and Garber’s theories, however, what ends up happening according to Wolf is that, when girls become women and enter the public sphere as consumers, their formerly “resistant” practices of bonding – practices defined by shared consumption – become impossible. I think Wolf is correct in suggesting that once girls become old enough, they are taught by patriarchal capitalism to compete with other women. But in the end, I don’t see how Wolf’s concern with consumption can be empowering for groups of teenage girls if bonding becomes a negative practice when they get older. Indeed, for any woman, it’s difficult to see how her economic power-driven version of feminism and sisterhood can be reconciled.

But there's another strand of Wolf's argument here that bears looking into further, something that I see as potentially transgressive about the consumption aspect of Girl Power. She mentions that she's often telling the young women that she meets that, "Not only was it permissible to learn to ask for more, always more, but it was a political act. It was imperative" (243). Learning to ask for more, for Wolf, is a way of engaging the "mischievous, boisterous, unregenerate twin, the inner *bad girl* lurking in the female psyche" (318, italics Wolf's). She argues that women can do this by embracing "those qualities of leadership, and sexual self-possession, and the solid sense of entitlement that [women] are raised to disavow" (xviii). While Wolf goes to great lengths to explain the practical ways in which women can wield their economic power, she is less explicit about how to encourage psychological change in women, other than learning to "ask for more, always more."

These women who ask for more are close in spirit and action to writer Elizabeth Wurtzel's "difficult women." As she explains in 1998's *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, "rebellious and unladylike and occasionally antisocial acts are the obvious statement" for a woman wanting to declare "her strength, her surefootedness, her autonomy" (3). Wurtzel addresses the women with a "bitch persona" thus:

That has been your defining characteristic: You have appetite, and only if you are truly shameless will you even begin to be sated because nothing is ever really enough. . . . This is not about making demands of other people or wearing down those who have their own screams for MORE! to address . . . Everything tells us to stop, to not talk to that guy first, to not have a thousand lovers if that's what feels right because one husband is supposed to be enough. Everything says we don't need another piece of chocolate cake, we don't need another Gucci bag, another dime-store lipstick, another Big Mac, another night on the town, another spin on the Rainbow Room dance floor. (29)

What I'm arguing here is that, while Wurtzel's and Wolf's versions of Girl Power may enforce gender stereotypes in the ways that young women are encouraged to consume feminine popular culture, their version has also given them license potentially to act outside of their patriarchally-defined roles as teenage girls in always wanting and asking for "more." So, in this case, their excesses can be seen as equivocally transgressive. They are both acting as consumers of popular culture at the same time that they're acting excessively. Of course, this is politically progressive only to a limited extent, since what's encouraged in these girls is merely more consumption.

In the following analysis of the Valley Girl, I'm reading Girl Power as a potentially feminist practice in two ways. First of all, the fact remains that, in McRobbie and Garber's formulation, girls are bonding and acting as groups of consumers together; while consuming isn't necessarily a resistant practice for girls, their sorority is, and it remains a source of strength. Second, and perhaps even more potentially progressive, is the issue of excessiveness within these girls' cultures. If the patriarchy wants to keep young women silent and constrained, then acting out and asking for more can only be an empowering tactic. As I mention above, though, Girl Power is forever stuck within the boundaries of consumerist patriarchal capitalism. As such, its feminism is inevitably limited by those boundaries.

What I want to turn to now is a girls' culture from 1980s popular culture that – in its fundamental obsession with consumption – is a direct progenitor of Girl Power. In some ways, Girl Power's third-wave feminist practices are nothing new. One of her influential older sisters is the Valley Girl, who loomed large on the cultural landscape of the mid-1980s. As an early illustration of Girl Power, and thus a nascent third-wave

feminist practice, the Valley Girl demonstrates the same crushing shortcomings and exciting potential that Girl Power demonstrates in the 1990s. I will be examining her representations in song, in print, and, finally, in film, in order to explore the Valley Girl as an equivocal political figure. As with Girl Power, there are aspects of the discourses surrounding her that are potentially feminist – her excesses, whether in language or in consumption practices, and the resistant practice of females bonding in public – but these two are consistently undercut by the pervading emphasis that the Valley Girl places on consumption.

“Valley Girl” itself has a curious history. Part media phenomenon, part socio-economic lifestyle, the boundaries between these two parts are so blurred, that it’s ultimately very difficult to decide whether the media representations of Valley Girl that filtered down to mainstream America in the summer and fall of 1982 are reflective of actual lives, or if the actual lives of Valley Girls exist without being media-ated through their representations.<sup>56</sup> Valley Girl first appeared in the summer of 1982; cultural commentators credit Moon Unit Zappa’s single “Valley Girl” as the beginning of its national exposure. Apparently after mimicking her San Fernando Valley classmates at the dinner table, Moon was asked by her father, musician and composer Frank Zappa, to improvise a stream-of-consciousness monologue in the studio, under which he would create a musical track:

You know me, I’m like into the clean stuff  
Like PAC-MAN and like, I don’t know  
Like my mother like makes me do the dishes  
It’s like so GROSS . . .  
Like all the stuff like sticks to the plates  
And it’s like somebody else’s food, y’know  
It’s like GRODY . . . (Zappa and Zappa)

The song was eventually released as a single, and, by the end of the summer, it was a “national hit, the kind of freakish pop-music event that happens when the air is hot and sticky and the deejays’ minds start to wander” (Barol and Pratt 10). As expected, though, when this youth cultural happening hit the mainstream, the media jumped. Articles written in Valley Girl vernacular appeared in major journalistic outlets, interviewing “real-world” Valley Girls in real-world shopping malls, from Sherman Oaks, CA, to Cedarhurst, NY. One station in Los Angeles ran a medical report, by a speech pathologist, covering the “Valley sound”: the speech malady her clients were increasingly bringing their children in to cure (Glass 7). At least four books were published in 1982 alone, highlighting important aspects of Valley Girl for their readers. And, in typical Hollywood fashion, a Valley Girl film was released one year after the fact.<sup>57</sup>

Before I talk about Valley Girl as a subculture, I want to look at this phenomenon for what it can tell us about Girl Power. It’s very easy to read “Valley Girl” (the single) on two levels as an example of the media co-opting female power. First of all, without the musicianship, the clout, the knowledge of the music business behind her, and her father’s help, it’s doubtful that Moon Zappa would have released her single. This single was packaged with a sleeve showing a calm and smiling Moon embracing her clearly-embarrassed father. One could read this as an example of a father using his daughter for financial and pop-cultural benefit. After all, the song is still Dad Zappa’s biggest radio hit ever. He and Moon were even nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group With Vocal (Oullette).<sup>58</sup>

On another, more insidious level, perhaps, the way the single brought Valley Girl to the mainstream could be read as yet another way in which something possibly empowering for young girls turned into a marketing and/or exploitation tool. I'll be looking at this fraught concept of empowerment in terms of Valley Girl below, especially in the tradeoff between marketing and empowerment. Despite the fact that some of the contemporary news articles I've found on Valley Girl in the summer of 1982 do talk to teenage girls, whether or not they actually are Valley Girls is immaterial in the journalistic push for sound bites and "relevance." *Time's* article "How Toe-dully Max Is Their Valley," from September 1982, seems especially egregious in this respect. The entire article is written in a strained Valley Girl dialect, and reads as if the author is trying on a tight pair of pants: "Meanwhile, a lot of Melvins who must have Val daughters have been writing them up in neat magazines and newspapers, not to mention major cool calendars, coloring books, beach towels, T shirts and lapel buttons. . . . A lot of space cadets assume that Val Gals are simply updated versions of the 1940s bobby-soxer. Kiss my tuna!" (Demarest 82).<sup>59</sup>

Valley Girls fare somewhat better in a *Newsweek* article. In "It's Like TUBULAR!" (August 1982), Loryn Laughlin claims that the attention she's been getting as a young woman living in the San Fernando Valley is "really neat and flattering." She says that, on a trip to Europe, people would ask her, "'You're from the Valley? Say something like barf-out'." This article describes her gear ("her trendiest mini, white flats and white bow tie") and quotes the owner of a clothing store in the mall, who says, "I'll take a Val's check any day . . . You know they'll never bounce because these girls take their shopping seriously" (Langway and Cavazos 61). In this account, a real-life Valley

Girl is given a voice and agency; she's made to seem desirable and important. At the same time, however, she's reduced to the status of a consumer who's obsessed with appearances.

Although it spends more column space documenting what actual "Island Vals" (Valley Girls from Long Island, New York) have said about Valley Girl as a phenomenon, a *New York Times* article from September 1982 gives its content away in its title: "They're Clothes Crazy, fer Sure."<sup>60</sup> Of the nine girls they interview, eight are described by the clothes they are wearing, while only four are asked about Valley Girl as a vernacular. Perhaps most representative is the following account:

For Heidi Fishkind, 16, a senior at Lawrence High School, Val-Speak is "not my regular speech, maybe I use it like every other day." Which would be as often as Miss Fishkind, who has a part-time sales job, goes shopping. "Today I bought before I worked," she said, flashing a shopping bag with three pairs of corduroy pants. She was wearing a turquoise miniskirt, matching striped pullover, white anklets and gold ballet slippers. (Alexander C10)

Once again, despite talking to real girls in the real world, the writer of this article minimizes this female youth subculture to two of its parts: slang and dress.

It's odd that, within the mainstream media sources I've investigated, there's no meta-commentary on Valley Girl. In other words, there are no Valley Girls talking about what Valley Girl as a cultural event foisted on them by the media has done to or for them, although the *Times* article does make a gesture toward this. Heidi Fishkind, quoted above, and the three other girls who mention Valley Girl in the article, all talk about Val-speak as a given, as something they just "picked . . . up," as Linda Raab claims. Beth Miller says she only uses the dialect "on purpose, like when I see someone really weird?" Andrea Levitan provides the most illuminating opinion about Valley Girl in the article:

she claims it's "a conscious exaggerated imitation of the American Princess" (Alexander C10).<sup>61</sup> In this definition, Valley Girl as a media construction removes the religious stereotypes accompanying the (Jewish) American Princess and overdetermines her role as a teenager with impenetrable vernacular and an appetite for clothes and consumption.

From these news sources, too, Valley Girl is treated more as an interesting fad that the youngsters were obsessing over, something that would be gone in a year or two.<sup>62</sup> However, it didn't vanish completely. Over 15 years later, Valley Girl appears in Baumgardner and Richards' chapter on Girlies. They say, "As girls, we saw the culture reflect a bit of our particular vernacular: Valley Girls who shop and register pronouncements about the relative grodiness or radness of all things" (130). They use Valley Girl to illustrate the fact I've discussed above; namely, that for young women of the third wave, culture supersedes politics. The two explain that the "products of [their] culture are mundane to [them], simply the atmosphere in [their] temporal tank" (130). As we'll see, in representations of Valley Girl, it's no wonder that their Girlie / Girl Power atmosphere has been infused with droplets of Valley Girl precipitation.

In an alternative press source, Valley Girl comes across as more complex. The Valley-Girl-as-American-Princess definition comes up in *Ben Is Dead* zine's *Retro Hell* book. Editor Darby Romeo explains in her history of Valley Girl:

All of a sudden everything we were, everything we did and said, was blown out of proportion . . . Being that I spent a great portion of my formidable years in, like, pre-valley-girl-phenomenon Encino, I know that the song affected the val culture more than val culture actually accepted the song. After the tune exploded outta Los Angeles, vals united in one grody JAP (Jewish American Princess) fest and proudly took on the terms they were branded with. (234)

This personal conception is one of the few accounts I've found in which the Valley Girl position is theorized, to an extent. Romeo allows that the culture existed before the song "Valley Girl," that the song had an effect on the culture, and that the members of that culture reacted to the song's influence on themselves. As she tells us, her Valley friends took on the terms of their (now heavily mediated?) subculture proudly.<sup>63</sup>

Third-wave feminist superstar Kathleen Hanna's musical alter-ego Julie Ruin's song "V.G.I." ("Valley Girl Intelligentsia") performs a similar reclamation of the term:

I say, I say, an intellectual genie  
I'm makin' bullshit disappear like I'm Hou-fuckin'-dini  
Turntables around with my smile bright and gleaming  
You think ya take ya order boy?  
You must be fuckin' dreaming  
V.G.I - my philosophy  
V.G.I. - is I'm a masterpiece  
V.G.I. - I wear a scrunchie  
V.G.I. - I'll say it again (Julie Ruin)

Here, the speaker's no-nonsense intellectualism is set up in deliberate contrast to the scrunchie she wears. In an interview, Hanna explains about the song:

Actually, it's a loosely structured group of women academics who have valley-girl accents. . . . The whole idea for me was that if you talk a certain way or look a certain way, people will think you're not smart. . . . It's the whole thing of feeling like you're somewhere where you're not supposed to be and nobody's going to take you seriously because . . . you have a voice that sounds like you work at the hot-dog stand at the mall. You can't be talking about . . . Foucault in a valley-girl accent because people won't take you seriously. I just think it's funny because there's a whole new breed of academics who do have them, who actually aren't even girls from the . . . Valley, but just adopted that because it's from the '80s, you know, it's a great '80s thing. (Nelson)

She seemingly dismisses the Valley Girl accent as a "great '80s thing," but I think she understates what to me is an important aspect of one of the excesses of Valley Girl that I'll examine in more detail below: its uses of language to confound expectations.

Although, like Baumgardner and Richards, Hanna sees Valley Girl as crucially affecting the lives of women: in this case, the “new breed” of women academics she’s talking about.

These three contemporary feminist accounts of Valley Girl’s influence on young women all point out the complex relationship between the mass media, lifestyle choices, and potentially feminist practices. Seen through Romeo and Hanna’s eyes, Valley Girl is a preexisting culture that was shaped and, perhaps, distorted, by Moon Zappa’s song, not to mention the books and film that followed. For example, three of the four books published about Valley Girl are packaged and written as guides-to-lifestyle: *Fer Shurr! How to be a Valley Girl - Totally!*; *The Valley Girls’ Guide to Life*; and *The Totally Awesome Val Guide*. What’s important for my project, however, aren’t the unanswerable and finally futile chicken-or-the-egg questions (Did the culture shape its media representations? Or did the media representations shape the culture?). What is important, again, is the claim that Baumgardner and Richards make: that the media-influenced culture (or is that the culturally-influenced media phenomenon?) provided an atmosphere in which feminism could be a lived part of young women’s worlds.

I’m not ultimately going to be claiming that Valley Girl was somehow a more useful strategy for empowering young women of the 1980s than Girlie / Girl Power was in the 1990s (and continues to be today). Nor am I claiming that Valley Girl is somehow “more feminist” than Girlie / Girl Power feminism. As I mention above, and will continue to explore below, the interests of the two are similar – and I don’t find either practice particularly feminist. In fact, Susan Douglas called *Jane* magazine (Jane Pratt’s post-*Sassy* publishing venture, still going strong as a pseudo-feminist periodical since

1997 and replete with smart irony in the service of consumer culture) “the triumph of Valley Girl feminism,” pointing out the consumption-based Girl Power feminism broadcast throughout that magazine (“Valley Girl”). I’m going to look at the tenets of Valley Girl in order to theorize what could be potentially feminist about it, as well as aspects of it that make it fall disappointingly short of becoming a vital feminist practice.

I want to mention before I begin my exploration that “the tenets of Valley Girl” is itself a misleading category for analysis, since most of my evidence comes from representations of Valley Girls in contemporary print sources (news articles and books).<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, I’m not old enough, nor was I geographically situated, to have been present in the Los Angeles of the early 1980s. I’m not going to be relying on these outside sources for supposed “accuracy” of representation, nor am I claiming that these sources paint a complete picture of what a Valley Girl is. In fact, there are multiple levels of separation here: between representation and reality, between an adult population of ethnographers and their teenage subjects of study, between the audiences intended for these texts and their actual audiences, etc.<sup>65</sup> What these sources do accomplish is that they create a world for us that, while media-ated, can be read as the aggregate of all the signs and symbols that made up the world of the Valley Girl.

One of the more interesting things about Valley Girl is that, in two of the four contemporary books on the subculture, the authors take great pains to make it non-gender-specific. Sue Black and Jodie Ann Posserello’s *The Totally Awesome Val Guide* [TAVG] and Dr. Lillian Glass’ *How to Deprogram Your Valley Girl* [HDVG] are gender-neutral books, the former in title and coverage, the latter mostly in coverage; both have chapters or features on Val Dudes. Whether this is for reasons of money (attracting a

potentially larger audience) or scholarly integrity (doing a “thorough” study) is anyone’s guess. But it’s almost as if the authors seem reticent to admit that their teenage girl subjects have as much agency as they are willing to give them. For example, here’s an excerpt from the chapter “Is There a Val in the House?” in *HDVG*:

A good way to determine whether or not you have a Val in your house is to find out how often the suspected Val really *is* in the house. The natural habitat of both Valley Girls and Dudes is the shopping mall, invariably known in Val parlance as the Galleria. (9-10)

So far, Glass is careful to be gender-neutral, to address both women and men. But later on in the paragraph, she makes this slip:

Most Valley conversation, in fact, revolves around things: who has what, who’s [sic] is better, who has more. Even members of the opposite sex are considered from this acquisitive perspective. A good-looking boyfriend (“buf babe” in Valspeak) can be displayed with as much proprietary pride as a new necklace. (10)

What happened to being gender-neutral? While we could claim that Glass’ intended reader is a concerned parent, it would follow that it doesn’t matter whether she’s talking about girls or boys. But that doesn’t quite explain this rhetorical slip she makes.

Black and Posserello do something similar, although their intended reader is, presumably, a teenager. The book opens with a list of “Celebrity Vals” who are all men: Richard Nixon, Donny Osmond, Captain James Kirk (9-10). Following this section, they claim that “The Galleria is in Encino, which is this totally *bitchen* part, which has more beauty salons and hair removal places per square mile than like any other place on the planet” (10). This conflation of men and culturally feminine places and activities makes for schizophrenic reading. For example, the section on “Valley Style” addresses feminine activities such as applying makeup, wearing blouses and skirts, and styling hair.

Accompanying these tips is a photo of a grinning Valley Girl, credit card in hand, and head band in hair. Following this is a section on “School” that clearly addresses a female reader (with presumably culturally feminine concerns such as “new guys” and “baby fat” [51, 57] and tips like, “Combing your hair is the best way out of any embarrassing situation” [56]) at the same time that it singles out male readers with qualifiers such as “Like for guys . . .” and diagrams demonstrating “How to Sit through Class,” showing a male figure slouching in a chair (58, 59).

I’d argue that this confusing switch between gender address in these two texts is especially noticeable when compared to the ways in which these authors specifically describe Valley Girls and their milieu. If we look at sheer number of pages and graphics in these texts, it seems as if the authors are more interested in discussing and poring over the minutiae of the lives of their female subjects, rather than presenting a balanced view of life in the San Fernando Valley. The slight attention paid to Valley Boys on their own terms, seen in this way, comes across as more a concession to notions of authorial balance than any real concern for them as an important part of viable youth subculture, whether their viability is anthropological, academic, or financial.

At the same time that the Valley Girls are subjected to a fine-toothed comb in these four books, there’s an accompanying palpable sense of disgust at them. This dual impulse – one part documentary awe or wonder at its subjects, one part revulsion with them – is apparent in Glass’ book. She begins by comparing the appearances of Valley Girls in her readers’ homes to “the slow metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly—or a cold into galloping pneumonia” (11).

One way of explaining the equivocal treatment of their subjects would be to claim that the books are packaged and written as humorous ones. Both Mimi Pond's *The Valley Girls' Guide to Life (VGGL)* and *TAVG* are written from the perspective of a Valley Girl.<sup>66</sup> Here, for example, is a representative passage from Pond:

Yesterday I'm sitting in the living room waiting for Erin and her mom to pick me up to go to Northridge Fashion Mall. So I hear this horn honk and I look out the window and I see this BOAT. I couldn't believe it. Like a STATION WAGON, in *our* driveway, like from 1969 or something. And PINK. Oh, my god. (16)

What makes this passage different from the *Time* article quoted above? Pond seems less interested in scoring journalistic points, by using hip lingo, than she is in creating characters and giving these characters life. To her credit (and to Black and Posserello's credit, too), she gives Valley Girls agency. But at the same time, the humor in these books comes from a somewhat patronizing "Girls Say and Do the Darndest Things" perspective:

Okay, you always wanted to go mega-blonde, so you gotta use this bleachy-type stuff on your hair. But be careful. One important phone call, you forget it's on your head, and you end up looking like a DANGER sign on the highway. (Black and Posserello 46)

These are teenage girls, after all, so why should we be worried about them? Don't they say and do frivolous things? Well, here's where *HDVG* might provide a way of looking at Valley Girl in a way that goes beyond a simple wonder/horror dichotomy.

Perhaps because of its "academic" pedigree (Glass is an MD, after all), *HDVG* stands alone in its attempts to historicize Valley Girl, although it goes about this almost unintentionally. "Every twenty years, it seems," begins Glass, "something happens in America that produces a new strain of youth." She goes on to link the 1920s Flapper, with her bobbed hair and bare knees, to the 1940s Bobby Soxer and her tight sweaters

and dances, to the Hippie of the 1960s, who “thought it was groovy to do her own thing,” to the contemporary Valley Girl (9). What’s conspicuously absent from Glass’ timeline here is commentary about these archetypes for teenage girls: all of them, seen through a historical lens, broke free from “acceptable” definitions of adolescent femininity in their respective decades and were perhaps, as a result, viewed as a sign of the downfall of American culture. For example, mainstream America’s Prohibition-era fears – alcohol consumption and miscegenation – coalesced in the figure of the flapper; while, in the 1960s, it was the fear of unrestrained sexuality that stained the culture’s view of the female hippie.

In turn, perhaps we can see the Valley Girl as doing similar things as her sisters – acting outside of patriarchally-defined notions of acceptable adolescent femininity. While Glass undercuts this potentially progressive reading of Valley Girls with captions accompanying the photos of her female subcultures (“Oh, wow!” for the Hippie; “Oh you kid!” for the flapper), her (unintended?) reading of their behavior as un-feminine might help to explain their equivocal treatment (10,11). In other words, Valley Girls might be easily dismissed as a youth culture with frivolous concerns. But this dismissal belies a deeper cultural worry about their potentially transgressive nature; as it appears in these texts, though, this worry is translated by these authors into a sense of disgust.

In their representations in all of these books (and in the film), it’s their excessiveness (and accompanying authorial uneasiness) that’s at the heart of Valley Girls’ potential transgressiveness. As seen through the lenses of Wolf and Wurtzel, the representations and obsessions of Valley Girls point to the figure of the excessive woman, she who always wants more. We can see this, first of all, through the

“unintelligible” (Demarest 56), and the “bizarre” (Langway and Cavazos 61) verdicts passed on their language, a language that Glass characterizes as “a language of black and white” (29). As she explains (and as Mary Corey and Victoria Westermarck outline in *Fer Shurr! How to be a Valley Girl - Totally!* [FS] in an extensive glossary), Valley Girls have a limited vocabulary: adverbs can only mean “very,” adjectives can only mean either good or bad (32). But at the same time that their language is condemned for being simplistic or indecipherable, its maze-like quality betrays a joyful exuberance that the authors can’t quite rein in with negative descriptors. Pond seems to voice this exuberance best:

O.K., like, so you don’t need moisturizer when you’re fifteen. You need toner and foundation and face powder and blusher and shadow and liner and mascara and cleansing cream and stuff like that but no way do you need moisturizer, especially with placenta in it. That is gross. O.K., like Sharma was using this conditioner with that in it, and I told her what it was and, like, she almost barfed. (25)

And here are Black and Posserello:

School life is like this totally gross existence. Like if it were Star Trek or something, you’d be one of the planets that Kirk had to save, I’m sure, except he’d probably have to like blow up your parents and most of the teachers and stuff, to put them out of their misery. (50)

These two even go so far as to translate a conversation. The following passage illustrates the more-ness of Valley Girls’ language, both as it compares to “normal” diction, as well as to Valley Dude language:

[“Normal”:] “The driver of the car was all bandaged up, but the guy on the motorcycle just made a dent in the street and walked away.”

Val Dude: That’s kazh. Gnarly dude.

Val Girl: Oh, I am sure. Really? Really? Is that the truth? Promise? You lie! He like makes this dent in the street? I’m sure. What was he, like Steel Girder Man or something? You geek, you’re lying. O.K., fine, don’t tell me. You’re just like so totally immature sometimes, you know? I’m sorry, it’s like BARF

OUT, I hope you're happy you made me like totally sick, I can't even eat this burrito any more. You're totally gross. (19)

The language, in these examples, with its mile-a-minute non-sequitors, strung-together nouns, and unrehearsed conversationality, almost can't be contained by words on the page. Its excessive and unrestrained quality, the way the Valley Girls consume and transform language – taking huge chunks of it and spitting it back in pieces that don't quite fit together – finds a parallel with Hanna's reading of the way language is used by her academic friends to confound expectations of them. We're confounded by the Valley Girls' language; we're forced to think as fast as they are speaking, in order to be able to understand. But, at the same time, there's something in their language that prevents an understanding of how these girls are producing the language they are. This use of language, then, is only the first example of how Valley Girls connote *more*.<sup>67</sup>

There's also the matter of Valley Girls, food, and bodily functions.

Representations of their physical appetites are just as excessive as representations of their linguistic ones. In *VGGL*, Pond explains, “Belching and burping and farting . . . provides comic relief when things get dull—everyone gets to talk about how totally gross it is” (37). She reminds us, “On days when you can't get to the mall *or* the beach: pigging out on Doritos in front of the 7-11 is *always* fun,” and explains that at the beach, you can “go to the Snak Wagon and mac-out on Frooty Patooties” (39, 21). *FS* provides us with a “Hairy Valley Girl Diet,” with amazing incongruities such as “Breakfast: 2 clove cigarettes, 1 cup black coffee. Lunch: 1 dill pickle from Kimberly's lunch. Dinner: One whole watermelon” (np).

In the meantime, though, just as Valley Girls are represented through their obsessions with language and eating, they are more obviously obsessed with consuming in a capitalist sense. In an interview from 1983, Martha Coolidge, director of *Valley Girl*, explained that “Valley Girl-ism [is a] kind of expression of the ultimate American dream, an aspiration toward or an affectation of affluence, a preoccupation with cars and clothes, nails, hairdos, credit cards, that kind of thing—having things” (Klein, “Valley Girl” 17). The *Time* article explains that one main difference between Valley Girls and their youth subculture predecessors is “the amount of billies a true Val pours into clothes, sunglasses, tanning oil, lip gloss, Tab, Doritos, Kahlua brownies, Bubblicious chewing gum, beer (Heinies and Lowies), burritos, movies, Harlequin romances, records . . . and movies” (Demarest 56).<sup>68</sup> We’ve already seen the reifying tendencies of Valley Girl above: Glass reminds us that Valley conversation revolves around things, even if that thing is a handsome guy. *FS* gives us a map of Val Country, which is an outline of the United States with – surprise – all the malls helpfully marked. And *TAVG* has the following pithy advice for its readers: “The two most popular ways to get style: 1. Master Charge; 2. Visa. Once your pocket is stuffed with credit cards, head for the Galleria. After that, simply buy all the matching outfits you see in the window” (41).

While this excessiveness may be transgressive – and is certainly one of the main reasons why their contemporary chroniclers feel a little sickened by their behavior – it’s obvious that what Valley Girls are doing is just consuming. And, as with Girlie / Girl Power practices, there’s nothing particularly feminist about being a consumer in patriarchal capitalism. Valley Girl could thus be read as the ultimate manifestation of what happens when private groups of girls meet capitalist America and American

preoccupations with amassing wealth and consumer goods. In other words, Valley Girl – like Girl Power – serves the purpose of socializing young girls into becoming good consumers. What’s more, as with the feminist critiques of Naomi Wolf outlined above, class is invisible in Valley Girl. Barbara Ehrenreich comments on this invisibility: “Consumerism, whether as acquiescence or escape, is always a limited and risky strategy. Moon Zappa . . . may cruise the shopping malls with a full deck of credit cards, but other little girls must nag their parents or learn to shoplift” (598).<sup>69</sup>

Yet, as I mention above, there is a way of reading Valley Girl more positively; this can be found in the sisterhood – glimpsed in McRobbie and Garber’s study of girls and subcultures – that Valley Girl can provide. To begin with, the texts propose that with Valley Girls sisterhood and consumption can exist together, unlike in Wolf’s formulation; although it’s consumption that seemingly unites the girls. For example, Black and Posserello in *TAVG* tell their readers that, in order to get clothes at the mall, they need “two of [their] friends to go along because you, like, need [their] opinion” (66).

Mimi Pond’s *VGGL*, however, proposes a model of female bonding that’s not necessarily tied to the buying into or the buying of popular culture. In the world of her book, friends provide a sanctuary from the outside world, an empowering support group. In her first chapter, called “Priorities: Clothes and Dudes,” Pond’s narrator sounds more interested in talking about her friends than these friends’ priorities. As she explains, “You always have to go with at least three other friends, like your best friend and then maybe April and Shawn and Michelle. EVERYONE has to help you decide what to buy. You can’t get it unless they say it’s super darling on you. ‘Cause how would you know by yourself?” (5). She later gives advice for dealing with salespersons:

Then you tell them how ugly everything is and like how come they don't have anything good? Then you ignore them. Another good thing to do is pretend you're from somewhere else like New York or Europe or something and put on a fake accent. I mean really the only reason we do it is not to be mean or anything, but just to excite our day. (7)

This passage imagines a collective of Valley Girls, identified by a common "we," more interested in having fun and enjoying each other rather than consuming for its own sake.

Later on in the same chapter, the narrator relays advice for watching guys. In this case, too, what's important here is being with friends, rather than hooking up. For example, she claims that if you give a boy your phone number, "you always tell the dude opposite names. Like you said you were Heather and she said she was you" (7). And she relates a story about her friend Missy, who stares at a guy's crotch "to freak him out" and then yells "HOW DOES HE STACK IT?" (7). In a section of cartoons called "At the Beach, Huh?" a caption explains, "You have to go to the beach with *at least two* other girlfriends . . . that way it doesn't look so much like you're scamming on the dudes. Make sure you find totally *vicious babes* to sit next to" (17). Under a heading labeled, "Things to Do at the Beach," all the cartoons show Valley Girls applying make-up and tanning oil and staring out the corner of their eyes at the surfboard-carrying guys. There's also a cartoon captioned "Act Cool" where, despite the nonchalant poses of the girls in the frame, their respective voice balloons belie their feelings: "I'm sooo horny." "Me too." "Cute ass" (21). These instances show us active and playful displays of teenage female sexuality. As the books' narrator confides about high school: "Having a boyfriend is MONDO important. When you get a new one, you have to tell everyone like how you're in love and stuff, but then you break up with him after about a week" (46).

What's seemingly privileged in Pond's representations of Valley Girl is bonding among friends. To the extent that this bonding isn't always tied to consumption, I see a potentially more progressive reading of Valley Girl. Sure, what might take the place of shopping here is heterosexual romance, but, as with Pond's take on Valley Girls and consumption in general, this is also done more in the name of being with friends. I see a resistant practice in this, in the way that these groups of girls are acting outside of how patriarchal capitalism dictates they should act: the ultimate goal of either form of their bonding isn't acquisition. In this way, Pond's book comes across as more progressive than any of the other texts. She does acknowledge that consumption is ever-present in groups of Valley Girls, but this doesn't necessarily define their lives.

This is why the filmic representation of Valley Girls is maddening: it completely undercuts Pond's important interpretation of Valley Girl. The film not only proposes that shopping might be the only activity that unites girls, but it also shows that heterosexual romance is more important than friendships among young women. Having said that, though, the film does present one way of reading girls' subcultures that Pond is silent on and that McRobbie and Garber don't quite anticipate in their own work on the subject: this is an illustration of the ways in which girls can actively colonize public spaces for private use. In the end, though, *Valley Girl* unfortunately reduces its female subjects to "Clothes and Dudes."

In the film, Julie (Deborah Foreman) and her friends Loryn (Elizabeth Daily), Stacey (Heidi Holicker), and Suzie (Michelle Meyrink) are best friends – Valley Girls living in the San Fernando Valley. Julie, popular at school, has recently dumped her equally popular macho boyfriend Tommy (Michael Bowen). One night, at a party at

Suzie's house, Julie meets quirky Randy (Nicolas Cage), a Hollywood punk. Despite fighting with Tommy and being ejected from the party, Randy and his friend Fred (Cameron Dye) return to take Julie and Stacey to a club in Hollywood. Fred and Stacey argue and flirt while Julie and Randy fall in love. Julie and Randy begin dating, while Julie's friends warn her about her cachet in school and among them because she is involved with someone from a different social class. She unhappily dumps Randy and begins seeing Tommy again. A despondent and drunk Randy is saved from violence by Fred, who convinces him to win Julie back. Julie, reunited with Tommy (as well as her friends), attends her senior prom, only to have Randy and Fred show up unannounced. Randy spirits her away from her date in Tommy's rented limousine and the two drive off into the neon night.

Despite the ultimate focus of the narrative of the film on heterosexual coupling, from its opening moments, the film seems to privilege the female voice, and simultaneously set it in direct opposition to the male voice. A pre-credits sequence gives us an aerial shot, as a male disk jockey's voice on a Hollywood radio station mentions the day, weather, and tickets for an upcoming concert. This voice fades as the camera drifts over to the Valley, and we're tuned now into a different DJ, a female one, who mentions the weather in the Valley, and explains the song we're about to hear is the "story of [her] life." We hear "Girls Like Me," by Bonnie Hayes, with its lyrics: "They gotta word for girls like me / They gotta name but don't wanta use it" as the camera travels across the Valley (Hayes). I'd like to read this opening as a metaphor for the film as a whole, which lets us be privy to the conversations and obsessions of a group of Valley Girls. The opening establishes the Valley Girls as a private society: after all, the male DJ voice – a

public one, talking about the world outside (the temperature, the time, an upcoming event) – switches to a female one, telling us about the story of her life. What the female DJ does is relevant when we see her in terms of McRobbie and Garber's subcultural theories about girls: she acts, perhaps, as a public voice for the private lives of her female listeners. As we'll see, in one key sequence, the Valley Girls we follow carry their private lives into a public sphere, making them pseudo-public events. Their colonization of public places for private use could be seen as an *extension* of McRobbie and Garber's private girls' cultures – one removed from the domestic spaces.

This, I think, is where the film is most frustrating. With this colonization, we potentially have an exciting reclamation of patriarchally-defined public space. This reclamation removes the domestic connotations of girls' private spaces, making them importantly visible. While the film does show one funny and crucial example of this colonization in action, it more often seems to marginalize and make exploitative fodder of girls' private cultures. The sleepover sequence late in the film illustrates this point well. In this sequence, we're privy to a secret world, as the girls dance for each other; pig out on cookies, ice cream, and potato chips; and talk talk talk about zits, parties, and boys. But why does the camera seem to linger on them modelling lingerie (over their skimpy sleepover outfits) in full-length mirrors? It's hard to see this sequence as anything other than a recapitulation of how culture has taught to see groups of girls: either as harmless obsessives of junk food, pop music, and mommy's clothes and makeup, or as sexualized teases.

On the other end of the spectrum, though, there's the sequence after the party where Julie's taking her driving lesson. This is clearly played for laughs, as her

instructor bails out of the car, afraid for his life because Julie is paying more attention to talking with her friends than she is to driving her car along a closed course. The camera cuts rapidly among the girls talking about the party and the boys the night before, as the car tires squeal, perhaps representing the joy that the girls feel. But the obvious comic elements of this sequence can't obscure the fact that what we're watching is a public reenactment of a conversation that the girls would have in private. In fact, we've already heard a similar conversation at the food court in the beginning of the film. If we take the excessiveness of their language and combine it with McRobbie and Garber's imagined "resistance" within private spaces, then we have here a vivid illustration of what McRobbie and Garber's comments on girls and subcultures could mean as a feminist practice in the real world. The girls, by talking to one another privately in a public space, are co-opting it for their own use, as the instructor opens the door of the moving car in order to roll to safety. In this feminist expression of girl bonding, men are literally ejected from the scene.

But this girl bonding is often undercut by the dual impulse that the narrative sets up from its opening moments, which, as I've shown, anticipates on a metaphorical level a narrative that literally turns off the male point of view for a female one. In the end, the film seems to oppose bonding among females to partnership with a male. After the aerial shots of Los Angeles mentioned above, we cut to a shot of Julie browsing through clothes in the Galleria Mall in Sherman Oaks while "Girls Like Me" plays on the soundtrack. As the credits roll, a montage of Julie and her friends modeling clothes for one another follows; they try on the exaggerated pursed lips and shifting shoulders of models just as they display their clothes. This is all interspersed with stationary shots of a hand ringing

up various purchases, sliding a credit card through a machine, and sliding goods into a plastic bag. This sequence is saturated with neons, pinks, and blues; the editing between the shots is quick, and within the individual shots, the camera is often mobile. The jaunty pace of this opening foreshadows the rapid-fire dialogue among the friends throughout the film. After the credits end, we get a brief establishing shot of the food court in the mall with Julie, Loryn, Stacey, and Suzie sitting around a table talking about pregnancy. The camera zips among the young women, letting us catch only pieces of their dialogue.

While this seems less exploitative than the later bedroom sequence and we could read it as an important sequence, especially in the way that it shows girls in a group being excessive, both in their language and in their consumption of popular culture. The cinematic treatment makes their excesses seem vital and attractive. What I think reverses this positive reading is how the food court sequence ends. The eyes of the four girls follow Brad, a boy they know, as he walks over to a food counter. Just as this sequence ends with the intrusion of a boy onto the scene, the ultimate message of the film seems to be that partnership with a male is what's ultimately most important.

Indeed, the film appears to set up Julie's phrasing of her friends' unspoken dictum, "It's Randy or you guys" as a dichotomy between total allegiance to a boy or total allegiance to the group. This dichotomy is treated literally in the film, as the scenes of girls in a group are always broken up or interrupted by the arrival of a boy: Tommy comes across the girls at the mall, and Julie dismisses her friends, telling them she'll meet them outside; at school, where Tommy tells her friends that he's worried about Julie hanging out with Randy; and at a restaurant in what looks like a pre-planned accidental meeting where the girls flee with excuses to let Tommy talk "some sense" into Julie.

Besides these moments, Suzie's friend Skip calls her at her house while she has her friends over for the sleepover. In all these cases, the private sphere of the girls' bonding is intruded upon by a male – this makes the scene with the driving instructor stand out even more.

The overall narrative project that sets girlfriends against boyfriends, I would argue, turns the concerns of the group of friends into trivial ones, simply because they forestall the pairing of the heterosexual couple. As Diane Negra notes in her unpublished thesis on *Valley Girl*, “the trope of the couple here acts as the ultimate self-validation for teenage women” (17).<sup>70</sup> As a telling example of this, as the film progresses to its conclusion, we see fewer scenes of Julie and her friends, and more of her with Randy.

In fact, this gradual removal of Julie and her friends from the narrative is taken to an extreme conclusion: after Julie dumps Randy, he actually becomes the protagonist for a considerable stretch of the film up to its conclusion. Prior to this, almost everything we've seen in the film comes to us through Julie's eyes. It's very rare that we're privy to anything that occurs without her being in the scene.<sup>71</sup> Thus, once we start following Randy around, first on a drunken visit to the Hollywood club where he went with Julie (he and his old girlfriend Samantha have a wordless and passionate smooching session in the women's bathroom), and later, on his mission to win Julie back, he has become a central identification-figure for the audience. In a weird narrative turn, Julie actually becomes the literal object of his affection; briefly glimpsed as he stalks her, she is allowed only a range of amused and amazed facial reactions to his amorous antics. This comes across as an odd shift in the film because it's Randy who is first shown to us as the voiceless, backlit and glistening object of Julie and her friends' gaze at the beach. The

near-reversal that the film makes, by shuffling our identification from Julie and her friends, first to the Julie-Randy couple, and then to Randy alone, is yet another way that any potentially progressive reading of the film is undercut by its narrative construction. In other words, not only does the film rush to establish the heterosexual couple, it also rushes to remove the woman as the center of the narrative.<sup>72</sup>

Amy Taubin, writing in *The Village Voice*, notes the way the film treats Randy. He is “the only interesting character . . . [and] is allowed a wide range of actions and desires” (55).<sup>73</sup> She chalks this up to this fact: “Valorizing the Vals required keeping them out of any situation in which their narrowness of aspiration, intelligence, and emotion might become offensive – i.e., all they get to do is change clothes” (55). This review, I think, hits a crucial point. In the film, Julie and her friends – despite the fact that the filmmakers are genuinely fond of and seem fair to them – are flat characters, reduced to the sum of their parts: shopping, talking, eating, hanging out. We could read, then, a similar impulse here as in the books on Valley Girl: the film seems to want to be anthropological. In other words, we could see director Coolidge attempting, in part, to make a film version of the how-to Valley Girl guides that appeared during the year the film was in production.<sup>74</sup>

But why does the film stress – as the books largely don’t – the role of teenage boys in this teenage girls’ subculture? For it’s precisely in this way that the film’s representation of Valley Girls comes across as the least progressive. In fact, despite the real connections that these girls have with each other – as shown in the driving lesson scene, this is a connection that isn’t entirely dependent on shopping, and that can exclude men – any sense of sisterhood is undercut when boys enter the picture. This tendency is

signposted from the opening sequence, when Brad enters the scene. Julie wonders aloud about being with him, and Stacey reminds her that she's with Tommy, telling her, "Don't be so greedy. Save some for the rest of us!" This greediness for men, as developed later on, especially in Loryn's words and actions, is coded as *wrong* among the group.

And this is another place where a potentially feminist reading of the film falls flat. It's almost as if *Valley Girl* illustrates what happens when Wolf's stress on self-interest and Wurtzel's stress on greediness collide: Girl Power, in this example, becomes just another way for women to fight over men. The morality of Loryn's friends judges any of them who want more than they have (or who want something different, in Julie's case) as somehow unacceptable. In the sequence in the food court, Loryn's near-monologue about pregnancy—how it would affect her stomach and her pimples, how it's "totally gnarly birth control"—and her friends' explosions of disgust demonstrate the fact that she'll be treated as different.<sup>75</sup>

In the scene at the beach where Julie first sees Randy, there's a double standard at work. It seems okay for all the girls to ogle and make comments about the boys—"My god . . . what a hunk . . . that guy is sooo cute . . . look at his smile"—but when Loryn says "Oh yeah, he's my kind of guy," Stacey cuts back, "Aren't they all?" When preparing for Suzie's party, Stacey wonders, "Do you think she does everything she says?" She hints with her comment, "Who could make [it] up . . . that stuff tastes like Clorox!" that Loryn's engaging in sexual acts that the others don't want to try. Later, at the party, Tommy convinces Loryn to sleep with him. When he's dressing, she asks him, "Does this mean we're going together?" Tommy replies, "I think it means you're a pretty lousy friend, messing around with her friend's boyfriend while he's in a bad way," before

leaving her topless in bed. At a sleepover party with the girls, Loryn mentions that the air in “Hollyweird” makes men shrink to a few inches. When Suzie asks her friends, “What’s, like, the biggest you’ve seen?” Loryn adds, “in your hand!”<sup>76</sup>

But Loryn isn’t the only friend who is being sexual. By the end of the film, it is only Stacey who remains chaste: Suzie is seen naked in bed with Skip (and shows up late to the prom with him because they were consummating their love); Loryn’s fooling around with Tommy (and, at the end of the film, is willing to leave the prom with her date Arthur, but only after they announce the king and queen); and Julie, in the montage of her and Randy dating cute, is involved in some serious snogging action (this montage is cut so it looks like their kisses continue spatially and temporally over miles and days).<sup>77</sup> Why, then, do the other girls treat Loryn so poorly?

This is a puzzling question, because, just as the film pushes for heterosexual romance, it also performs a kind of policing among the groups of friends and those who socially transgress. In *Valley Girl*, girls who go against what turn out to be the rather conventional rules of the group are made to feel unwelcome. Loryn and Julie are chided the most by Stacey and Suzie; the former because of her sexual violations of the group’s codes, the latter because of her social ones. The film makes this fact tangible in a three-shot at the sleepover. Stacey, Loryn, and Suzie are grouped tightly in the center of the frame, perched in different poses, draped on or close to one another in the center of Suzie’s stepmother’s bed. The camera is stationed slightly below them to make them seem larger than they actually are, as they whisper and laugh to each other. The scene cuts to a shot of Julie alone, center-frame, at the foot of the bed, looking at her friends. In this case, the camera is stationed just to the right of her friends’ eyeline; the effect here is

to make Julie gaze slightly up and to the left. The camera placement in the second half of the three-shot, combined with the forlorn look in Julie's eyes, is devastating. Her isolation from her friends is represented both narratively and stylistically. So much for sisterhood.

In the end, the film may be the least feminist of all the Valley Girl texts discussed in this chapter. All of the Valley Girls' excesses – in language use, in eating practice, in shopping prowess – are pushed to the side in the drive for conventional narrative closure: that is, the privileging of the heterosexual couple. The potentially feminist excesses that are shown are reduced to spectacularized features of the *mise-en-scène*. As such, these acts are stripped of any transgressive political impact. As I mention above, while the film does present an interesting twist in the driving lesson sequence, this scene is a rare one of progressive female bonding in a film that otherwise pits women against each other over men. However, I think it would be going too far to claim that the film is completely devoid of feminist sentiments. It's just that, in the same way that Valley Girls are represented as being so concerned with consumption, the film *Valley Girl* shows them as finally being focused on heterosexual coupling.

Because the film probably reached a larger teenage girl audience than the books on Valley Girl, it could have taught some important lessons to its audience. For example, it could have taught its audiences about female bonding in public life, about how women could use language to confound or confuse, about more self-conscious consumption practices, and the way these practices might eventually be connected to personal and political agency. These messages are sacrificed in the film's rush to bring about a conventional ending. Like *Girl Power*, *Valley Girl*, as a mainstream pop cultural text,

really isn't much concerned with using entertainment to lead young women to consider their potential to resist or reshape patriarchal capitalism.

What connects Valley Girl with Girl Power is that both are potentially-feminist discourses that stress the consumption of mainstream popular culture. This, of course, brings up the question: how can something that is so plugged into mainstream culture ever be effectively feminist, especially if the patriarchal capitalist mainstream usually finds a way of neutralizing anything potentially feminist in its midst? Jane Pratt's feminist magazine *Sassy* morphing into the Girl Power *Jane* is an unfortunate illustration of this. Some would argue, too, that Liz Phair's transition from unfuckwithable on her 1993 *Exile in Guyville* record to her current mainstream incarnation is another. As Joy Press comments, "originally, of course, girl power was never meant to be consumer friendly; it was supposed to stick in the mainstream's craw." As an example of the original model for Girl Power, she points to the angry and politically-minded Riot Grrrl, a punk cultural practice that found its diluted way down into the mainstream as Girl Power. This is where my story comes in: as a member of the punk subculture in the mid-1990s, I was invigorated by Riot Grrrl; it's from my exposure to this that my feminism grew. My next chapter will discuss Riot Grrrl – which I still see as the most vital third-wave feminist discourse – and an early illustration of it, in the all-but-forgotten film, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (1981, Lou Adler).

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Riot, Girls:

#### *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* and Third-Wave Cultural Production

The last chapter explored how certain less-progressive discourses of third-wave feminism appear in girl-centered teen films. In this chapter, however, I want to examine the ways in which popular culture can be used by young women for feminist ends. It is in these uses of pop culture that I see the most the most utopian possibilities for real-world political change. I argue that as a pop culture product of the media machine, and thus subject to both its shortcomings and its positive potentials, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (1981, Lou Adler) performs in the same way that the various media (popular music, television, news) do in the film itself. In other words, the functions of and uses for popular culture are explored within the film's narrative. And, as I hope to show, the film reveals how popular culture can have the greatest success in broadcasting feminism to its young female consumers – whether such feminism is intended or unintended by its producers.

As Catherine Orr says of third-wave feminism in her article, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” “this newest wave [of feminism] is returning to popular culture, the medium through which feminism captured the popular imagination – and thus political clout – in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (41). Although she's partly concerned with creating a dichotomy between academic feminism's perceived inaccessibility and “popular” feminism's “accessibility” (41), she is correct in suggesting that popular culture is an accessible way to both broadcast and receive feminist politics. It is questions concerning the ability of popular culture to present feminist politics to mainstream audiences that most interests me here.

While third-wave feminist uses of popular culture are numerous and varied – the preponderance of magazines like *Bitch* (1996-present) and *Bust* (1993-present) and the proliferation of websites like *gURL.com*, to name only a few – one of the most vital and visible elements of this discourse of third-wave feminism is the Riot Grrrl movement and the surge of cultural production among teenage girls that preceded, and was galvanized by, it. As Melissa Klein notes, in its debt to the “personal is political” ideology set by second-wave feminists, “Riot Grrrl allowed young suburban girls to vent their anger at the world of suburban boys” (217). If the punk rock subculture was (and continues to be) largely the province of suburban boys, then Riot Grrrl was a movement that reacted to the symbolic erasure of girls in the subculture and simultaneously brought these heretofore invisible girls to the foreground in revolutionary ways.

People generally date the beginning of Riot Grrrl as the summers of 1991 and 1992,<sup>78</sup> where, in two Washingtons – DC on the east coast and the town of Olympia, Washington, on the west – girls who identified with the punk subculture started producing their own culture in earnest as a reaction to their exclusion (whether intentional or not) from the punk subculture. This cultural production provided an important outlet for the frustration and anger felt by many of them inside that subculture. This anger is, obviously, inherent in their name. As Marion Leonard has it, the words Riot Grrrl “signif[y] an angry, assertive feminist who relishe[s] engaging in activity” (232).<sup>79</sup> In other words, Riot Grrrls reclaimed the word “girl” for themselves, stripping it of its signification as something specifically feminine, immature, and innocuous.

As a grassroots network of girls producing culture exploded across the country, the most important venue for this network was the fanzine. These may have largely been

crudely Xeroxed pamphlets or ill-stapled booklets, but they remained the primary means of communication for many Riot Grrrls isolated in small towns across the country. What is more, they made up for their “aesthetic” shortcomings with vigor and verbiage in smart, witty, and angry articles about women’s issues. Like the name Riot Grrrl, the names of the zines often performed the same reclamation of the feminine; they took words and phrases associated with girl- or woman-hood and recast them in new, sometimes angry, forms: *Discharge*, *Girl Germs*, *Bikini Kill*, *Sister Nobody*.

Representative of the ways in which Riot Grrrls’ production of culture remained independent, zines often eschewed mainstream production/consumption venues, as they were photocopied (sometimes illegally) at schools or at Kinko’s across the country; distributed by hand; publicized by word-of-mouth or through ads in other punk zines; and were made available from girls at shows, at underground record stores, or at book stores. Girls’ bodies and clothing, too, became the means by which to address their frustration and anger at the punk scene. Words and phrases like “SLUT” or “I AM NOT YOUR OBJECT” or “ANGRY BITCH,” whether scrawled on exposed midriffs or on t-shirts, became powerful words, both imbued with site-specific meaning and also shorn of exploitative meaning through their exposure by women.

Girls also began facilitating girl-centered workshops. Whether the subject of the workshops was self-defense techniques, crocheting, bike repair, or the uses of natural menstrual pads, community, education, and safety were stressed. And last, but certainly not least, all-girl bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Team Dresch sprouted in this climate, reshaping punk music with their stress on personal expression rather than technical know-how. The vitality and explicitness of their lyrics –

whether they were about queer love, frustration at parents or teachers, exploitation (or worse) by bosses, or anger at punk rock boys – spoke to girls across the country whose experiences were similar, but who had perhaps never heard their love or anger within a song. All of these bands remained staunchly independent of the mainstream music business, playing all the music themselves (often without the help of outside producers), working through their own sympathetic support system of concert organizers and record distributors, and controlling the ways in which they were represented on records and in photographs.<sup>80</sup>

When I was part of the punk scene in the mid-1990s, Riot Grrrl and its influence was everywhere. Now, however, it seems that that cyclone of cultural production among girls during and after those incredible summers is only a memory.<sup>81</sup> There were two kinds of effects that I noticed from this cyclone, both tangible and ideological. To start with the tangible, Riot Grrrl made it safe for girls to dance at the front of the stage in front of the band without fear of bodily harm or harassment. I still get tingles when I remember Kathleen Hanna from Bikini Kill asking a crowded audience at my college house that a space be cleared so that the girls could dance. Riot Grrrl brought women's issues (sexual harassment, concerns about negative body image) to the punk "agenda," in fanzine articles and columns, in songs on 7" records, and in between-song speeches by performers. Riot Grrrl also visibly changed what was subculturally acceptable for girls to wear to shows: girls started wearing "feminine" summer dresses over "masculine" army fatigues, or wore feminine tanktops and shorts, knowing there was safety in numbers from the grabbing hands and probing eyes of punk rock boys. And Riot Grrrl made girls

a more clear presence in the scene, as organizers, bookers, writers, musicians, and, most crucially, voices.

There was an ideological effect, too. My own political awareness of real-world issues through my involvement in the punk scene was made all the more real to me as this scene itself was changing. In other words, looking back, I feel now as though I was becoming aware of feminism as it was expressed in the subcultural group to which I belonged, at the same time that I was also becoming aware of other ideologies connected with the punk scene: anti-globalization, animal rights, and social justice. The difference to me – and the reason why Riot Grrrl remains in my mind as a powerful force – is that Riot Grrrl made feminism a lived thing *at the same time* as they were talking about it with others; *they* practiced what *they* preached. For example, it was always difficult to come to terms with the punk subculture’s supposedly anti-capitalistic stance when so much depended on selling merchandise; the economy circulating in the scene was more of a mirror of the mainstream than I was ever comfortable with. Riot Grrrl seemed to effortlessly unite practice with “theory” in the ways it was always girl-centered and girl-positive. Later, when I read and discussed feminism and queer theory in college and graduate school, Riot Grrrl was the one feminist practice that seemed to break through what I saw as the brick wall between the academic feminism I was reading and the feminism I saw happening around me. With Riot Grrrl, I am still struck by the ways in which the simplest choices about how to live in the world are both talked about (theorized, if you will) *and* lived. To me, this makes it all the more important a force for feminist change.<sup>82</sup>

Even so, in my experience, girls were still expected to defer to boys in the punk scene. For every girl smashing the hell out of her drums on stage, there were five who turned the Riot Grrrl non-fashion of thrift store skirts, combat boots, and handmade t-shirts marked up with provocative phrases into an empty pose as they held their boyfriends' jackets in the rears of clubs and halls. In these same halls, girls were overwhelmingly in charge of the merchandise tables or the bars at shows, even at ostensibly more progressive venues (benefit concerts, for example), while their equally political-minded boyfriends were at the front of the room. The sheer number of apolitical-at-best, reactionary-at-worst record labels and bands continued to (and still do) drown out the pro-woman voices being heard by music consumers, even those who avoid the mainstream. The amazing Riot Grrrl revolution didn't quite change things as profoundly as it seemed to promise.<sup>83</sup> What happened to Riot Grrrl? Why was its feminist potential never realized in either the punk rock subculture or in the music and pop culture scene in general?

One answer might be found in the nature of girls' cultures. As Mary Celeste Kearney argues, one of the most problematic (albeit also one of the most influential) early ways of theorizing girls' cultures comes from Simon Frith, who sees girls' culture as a "bedroom culture." This is a subculture "centered around heterosexual romance, and the consumption of mainstream cultural commodities" ("Producing" 285). Girls' bedroom culture is deemed a subculture of youth culture because it assumes that girls are working within cultural realms of their own making, with their own rules and regulations. However, Kearney correctly points out that Frith's theory of these subcultures ties them to mainstream ideologies: they foreground heterosexual romance (the boy band pin-ups

as objects of affection, the makeup and clothes bought to attract boys at school, etc.) and unfettered spending (more CDs! more makeup! more clothes!). But, as she says, theorists such as Frith also see the meaning of these subcultures as equivocal. They are linked to mainstream capitalism by the way they “over-privileged consumerism”; at the same time, however, they offer this capitalist consumerism as a “political[ly] resistan[t]” practice for girls (“Producing” 287). In Frith’s conception, any instance of spending, any new acquisition, even any shred of desire felt for consumer goods, are both highly political acts, as well as acts that are absolutely part and parcel of the mainstream’s capitalist ideologies.

This is a problematic definition that sounds a lot to me like Girl Power, which I’ve discussed in the previous chapter, and the ways in which liberation – and thus, the potential for political power – is provided (and perhaps contained) through consumption. But the question remains, how can girls’ cultures be separate from – or resistant to – mainstream culture, if they value the same ideologies and practices (heterosexual romance, consumer capitalism) as the mainstream? One line of argument claims that girls’ cultures are “*bedroom* cultures,” after all, which situates girls in a space that’s *literally* outside of the public sphere of the real world. Of course, arguing that girls are outside of the real world is itself a troublesome prospect, in that, with this conception, girls become domesticated, and thus, refeminized, entrenched or contained in their bedrooms, free from real-world influence or concerns. As does Girl Power, this idea of girls’ bedroom cultures only seems to transpose into the private realm what mainstream public culture valorizes: heterosexual romance, materialism, individualism, etc.

In addition, if bedroom culture is understood as existing outside of the real world, then it is potentially difficult to see it as having any bearing whatsoever on real world concerns. However, Angela McRobbie, in a 1980 article on girls' culture that complicates Frith's notion of bedroom culture, hints at the ways in which girls' bedroom culture *could* exist as a space with more potential to be both resistant to, if not fully separate from, the mainstream ideologies of heterosexual romance and patriarchal capitalism, and to have potential real world impact:

To the extent that all-girl subcultures, where the commitment to the gang comes first, might forestall these processes [of looking for boyfriends] and provide their members with a collective confidence which could transcend the need for "boys," they could well signal an important progression in the politics of youth culture. ("Settling" 80)

What McRobbie is doing here is crucial. She's figuratively taking "bedroom culture" out of its private-sphere ghetto. In other words, rather than claiming that bedroom culture is mainstream public culture transposed onto girls' private subcultures (as Frith does), McRobbie claims that girls' cultures – in their private collectivity, uninformed by heterosexual romance (or consumption) – *could* be transposed onto, and moved into, young women's public lives.

This potential for girls' cultures to both exist in public and influence the mainstream (as opposed to Frith's conception of girls' cultures, which does the opposite, by stressing the mainstream's influence on girls' cultures) is explored in another article by Kearney, who links McRobbie's ideas to Riot Grrrl. Her argument, importantly, avoids the problem of seeing bedroom culture as necessarily supporting the mainstream ideologies of heterosexual romance and capitalist consumption. She claims that Riot Grrrls enact a kind of "separatism" from mainstream cultural ideologies and concerns.

This separatism ultimately “works ... because it is a temporary tactic enacted for safety and empowerment” (“Don’t” 149). But what makes their separatist impulses truly a feminist act, a manifestation of “radical culture and politics,” is that Riot Grrrl performs a *double* separation (“Don’t” 149). In other words, it is separated both from the mainstream – in that it is a punk subculture – as well from the masculinist subculture of punk rock, whose politics and ideologies (as I mention above) mirror the mainstream in certain ways, particularly in having little room for girls and no room for feminism.

While Kearney’s line of argument about Riot Grrrls being a radical feminist subculture is closest to the one I will make in this chapter with regards to the film *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains*, I want to point out that her argument nevertheless has its own set of problems. As she suggests, Riot Grrrl is only a temporary tactic, presumably used only for temporary empowerment within the punk rock subculture, and thus inapplicable to daily life in the mainstream culture beyond. And there’s also the fact that this conception of the subculture refeminizes it in the ways that it stresses the “characteristics of nurturance and community [stereo]typically associated with femininity” (“Don’t” 157). This take on Riot Grrrl is uncomfortably close to Frith’s on bedroom culture; it stresses the fact that Riot Grrrl only absorbs the values of the mainstream onto itself and doesn’t ultimately allow it to progress beyond the confines of what mainstream culture dictates is acceptable for young women.

What I see as Riot Grrrl’s most radical move, however – its double separation from the mainstream – has another, attendant, problem. While this separation is certainly a radical move in itself, it has also led to charges of the movement being self-contained and doing nothing more than “preaching to the choir.” Kearney claims that Riot Grrrls

are often criticized, by mainstream and feminist critics alike, “for not making themselves, their culture, and their politics more palatable for mainstream society” (“Don’t” 173). One main reason for this criticism against the subculture is that Riot Grrrl willingly takes a self-consciously angry stance against punk rock and mainstream culture. Author and performer (and Riot Grrrl-friendly activist) Jen Smith claims that, among the teenage girl participants at a conference in 1996, she saw that “a lot of energy was spent in anger and rejection” (229). While I see this anger, which can ultimately lead to a *rejection* of mainstream ideologies, as a potentially progressive feminist tactic, Smith wonders how effective would this “simple repudiation” of mainstream structures be as an instrument of change on mainstream culture (230).<sup>84</sup> For Smith, Riot Grrrl needs to go well beyond the confines of its punk rock subculture in order to enact more widespread social change. It is important for her that this social change be enacted through the cultural production of films, comic books, or interactive music projects, because it’s only through a wider dissemination of feminist ideas through cultural artifacts that these ideas will get heard or noticed.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, as critics Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald claim about Riot Grrrl’s insularity, “If Riot Grrrl wants to raise feminist consciousness on a large scale, then it will have to negotiate a relation to the mainstream that does not merely reify the opposition between mainstream and subculture” (271). So one of the problems with this doubly separatist approach to broadcasting feminist ideas is that the subculture-within-a-subculture runs the risk of not gaining mass acceptance because it presents itself *in opposition to the masses*.

At the same time that some critics fault Riot Grrrl’s efficacy as an instrument of widespread feminist change because of its anger or its insularity, other critics have

faulted the movement for its homogeneity. Writing in *L.A. Weekly* in 1992 in a largely sympathetic article, Emily White claims, “most of the Riot Girls [are white]. The majority are from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds. Like a religious sect they huddle together, rejecting the world, but also somewhat afraid of it” (402). In the eyes of critics like White, Riot Grrrl doesn’t critically consider its own status as a non-mainstream subculture; it’s too concerned with defining itself doubly against the mainstream and punk culture to consider the ways in which – for example – its racial and class makeup might actually mirror both that of the mainstream, as well as that of the (male) punk subculture.

Of course, on the other hand, there is a problem with a more “mainstream” approach to feminism. In a recent issue of *Bitch*, a roundtable discussion on music and feminism featured two related claims:

Andi Ziesler: So what we need is a band that amasses the unconverted and turns them on to feminist concepts because they have fabulous songs – stuff that’s going to catch people’s attention.

Windy Chien: [*sarcastically*] That’s what the Spice Girls did, right? Girl power?

Allison Faith Levy: You have to distill it down to a really small, catchy little idea. You can’t be too complicated in what you’re saying. (Chien et al. 56)

To have feminism be accepted by mainstream culture, you need something easy to digest that’s accompanied by a catchy song. And, as I mention in my previous chapter, this is why third-wave Girl Power comes across as problematic: it too simply tries to sell its consumer-driven ethos as female empowerment.

This does not mean, however, that I’m claiming that Riot Grrrl is a non-problematic feminist subculture. However, what does make it different from Girl Power is that it attempts to make an issue about its problematic status as a subculture defined as

doubly separate from the mainstream. Kearney notes that Riot Grrrls had taken steps to come to terms with the mainstream media and had made an issue out of their privileged status, but that both of these responses were directed at specific accusations. Even so, I would argue that both responses show a complete awareness of the problem of representing themselves within the mainstream culture and to women at large and of the contradictions within their movement. In 1993, for example, Kearney notes that Riot Grrrls initiated a “press blackout” (“Don’t” 161), based on the tendency for mainstream journalists to turn Riot Grrrl into a flavor-of-the-month. For example, a representative *Newsweek* article from 1992 wants its readers to glibly “Meet the Riot Grrrls – a sassy new breed of feminists for the MTV Age” (Chideya, et al 84). And *Sassy* magazine, which many credit for helping Riot Grrrl reach a larger audience, ran “zine of the month” features. Now, this may have been a move on the editorial board’s part to help, instead of hinder, Riot Grrrl’s messages, but, as with the *Newsweek* article (and similar articles in *Seventeen* and *Spin*), the effect, unfortunately, compromised Riot Grrrl, as the mainstream media attempted to make a complex take on feminism easy to digest. Kearney also suggests that, in order to “lead to greater critical consciousness” (“Don’t” 175), groups of Riot Grrrls have attempted to address their privileged status, by reading and publicizing non-white feminist authors, performers, artists, and theorists, acknowledging their (class, racial) position in society, and getting involved in non-white or underprivileged women’s groups.<sup>86</sup>

Despite its myriad criticisms, Riot Grrrl demonstrates that there are two ways of effecting change through broadcasting feminist ideas – one that stresses outside accessibility to the mainstream, and another that stresses its internal changes – the former

is what is exciting to me about Riot Grrrl: its potential to change the mainstream from its subcultural position. The ways in which this subculture within a subculture allowed young girls to not only create their own culture (Riot Grrrl), but then to take that culture and have it consistently influence its parent culture (punk rock) makes me excited for what it could have done, given wider exposure, to influence the mainstream.<sup>87</sup>

And this is where *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* comes in. The film not only treats what would become Riot Grrrl's potential shortcomings, but it also shows the ways in which, even in a wider cultural setting, its feminist politics might not be completely erased. As I hope to show, the film, over a decade before the Riot Grrrl movement itself, dramatizes what would be Riot Grrrl's place within its subculture-within-a-subcultural context, and seems to foreshadow the problems that Riot Grrrl has had in its use of and relationship to the media. Furthermore, it proposes a potentially utopian future for feminist politics in a mainstream setting.

The film itself is interesting in that its own relationship to mainstream media outlets is problematic. Made in Canada in late 1980 under the auspices of Paramount Pictures (and originally shot under the title *All Washed Up*), *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (referred to here as *The Fabulous Stains*) was the final movie directed by Lou Adler, previously known for being the founder of A & M Records (he's the A), managing Carole King in the 1970s, and producing *Monterey Pop* (1969) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Its script was penned by Nancy Dowd (under the pseudonym of Rob Morton), writer of well-known and lauded films such as *Coming Home* (1978) and *Swing Shift* (1984). The film stars Diane Lane, who was still basking in the attention from *A Little Romance* (1978) and a 1979 *Time* magazine cover

proclaiming the arrival of “Hollywood’s Whiz Kids”; Laura Dern, quickly becoming a star of her own in small roles in teen films; and Christine Lahti, known now for her Emmy-award winning work on *Chicago Hope* (1994-2000). Originally released in test markets in Seattle and Denver in 1982, the film was shelved by Paramount until 1985, when it was released in limited runs in New York and Los Angeles; perhaps because of this, *The Fabulous Stains* has never been officially released on video, laserdisc, or DVD in this country.<sup>88</sup> What I find fascinating about this film is that, despite the fact that a veteran of the music business, the youth culture industry, and long-running subcultural “happenings” was behind the lens, and a major company was bankrolling it, the film still manages to remain an obscurity. For example, in contemporary interviews with Lane and Dern, the film goes unmentioned.<sup>89</sup> And in Timothy Shary’s exhaustive dissertation on the teen film genre, *The Fabulous Stains* warrants a mention only in its appendix as an “obscure delinquency movie” (778).

Despite this lack of critical attention, the film is remembered fondly by those who saw it first on late-night cable. The film occasionally turns up for sale on Internet auction sites (this is where I obtained my copy, apparently copied from laserdisc) or available through bootleg video distribution houses (one such catalog describes it as a “punk rock black comedy” [*Video 23*]). Because members of punk rock / new wave bands the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Tubes play bit parts or actually perform in the film, third- or fourth- generation copies of it regularly make the rounds on Internet fan sites and punk rock record stores. In *Retro Hell*, the bible of pop cultural life in the 1970s and 1980s edited by folks from *Ben Is Dead* (a zine praised by Kearney for being a prime site showcasing girls’ cultural production), *The Fabulous Stains* is recalled as being a favorite

film broadcast on Los Angeles' now-defunct Z Channel (252). And, most notably, a documentary about the making of the film circulated around film festivals in 2001. Directed by Sarah Jacobson and Sam Green, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains: Behind the Movie*, tells the tangled tale of this cult film's production, and features interviews with cast, crew, and fans, including Courtney Love, mainstream America's face of Riot Grrrl. The film *is* remembered these days, but only among groups or publications that exist outside of mainstream media outlets.

The film's mainstream pedigree, coupled with its lack of promotion and/or attention, didn't seem in the end to matter much considering the ways it is now being seen today. This points to the fact that it was actually embraced by precisely the subcultural groups at which Adler aimed it. This fact is further underlined by its plot, which shows the ways in which the products of the mass media can be used for productive, even political, ends by subcultural groups. I'm reading this proto-Riot Grrrl film as politically progressive, just as the narrative itself shows how the fans of a proto-Riot Grrrl band read a political meaning into this band. The film critiques popular culture's way of creating political meaning in two ways: through its depiction of the popular music industry, and in its representation of the ways in which both this music industry and television can co-opt a subcultural group for its own ends.

*The Fabulous Stains* is about three young women from a blue-collar Pennsylvania town—sisters Corinne and Tracy Burns, and their cousin Jessica McNeil—whose band, the Stains, enjoys a meteoric success after Corinne's television interview. Getting a lucky opening gig for the Looters (a punk band) and the Metal Corpses (a glammy metal band), the Stains tour what appears to be a succession of dives in the coal regions of

Pennsylvania, eventually assuming opening-act status after the guitarist from the Corpses overdoses, and gradually eclipsing even the popularity of the Looters. As the bands play larger and larger venues, the Stains amass a following of young girls who are so taken with Corinne's confrontational attitude and appearance that they begin acting and dressing like her; meanwhile, the Looters' unscrupulous manager begins marketing the Stains. At their biggest concert, and with their popularity and visibility at its height, the Stains' audience turns on them, after the disgruntled singer of the Looters claims (falsely) that they are money-grabbing charlatans. Left alone in a parking lot after a disastrous television interview, and with her band potentially broken up, Corinne envisions a future of gold records and magazine covers for them, along with multitudes of young women following her band's lead and acting out their own pro-girl dreams.

The music world represented in *The Fabulous Stains* is irrefutably male. Corinne asks Billy, singer of the Looters, at the end of the film, what options does she have left now that her band doesn't exist anymore: can she be his groupie, his guitar tuner, or his "old lady?" Throughout the film, we see that the women who follow the Looters and the Corpses fall into one of these three roles. At the Looters / Corpses gig at which Corinne, Tracy, and Jessica get their engagement to open for the bands, the role of women is to either be silent and look pretty or to open their mouths and risk being mocked. Corinne (who remains largely silent throughout this sequence) sneers and rolls her eyes at a pregnant, drugged-out woman rambling about her eating habits in the bathroom. Later, when the Corpses are introducing a song, the audience is stonily quiet, except for one woman who hoots approval at every word out of Lou Corpse's (the singer's) mouth and shimmies in the audience, seemingly for his approval. When Corinne wanders backstage

to the grimy dressing room to talk to Billy, after spending their set smiling in awe at their song, “Join the Professionals,” Billy has a woman under one of his arms and Lou has the hooting woman from earlier under his own arm. Billy ignores Corrine when she inquires seriously about being in a band or even auditioning for him. In this world, Corinne is made to feel ridiculous because she breaks free of her expected role as a non-questioning, sexualized (and thus non-threatening) female presence at the gig.

What’s interesting about this short sequence is that it seems to place both the punk band and the “dinosaur rock” band in the same relationship to women. I’d argue that, because the film casts ex-members of the Clash (Paul Simonon) and the Sex Pistols (Steve Jones and Paul Cook) as members of the Looters, the intended audience for the film is expected to side with them, as against the glam rock dinosaurs.<sup>90</sup> Combined with this are reminders that the Corpses are a band whose time has come and gone and who seem to be riding a nostalgia train; the film seems to elevate the Looters to a favored position in our eyes. It’s hard not to listen to Lou Corpse’s ridiculous stoned gibberish about the “good old days” as a satire on the washed-up, middle-aged rocker trying desperately to make one last run at fame. Although there are many examples of his reminiscing, two stand out in that they make him (and the genre of music he represents) look ridiculous because of his treatment of women.

First of all, he arrives at his tour bus in the Stains’ town in a Cadillac that appears to be driven by the hooting woman from the club. He steps out of the car holding a child with a bush of curly black hair, much like his own, and says goodbye to the woman at the wheel before boarding the bus. On the bus, he mumbles aimlessly about the woman and the kid. We’re led to believe from this brief monologue that he’s sired children in every

town he's ever visited as a member of the Corpses. His guitarist who overdoses, we're told, has survived multiple paternity suits, and is shown in a snapshot with his 5 multiracial children. Secondly, while applying his (David Bowie-influenced?) lightning-bolt makeup in the show that night, he talks about his song "Princess" to someone off-camera. He describes it as a song about expressing love beyond the use of words, and casually mentions that he sometimes has to hit his old lady because he loves her so much. And, he adds, "Some women are into that." So groupies become the old ladies of horny rockers, and the mommies of their kiddies, and domestic violence is something that these old ladies enjoy.

Compared to the Corpses, then, the Looters can't help but look good, right? Well, in his own way, Billy from the Looters could be seen as enjoying the same rock male privileges.<sup>91</sup> Apparently because he's tired of sleeping in the bus with his bandmates, he rents a room in a hotel and eventually sleeps with the housecleaning woman who's making the beds. At one point, she coos, "That's the biggest radio I've ever seen," when Billy stomps into the room, reasserting his phallic pride. Billy also convinces Corinne to join him in a hotel room, in what sounds like the most narratively contrived (and unconvincing) set of pick-up lines ever committed to celluloid. Considering what happens to them after their steamy shower scene (which I'll discuss later), the scene itself seems like an exploitative move on the part of the filmmakers, an excuse to shoehorn in a sexy coupling where none really makes sense. He compliments her on her hair; tells her that he could have any girl he wants on the tour (her answer? "Name one!"); and doles out advice like "don't be a gimmick," advice she wanted when she first approached him in his dressing room at the beginning of the tour.

Even the non-musicians in the world of music in *The Fabulous Stains* have a problematic relationship to women. I'll look later at the Stains' second manager, when I talk about the media's co-optation of the Stains' images. But, for the time being, Lawnboy, their Rastafarian tour manager / bus driver, presents an interesting counter-example of a possibly sympathetic male in the music world.<sup>92</sup> He, after all, gives the Stains' their first gig, recognizing Corinne from her recent television appearance. He talks about the reason why he's doing the tour—to get his friend out of jail—and what a challenge America provides for those without money, mentioning the story of the rich man on the mountain who says, “money in my pocket and I still can't find love.” In a rare moment of bonding across race in teen films, Corinne replies, “I know a lot of poor people who feel the same way.” While the film seems to posit a cultural connection between this black man and this white girl along economic lines—living in a “dead” industrial town makes Corinne painfully aware of her disenfranchised class and gender position—the potential for further bonding is actually undercut earlier, when the film brings up the relationship between the performer and her handlers. Lawnboy, after all, is the one who gives the Stains their tight black leather catsuits.

Because the film shows both the dinosaur rockers and the punks as having a similar relationship to women, and, in its support system, presents men who are more interested in the image of women than their musical abilities, we can ask: what alternative space is there for women in the world of music in this film? Is it true what Billy says, that “Girls can't be rock and rollers?” While the film does seem to present punk rock as a welcome subcultural alternative to glam rock, the fact remains that the man-centered politics of both are indistinguishable from each other. Where can young

women maneuver within this punk rock subculture? What the film shows of the Stains' negotiations within this male subculture, is where the Stains themselves come across as proto- Riot Grrrls.

The film's title itself could be a piss-take on the title of a Rolling Stones concert film called *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rolling Stones* (1973). This concept of renaming, of reclaiming or clearing for oneself a space within this male (and masculinist) world of popular music, as we've seen, is a tactic used by Riot Grrrl. Renaming appears from the beginning of the film, when Corinne tells her television interviewer that she's not Corinne Burns anymore. She's renamed herself Third-Degree Burns and tells her interviewer that she's the lead singer and manager of a band called the Stains (a name that, to me, connects to Riot Grrrl's recasting of the feminine); Tracy plays lead guitar as Dee Pleated, and Jessica's stage name as bassist is Dizzy Heights. From this interview, it seems as if the Stains don't really exist, other than as a half-formed idea in Corinne's mind. In fact, when the girls later drag their equipment to the waiting tour van, we hear that they've never had a show, and in fact, they've only had a few practices, although they were "long ones." We'll see another example of this at the end of the film, but at this early stage of her band's development, Corinne is strong enough to clear an imaginative space for a band who at this point has nothing except a few punk-rock names, a trunkful of equipment, and a will to play.

Their first appearance on stage, after we've seen the Looters and the Metal Corpses the previous night, is illustrative of the ways in which these girls make their own space on the stage. Most obviously, they're breaking the rubric of voice-guitar-bass-drums that both of the male bands subscribe to. And where the male bands'

performances are theatrical (particularly the Corpses, who arrive on stage back-lit and costumed – although Billy himself engages in some faux-angry posing with the microphone), the Stains stand relatively rigid, paying more attention to playing their instruments or singing than to projecting an image for their audience. In a way, their song reveals the artifice behind the act of performing on a stage, with Corinne’s cueing her bandmates and her attendant laugh at the feedback that erupts when Tracy stands too close to her microphone, and Jessica’s bassline that lags slightly behind the guitar.<sup>93</sup> These elements work in counter-distinction to the male bands’ “polished” performances, making the Stains seem jangly, trebly, and unformed with their song, “Waste of Time,” presumably written as Corinne’s response to living in a working-class town.

This first performance seems as unselfconscious as an earlier scene in which Corinne’s aunt and her friend, sitting at a kitchen table and leafing through a high-school yearbook, croon the Shirelles’ “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” to each other. If we look at these two instances of women singing in the film as informing each other, we could argue that what the Stains are doing is taking this private space of women singing for each others’ benefit and enjoyment into a public arena. If we can see, as Kearney does, Riot Grrrls’ attempting to move the bedroom culture out of the bedroom, this is certainly what happens in the film, as it appears from their first gig that the Stains are playing more for their own benefit than for anyone’s in the audience, and putting the emphasis on the fact that they are playing, rather than how technically brilliant they are. As with Riot Grrrl, their confidence comes as a consequence of their being an all-girl group.

Before I discuss the ways in which young women start following the example of the Stains – another instance in the film that parallels Riot Grrrl’s relationship to

mainstream media outlets – I want to talk about one other move of appropriation that the Stains make in the film that goes hand-in-hand with their breaking of the male bands’ performative ethos. Before showering with Billy, Corinne asks him what his song “Join the Professionals” is all about.<sup>94</sup> He replies that it’s about the draft, and she asks him to write down the words, which include the lines:

Yeah, I wanna see the world for free, / But I don’t like the things you see. /  
Hup-Two-Three-Four really ain’t my style. . . .  
Do they really have the say / Of what goes on with you each day? . . .  
Who knows what you’re gonna see? / Who knows when your turn will be? . . .  
Join the Professionals! / Be a Professional!

At an appearance at a cultural festival in a shopping mall the next day, the Stains perform this song to their fans, much to the disbelief and shock of the Looters. We could assume that Corinne’s sole reason for opening up to Billy in the hotel room (she even removes her makeup in front of him) was to steal his song away from him. However, this point doesn’t completely explain the reason for their scene in the shower: wouldn’t she be able to suss out what he was singing after hearing this song every night of the tour? At any rate, what’s important here is that, by stealing the song away from Billy, Corinne and the Stains have recast the song in a different register.

As Billy has it, “Join the Professionals” is a male fantasy of resisting England’s National Service. But this fantasy comes across as an adolescent one, in that it’s couched in terms of the popular television show *The Professionals* (1977-1983), which was about a special government body that operated outside of any governmental controls. While decrying National Service, the song romanticizes opposition to it, and makes this opposition to a totalitarian “democratic” State a legitimate ideology, without proposing an alternative to service. I see hopelessness, too, in the “who knows” above; for the

addressee of the song, whether or not one gets chosen to serve overseas and fight Communists is something that's entirely up to fate to decide. In fact, considering the ironic tone of the song, it's difficult to decide whether or not the speaker is in fact completely against the draft. And furthermore, claiming that marching doesn't match with one's own personal style turns the terms of opposition to the draft into a matter of personal choice, something that many working-class young men in Britain didn't have, or, more importantly, couldn't exercise. This reduction of the issue is problematic, in that it makes the song itself seem like a too-sanguine solution to a complex (inter)national issue.<sup>95</sup> Billy's own actions during the song further trivialize it: his pseudo-angry wielding of the microphone stand and grimacing during its guitar solo are so calculated that when Corinne does something similar when the Stains later perform the song, he notices it as an imitation of himself.<sup>96</sup>

J. Hoberman, one reviewer of the film, suggests that what the Stains do with the song itself is turn it into a do-it-yourself exhortation to their fans (46). I'm not sure if Hoberman would go so far as to claim this, I would argue that the song's lyrics relate directly to the Stains' trajectory in the film. This is one obvious example of the way in which the film represents the Stains' enactment of the Riot Grrrl tactic of taking their own personal situation and making a political statement out of it. The opening lines above could be Corinne telling her own story; after all, at one point, she cries that she wants to get out of the dump of a town in which she's living. Once there, however, she and her band become disillusioned by the fickleness of the media, and the way that friends one day become enemies the next. The "they" mentioned above that "have the say / Of what goes on with you each day" finds a direct parallel with what Corinne says

to the Stains' first audience after their first performance: "These guys have such big plans for the world, but they don't include us." Finally, the line "who knows when your turn will be," while not less hopeless than when the Looters use it, in the Stains' context actually seems to promise a future of recognition for the young women listening in the audience. As Corinne says in voice-over at the end of the film, "I was once like you: a nothing. But I didn't give up! And you shouldn't either!"

As I've mentioned, this tactic of reappropriation, of giving elements of mass culture new meanings is common to the Riot Grrrl subculture. What makes Riot Grrrl's use of this different from punk rock's use, though, is this double remove from the mainstream that they're accomplishing. To explain this double remove in terms of *The Fabulous Stains*, what the band is doing is taking the anti-mainstream, anti-patriarchal ideology inherent in the Looters' song, and making their own meanings out of it. Their version remains critical of the patriarchy, but it also comes across as more hopeful and less ironic. At the same time, their version (especially as performed live) reveals the Looters as possibly complicit in replicating mainstream ideologies, particularly in the way that Billy takes an aggressive physical stance while supposedly opposing warlike ideologies.

Appropriation is only one progressive move that the Stains make within their subculture. Another that I want to turn to now is the band's specifically girl-centered message, a message that to me has more explicit parallels with Riot Grrrl. I'll begin here by talking about the intersections of Riot Grrrl-esque politics and music, and end with a discussion of the ways in which the band (and, indeed, their politics) are constantly media-ted and equivocated about within the film.

At their first show, after Jessica has cut short their song “Waste of Time” by a misplaced bass note, she and Tracy slink offstage, while Corinne is left alone center stage wearing her red beret and greenish trench coat. Corinne removes her beret in a quick succession of shots that repeats her action from different angles. One could argue that the cinematic treatment of Corinne here could be to sensationalize and eroticize, since these rapid shots look at times like a shampoo commercial where a model flings her hair around for no reason other than to demonstrate a particular product’s “bounce” or “shine,” to thus put the young woman’s hair (and, by extension, her body) on display. It’s interesting to note here that the film has been lumped by fans under the label “punksploitation,” since it often comes close to exploiting the female body as an object of male gaze. As I’ll show, however, this reading is too simplistic.<sup>97</sup>

Corinne has dyed her hair black, with a white stripe down the center of her head. After she reveals this to her audience, we get a succession of close-up reaction shots of the women (alone, or as men’s partners) in the audience, interrupted by a long shot of Billy and one of the Looters at the bar, where Billy says, “Tell you what . . . I like her hair.” Despite this lone male intrusion into the scene, this scene is filmed as if it is played out between Corinne and the women in the audience, who all touch their hair in various ways, as if imagining themselves in Corinne’s place. One woman in the audience who appears at all the subsequent appearances of the Stains, looks in complete awe at Corinne, and is later shot in this sequence framed between her legs. Corinne then addresses a woman near the front of the stage combing her hair with this remarkable speech:

You! Hello? You don’t fool me for a minute. I know all about you. You came here tonight thinking you’d see some cute and wonderful rock star and you hope maybe he’d take one look at you from up on that stage and he’d fall in love

with you just like that. Then your savior could take you out of this dump of town you live in. You could be different from all the other girls. Suckers! Suckers! Suckers! Suckers! Be yourselves. These guys laugh at you. They've got such big plans for the world, but they don't include us. So what does that make you? Just another girl lining up to die!

Most obviously, this speech attacks both the glam rock and the punk rock scenes. Corinne connects the power that male musicians have in the world (their big plans, their mobility, their "star" power) with the fact that theirs is an all-boys club, where women enter only as objects to be taken away from their humdrum lives, or excluded entirely. Despite what she claims later in the film, the alternative Corinne sets out for these women is slow death.

This speech and the sequence in which it's contained shows how confrontational and uncompromising Corinne is. She ultimately breaks down the barrier between audience and performer as she addresses the woman combing her hair; as we later discover, this tactic enables her to speak to and reach her audience with her feminist sentiments. As the awe-struck young woman mentioned above explains later: "She said things I've always wanted to say."

The partner of the woman Corinne addresses throws his drink at her. The audience hoots as she walks to the back of the stage, tosses off her coat, and stomps back to the front of the stage, wearing a red, translucent blouse, a pair of black panties, and black pantyhose. She says, "I'm perfect! But nobody in this shithole gets me 'cause I don't put out!" before storming off stage, her bandmates following meekly behind. In the film, this first performance is important because it's the only one that isn't media-ted (or co-opted) through television. Therefore, it could be seen as the purest distillation of the Stains' pro-girl proto-Riot Grrrl stance. Being interviewed for television later that night,

Corinne explains her position, “It means don’t get screwed, don’t be a jerk, don’t get had.” In this explanation, she’s connecting the specifically sexual choice of not “putting out” or “getting screwed” with a more general message of not being taken advantage of, whether actively (*being a jerk*) or passively (*getting had*).

The next club appearance of the Stains, while it shows that their following is growing among young women, is also notable in that there are television cameras and a television reporter present. When Corinne says, “We’re the Stains and we don’t put out!” we get an interesting contrast to their previous appearance on stage. Rather than getting close-ups of women in the audience, we get a number of inserts of men hollering, whistling, and clapping at the young, barely-clad woman on stage. This reminds us, perhaps, that, by wearing her underwear for others to see, Corinne is walking a fine line between eroticizing herself and subverting that eroticization by making it an obvious self-conscious choice. As mentioned above, this tactic is used by Riot Grrrl in the ways they play with notions of what is “acceptable” clothing for young women to be wearing. But, as with the way the televisual media later compromises, elides, and depoliticizes the Stains’ feminist impact and their meanings for their audience, it is interesting that the presence of the cameras is equated with the pleasure that men get out of cheering at Corinne. While I’m reading what follows the inserts of the men as more progressive, it’s telling that, already, the media and the mass audience is equated with patriarchal power and privilege.

What follows the inserts is a medium shot of six or seven young women with two-tone hair at a table close to the stage who all jump on their chairs and yell “Don’t put out!” and “This is a big deal!” as they take their coats off, revealing see-through blouses

and panties. By doing this, the film wants to validate the effect that the band is having on its female audiences. In a way, the fact that these young women are able to display themselves as their idols do without fear of getting molested, and challenging the (eroticizing) male gaze, points to the efficacy of what the Stains are doing. The film, too, makes the men and their reactions seem utterly superfluous to the relationship that Corinne and her fans have. At a later show, in what looks like a mall, the audience is made up almost entirely of young women “Skunks” of different ages and sizes dressed like the Stains, whose “don’t put out” chant is deafening in response to Corinne’s questions, “What’s so wonderful about getting old?” and “What’s so wonderful about getting married?” We find out from a news broadcast about the Stains that the influence of the band extends beyond the concert hall; it looks as if their followers dress like them in daily life. Near the end of the film, in fact, Billy is knocked aside by a pair of Skunks, who tell him, “Watch where you’re going, you old fart!” as he enters a building. This is McRobbie’s all-girl subculture member, unafraid and bursting with confidence in herself and in the safety of her group of friends. Unmedia-ated examples like these, where young girls have taken the pro-girl, pro-body, anti-domesticity stance of the Stains to heart and thrown it up into the faces of the patriarchy, are, unfortunately, rare in the film. This, again, offers a shining parallel with certain critical takes on Riot Grrrl, in that it seems as if the film wants to say that the Stains’ followers (the proto-Riot Grrrls) are only listening and applying what they hear within the confines of a music venue.

Up to now, I’ve been talking largely about the ways in which *The Fabulous Stains*, predominantly through musical and fashion codes, illustrates the ways in which proto-Riot Grrrl’s feminist cultural production might have an effect on a larger audience.

If the film merely followed the band around, in pseudo-documentary fashion (as it indeed sometimes does), and showed us this effect on its audience, then I'd be finished.

However, there's another element of the narrative that breaks with the ways I've been comparing it to Riot Grrrl thus far. Since Riot Grrrl has never had coverage in the mainstream media (whether it was because of its self-imposed press blackout, or whether this, as some feminist cultural critics have mentioned, is because of the desire to remain staunchly independent of mainstream media outlets, even to their own detriment), the film stops being a Riot Grrrl precursor as the band goes mainstream. However, *The Fabulous Stains* is fascinating in the ways in which it highlights the unstable relationship the mainstream media has to feminist ideas. This makes the film important, as it treats something Riot Grrrl culture skirted or ignored, for the most part.

Riot Grrrl's critics were constantly on the fence about its efficacy as a third-wave feminist discourse. While young women engaged in creating their own culture remain one of the crucial legacies of Riot Grrrl, some critics were skeptical about how this cultural production would actually work when taken out of its punk rock subcultural context and applied to the mainstream – or public – culture. If Riot Grrrl – or something like it, as shown in the film – entered the mainstream, would it become empty Girl Power? In other words, would something get lost in the cultural transition / translation? Would its progressive tendencies be erased when it entered the “real” world? *The Fabulous Stains* suggests what might have happened (or still could, fingers crossed), with Riot Grrrl.

First, the film reminds us that it is itself a product of the media. Its narrative framework constantly places us in a mass media-tinged world. It tells us it is nearly

impossible to escape the effects of the mass media. An example of this occurs in the film's pre-credit sequence. A male newscaster sits in a chair, as the camera zooms closer to him. He introduces Corinne to his home audience and tells us she was first seen on "The Town that Would Not Die," an episode of one of his network's programs. We see footage of Corinne, after being fired from her fry chef job, throwing off her smock and shouting, "this town died years ago." The newscaster tells us that the response to her appearance was so great that the network sent a crew back to interview her. With the exception of one extremely high-angle shot in this sequence, all of the introductory material in the film could be what we, as this particular newscaster's television audience, could be watching. Notably, this high-angle shot appears with the film's title superimposed on a bird's-eye view of the television studio where the newscaster sits, perhaps drawing attention to the fact that we are watching a media-ted (cinematic) version of a television show.

The interview with Corinne, which takes place as the credits appear, is conducted in almost one extended take, as her face takes up the left half of the frame, and she looks off ahead of her and to the right at the unseen interviewer. What's interesting about this sequence is that it foregrounds the use of the voice-over as one powerful tool of television. The male voice of the interviewer attempts to control the interview by asking Corinne questions about her background and her prospects for survival as a teenager in a town already proclaimed dead by the media.

Much of what she mentions in this interview is recycled, in different forms, throughout her appearances in concert with her band. She already promotes a worldview that is pro-youth (when asked about growing older, she asks, "older?"); media-skeptical

(the interviewer continually asks questions long after Corinne has decided she's not going to answer any more; she tells him, "If you keep talking to yourself like that, you're going to get fired"); and nihilistic (when reminded that her mother died of lung cancer, she pops multiple cigarettes into her mouth). She's also savvy enough to reclaim the media's colonizing influence on her. As mentioned above, she renames herself, her sister, and her cousin. Cinematically, her voice challenges the television camera's probing eye and the interviewer's voice. As she mentions her sister and her cousin, the scene first cuts to Tracy sitting on the couch and then to Jessica lying on the floor. Corinne's voice seems to refocus the film camera. By this move at the end of the interview, Corinne wields both the power of the gaze (in this case, both cinematic and televisual) and the power of naming.<sup>98</sup>

Corinne's second television interview occurs after the Stains' show at which the guitarist from the Metal Corpses dies. This interview is framed as a part of his combination death report / career retrospective, which is moderated by newscaster Alicia Meeker. Her relationship to Corinne and the Stains is one we're never quite sure of as the movie progresses. It's an odd choice for the filmmakers to have a female newscaster follow the band around, especially since she seems to be more interested in her own career than in presenting the band objectively. In this way, she seems more akin to 1980s filmic "career women" than to the young women in this film, and she becomes a potentially third-wave postfeminist figure in the film, as opposed to Corinne's third-wave progressive feminist figure.<sup>99</sup> At any rate, the first interview with Corinne typifies what Alicia, as a representative of the media, will do with the Stains.

Alicia introduces Corinne at the tail end of her story on the guitarist.<sup>100</sup> And, as with Corinne's interview in the beginning of the film, all of the shots (except Tracy's and Corinne's reaction shot to the latter's lie about being involved with the guitarist) could come directly from the actual television report. At one point in the report, Alicia tells Corinne – and, in what's probably a blatant broach of television ethics, her audience at home – that her show has “the largest audience in the tri-state area” and that she gets “a lot of [her] stuff on network.” This is our first indication that Alicia could be using the bands' notoriety for her own professional ends. Indeed, later in the film, in a report on the young women dressing like Corinne and, presumably, following her around the area, she plugs her own show as she wonders aloud if the young women saw the Stains on her show. At the end of the film, she foregoes any idea of forging a bond with Corinne as she's left her own station to do national network news in Washington, D.C.

Counterposed with Alicia's obvious careerism is her seeming sympathy with Corinne. I use the word “seeming,” because in this early interview with her, Alicia contradicts herself. When Corinne tells her that she “won't put out,” Alicia reacts in (mock?) outrage, by saying, “In that outfit? It doesn't make sense to wear a see-through blouse and no bra and say ‘I don't put out.’” But at the same time, back in the newsroom with her uptight co-anchor Stu, she claims that she finds Corinne very elegant, and not at all “weird,” as Stu sees her. So already, we have no idea how to read her reactions to Corinne—does she act more as an “objective” journalist, an outraged elder, a fellow strong female, or some combination of the three? This example is also interesting, however, in the way that it almost reverses or recasts the power of the gaze that Corinne claimed earlier. In Corinne's first interview, she directs the camera's gaze away from her

and toward her two band mates. As mentioned above, this tactic empowers Corinne in the way that it allows her the power of the gaze and the power of renaming her friends. But in this television report with Alicia, the camera moves away from her; the effect here is to disempower her.

After Alicia asks Corinne about her revealing outfit, Corinne tells her, “That’s not what it means. It means ‘don’t get screwed, don’t be a jerk, don’t put out’.” At this point in the film, the scene cuts back to a shot of the two newscasters looking at the footage of Corinne delivering these lines on their monitors. In other words, we can hear Corinne, but we can’t see her. This insert, over which her voice can be heard, is telling: instead of looking at the camera filming them, Alicia and Stu look away and down at their monitors, presumably at footage of her. Here, they are subjecting Corinne to their own gaze at the same time that their cameras focus their gaze on her. The fact that they’re looking literally *down* on her is no accident here. Earlier, Corinne’s media-*ted* voiceover demonstrated her power in the narrative; her voiceover here, however, shows how equivocal her power is in the mainstream media. Granted, most of the young women who take the Stains’ message to heart wouldn’t have heard her without this television exposure. But we can ask, what cost to her and her message does this exposure exact? And, what would this mean for Riot Grrrl if it moved out of its subculture within a subculture to become a more mainstream force?

The film itself reveals that there are no clear answers to these questions; any answers might be complicated and involve shifting power and negotiation among subcultural and mainstream cultural groups. On a later television report on the Stains,

Alicia and Stu's banter begins opening up possible ways of coming to terms with what the film might ultimately be saying about media exposure:

Stu: They [young women followers of the Stains] see something on the media and they've got to do the same thing . . .

Alicia: You're on the box every night for an hour and I don't see anyone trying to be like you!

Stu: I'm talking about the power television has to create . . .

Alicia: Those girls created themselves!

Stu: Well, as far as I can see it, what it really amounts to is some girl dropouts who are using the media . . .

Alicia: I'm not reporting about a band as much as I am a very personal appeal for young women to resist.

Stu: Resist what?

Alicia: Life as we know it!

Despite the fact that it seems like Stu and Alicia are arguing two different points here—Stu wants to point out that the media has all the power here, while Alicia argues that the media has nothing to do with it, even going so far as to deny the fact that she's reporting on a band—the issue isn't really as cut-and-dried as they try to present it. In other words, Corinne, Tracy, and Jessica might have created themselves, but their creation and fruition is now being broadcast and mediated.<sup>101</sup> In *The Fabulous Stains*, the empowerment of most young women is made to seem unthinkable without the presence of the mass media.

However, within the reports on the Stains—and their Skunk followers—are contained the seeds of the movement's possible demise, at least as a viable force for social change. As Alicia mentions in the dialogue above, she really isn't reporting on the Stains. In a typically televisually easy and self-consciously “deep” news special on the followers of the band, Alicia makes a case within the narrative that the Stains' following is in fact something more than a simple fad.<sup>102</sup> While we see arty black-and-white still photographs of Skunks posing tough, and documentary footage of young women in

supermarkets and parking lots, Alicia's voiceover tells us that these young women are "not content to let old age bring them the specious wisdom of despair," and "in their rebellion they have clearly decided that female existence should not be a rush to the grave – or worse, to the supermarket," and that "none of their beauty should be wasted or pass unnoticed." Despite its ridiculous claims (whoever said that female existence was a rush to the grave and that dying was less bad than going to the supermarket? And what does "the specious wisdom of despair" have to do with anything?), this report posits that followers of the Stains could be seen as a feminist force for change. However, as with one criticism of Riot Grrrl, this force is portrayed as self-contained, rather than reaching beyond the confines of fans of the band and its original punk club followers. Alicia's words above, I think, lead us to make this conclusion. She doesn't mention anything beyond the rebellion of using their "beauty" to be appreciated. In this way, her report comes across as mildly patronizing; she's telling her viewers that, despite their unconventional appearance, these are beautiful young women.

Of course, there's an alternate way of reading this report; it is contained in the way the young women in the film read Corinne's "Don't Put Out" manifesto as something positive. Just as that manifesto was broadcast on television, and that that broadcast widened the Stains' appeal, this report could very well have done the same thing. And, given the massive crowds at the concert following this report, it's clear that this report, for better or for worse, has exposed the Stains to an even wider audience. But here's where the film seemingly reverses its stance on media representations of the band, since it's at this concert that Corinne's fans turn on her.

The Stains watch this, their final news report, with their new manager (Lawnboy being conveniently dropped by the narrative as the band gets more and more popular) through a shop window, on a bank of televisions. In terms of the film's take on media, this is an important framing device. First of all, the bank of televisions reminds us of the omnipresence of the media; as their manager mentions, they look "better on the screen" that they do on-stage. As if taking a cue from Alicia's mention of beauty, at the band's next show he's shown selling official Stains merchandise: photos suitable for framing or autographing, red blouses, black hair dye, and small stuffed skunks. If we're going to see Alicia's news report as ostensibly altruistic (and not merely, as Billy says of an earlier report, "exploitation"), then the new manager's capitalistic tendencies are anything but. He's reduced the Stains to a collection of consumer goods. A collection that emphasizes appearance over social meaning, and, in turn, re-feminizes (by means of the blouses and hair dye) and infantilizes (by means of the stuffed animal, of which one girl squeals, "How cute!") the band's followers. In fact, when he later decides to manage a new all-girl group—made up of two cousins (Tracy and Jessica?) and called "the Smears"—he tells someone that they're "darling." Until they get on-stage that is, at which point they become "killers." So the "anthropological" report on the Stains precedes a scene showing their marketing and becoming a recognizable and branded entity.

This development near the end of the film highlights the precarious position in which Riot Grrrl found itself: risk mainstream exposure and the accompanying dilution of its ideals, or remain within subcultural status in the punk rock community. However, the film's concluding sequences complicate things even further, and gives some hope that the former scenario might not be the case if Riot Grrrl moved into the mainstream. At their

final show as a band, Billy later tells an audience composed mostly of fans of the Stains that their hero is cheating them. He claims, falsely, that all the money made from their merchandise is going directly to Corinne's pocket.<sup>103</sup> The audience turns, en masse, yelling at Corinne and her band, and clobbers her with a tub of black hair dye. To add insult to injury, she's later interviewed by Stu on a program about manipulation and fads, where she attempts to reclaim her voice, only to be interrupted by him again and again. He tells her that she's encouraging young women to put themselves at the mercy of rapists by dressing the way she does, and, when she replies, calling him an old pervert, he ignores her. Later, he drowns out her statement, "I think every citizen should be given an electric guitar for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday," by telling her that they're out of time for that day's show.<sup>104</sup>

The sequence at the Stains' final show could be read as Corinne's rejection by her subculture, while her interview could be read as her rejection by the mainstream. Having said this, though, her proclamation, coming as it does at the point the film marks as the end of her career as a mainstream media force, is remarkable in a number of ways. First of all, it shows us a new side of Corinne, one that isn't completely explained away by her largely nihilistic or self-destructive behavior in the rest of the film. In other words, she shows she knows exactly what she's doing and is totally aware that what she says has an effect on the young women who listen to her music or see her on the television. Connected to this, her statement reveals that Corinne has explicitly connected young women and music as a source of political change. The gendering of "citizen" with the pronoun "her" promises that Corinne's revolution can happen among young women, armed with guitars and amplifiers, across the nation. In the parking lot outside of the

television studio, her vision is made real, as she sees two girls on a motorcycle driving into the lot, guitar slung on one of their backs, and “Waste of Time” blaring on a radio. She follows them with her eyes and sees fifty or more Skunks in the lot, singing along with her song. “Waste of Time” ends, and the DJ announces another Stains’ song, “The Professionals,” saying, “Go for your guns, girls!” Corinne tosses her head back to laugh and the shot freezes on her, before dissolving into a matched still shot of her in a music video performing “The Professionals” with Tracy and Jessica.

Despite their downfall at the hands of the mass media, it appears as if the Stains live on, both as a viable social force (the girls in the parking lot), *and* as a marketable commodity (their music video, which is interspersed with shots of magazine covers and gold records). However, the film finally appears to present this optimistic conclusion as part of Corinne’s daydream. Three pieces of filmic evidence bear this reading out. First, the final shots of the film are suffused with a soft and hazy end-of-summer glow, as if the cinematographer was being too liberal with the Vaseline on the lens, not to mention too romantic, what with the placement of the girls in the parking lot in front of the sun going down on the horizon. Second, the radio station might be the one Corinne imagines earlier in the film, one that will play punk or alternative music all the time, especially her then-unknown “number one rock & roll group.” And third, her line about giving citizens their own electric guitars is actualized by a guitar on the back of one of the motorcycle girls, as if Corinne has willed it and them to be there. If the section is read as Corinne’s utopian daydream, however, the music video that ends the film, and Corinne’s line right before it, are incredible in the ways that they open up, rather than close down, thinking about what

the film might be attempting to say about the efficacy of girls' cultural production on real-world existence.<sup>105</sup>

Corinne's last lines in the film delivered in voice-over (itself a crucial filmic technique for controlling the narrative, as we've seen) connect her role as a musician with her fans. She says, "I was once like you: a nothing. But I didn't give up, and you shouldn't either. You made me what I am!" Most obviously, this line recalls the claim in the Stains' version of "The Professionals," in that Corinne is calling for her followers to do it themselves, because their time could be now. More specifically, though, when read in tandem with her line about giving girls guitars, we can see that she is conscious of her role as one of being part of a community of girls, and in shaping young girls' lives. And rather than resting on her laurels, she's asking girls to act. After all, she's claiming that if the sisterhood helped create her, then the sisterhood can create another one like her, or that all young women can be like her, which is a potentially more radical claim. If the media can "kill" a feminist subculture by over-exposure and misreading it, it also might help a mainstream feminist movement to grow out of the ashes, the film seems to suggest.

However, this reading of the ending of the narrative of Corinne and the Stains might come across as too sanguine, especially considering the music video that *actually* ends the film, which is filled with sexualized images of the three playing their guitars and singing in a variety of outfits on a number of sets. Gone are the shock-tactic outfits and hair and fuck-you stage personae, and in their place are typically feminine makeup (blush, eye shadow, dark lipstick shown in close-up), tight t-shirts, and off-screen wind machines to give their hair the right amount of blow-dried body. Gone, too, are the

contexts of dirty dives, hooting male patrons, and cheering female fans; they've been replaced by a makeshift stage in the Hollywood Hills, "girlish" horseplay by the pool (everybody gets to swim with their clothes on!), and rhythmic dancing in army fatigues, where the Stains appear as WACS and grunts.<sup>106</sup>

Although, as we've come to expect with the film, there are two facets of the music video that lend themselves to a more positive third-wave feminist reading. First of all, we get footage from World War II-era films of female soldiers intercut with footage of the Stains dancing in period army gear. This further recontextualizes the Looters' version of the song in two ways. First of all, it reminds us that, unlike one meaning we get from the Looters' version, the army has a history of women serving in it as well. Of course, this itself could be read as regressive, in that the WWII-era women in the video are largely passive, dancing for their spectators' pleasure or waving out of portholes, which might reflect the actual conditions of women in the armed forces at the time. This reading is problematized by the second recontextualization of the original song. As I mentioned above, the song, as written, is a masculine anti-war fantasy, but is turned into a call-to-arms for female fans of the Stains when that band sings it. The video version of the song, in addition to showing WWII women in uniform, also shows the band in modern-day infantry gear. While their soldierly predecessors dance and wave, the Stains lounge bored in an army tent and later laughingly drive their all-terrain vehicle through it. So, at the same time that their version of the song removes the macho fantasy element from it, their video turns it back into an anti-war song, although one that's playful and active: don't like serving your country? Well, you can at least dance and have fun when you're doing it! And if you want to resist it, you can plow your ATV through the mess

tent! Seen through this lens, the passivity of the historical images of women is replaced with an element of resistance.

The second element of the video that allows a more feminist reading is connected with the recontextualization of the song. At one point, as the refrain, “Not me!” plays, we see an unexplained and out-of-context shot of Tracy, in everyday clothes, with a black eye, crouching under a harsh lamp. Ignoring the synthesized and over-processed treatment of the song, this refrain—that follows the lines, “Who knows what you’re gonna see? / Who knows when your turn will be?” – is the only significant addition to the song. In a way, this refrain makes obvious the implicit message in the earlier version of the song that we hear when the Stains perform at the mall, in that the questions are directed at their fans. The video turns the resposdee of this line into everygirl. Except, oddly, this is an everygirl who’s been injured and mutilated somehow. It’s tempting to read this introducing an anti-domestic violence message in the song, a message that’s largely pessimistic, in that it’s claiming that no one knows really when or where the next victim will be found.<sup>107</sup> But we might also see Tracy as a soldier who’s been hurt in combat, though the clothes she’s wearing don’t support this reading. The army gear worn elsewhere in the video does – or at least allows us to see Tracy as less a victim and more an injured fighter.

If read more generally, though, not only do the Stains show the listener an appropriate answer to their questions with their refrain, but they actually have a stand-in for this listener shown in the video. In other words, they collapse the distance between performer and fan and make explicit the connection between producer and consumer of their music. While they aren’t making a physical connection with an audience in a dingy

club, there is nonetheless a connection made in this music video between producer and audience. This points to another way in which the televisual world (as representative of the mainstream media) might help propagate their message. This detail in tandem with Corinne's voiceover that begins the music video, suggests what might happen when feminism moves from a subcultural arena to a mainstream one.

While critical takes on Riot Grrrl stress the risks inherent in both subcultural production and mainstream cultural production of feminism, *The Fabulous Stains* moves this subcultural production entirely out into the mainstream and ultimately shows that whatever risks exist, they could be worth it. The pro-girl empowerment messages broadcast by the Stains might be media-ted in by the mainstream, but a Riot Grrrl-esque feminist stance can work on this mainstream level through the production of girls' culture.

If we look back at the beginning of the film, it becomes clear that Corinne and the Stains were, first of all, consumers of popular culture: they listened to the radio, went to punk rock shows, watched television, and listened to popular music. At the same time, though, they remained *active* consumers and thus largely critical of the dominant ideologies promoted in connection to consumer culture. By the end of the film, however, they've become producers of culture. And, as we've seen, they are able to address and change what they felt were the ideological problems in popular culture. By ultimately encouraging their fans to do the same, to riot against the patriarchal control of the meanings of things, the Stains (and the film) show the possibilities for girls to negotiate their own way through this circle of consumption and production of mass culture. What it does, perhaps despite its mainstream pedigree, is exhort its viewers to literally act against

the mainstream and make their own cultural products. As this remarkable film demonstrates, it's always the production of culture that leads to the greatest rewards, since it's through changes in what popular culture the mainstream consumes that ultimate changes in that mainstream culture can occur. And, as an illustration of the importance of third-wave feminism, as well as the possibilities within 1980s teen films, I couldn't ask for a better way to conclude this study.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I became obsessed with Drew through a friend; this obsession was cemented through my Lesbian Theory class in college, where we spent nearly a whole class discussing her iconic status, and I was the only one to know anything about her personal life outside of her cinematic representations.

<sup>2</sup> According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, the term was popularized by Jane O'Reilly, in her article "The Housewife's Moment of Truth."

<sup>3</sup> The mission statement of Third Wave reads as follows: "Third Wave is a member-driven multiracial, multicultural, multisexuality national non-profit organization devoted to feminist and youth activism for change. Our goal is to harness the energy of young women and men by creating a community in which members can network, strategize, and ultimately, take action. By using our experiences as a starting point, we can create a diverse community and cultivate a meaningful response" (qtd. in Heywood and Drake 7). One of the first national projects initiated by Third Wave was the summer 1992 voter-registration drive to poor black and Latin communities.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, perhaps shaping their thinking around Douglas Coupland's seminal 1991 book *Generation X*, give the generation born between 1963 and 1974 as defining the third wave (4). This is an attractive definition – since it encompasses me and my generation – but, for my purposes, I'm using "third-wave feminism" to mean any feminist expression or discourse that, simply, follows *after* the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. This both acknowledges Heywood and Drake's generation, and extends it toward the generation born in the 1980s. Rita Alfonso's phrase, "those who came of age during the Reagan administration" would perhaps be a better phrase to define the boundaries of my project (9).

<sup>5</sup> Madelyn Detloff's article "Mean Spirits: The Politics of Contempt Between Feminist Generations" similarly explores the conflict between second and third wavers, although specifically "among feminists in academe" (77).

<sup>6</sup> Rita Alfonso and Jo Triglio, in "Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue between Two Third Wave Feminists," bring up the notion that third-wave feminism might be defined more closely as postmodern feminism; as Triglio wonders, "Third wave feminism seems to be more of an academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodernist critiques of second wave feminism" (8). There's indeed something attractive about this definition, as there is a similar stress in both postmodernism and third-wave feminism on a shifting notion of the self and the self's relationship with its environment; this discussion, however, is out of the scope of my dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry's 1996 anthology *"Bad Girls" / "Good Girls": Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties* wants to negotiate feminist contradictions, as do Walker and Findlen's anthologies; Maglin and Perry's, however, "attempt[s] to correct some recent misreadings of the last twenty years of the women's movement, particularly the movement's so-called focus on sexual violence: rape, sexual abuse, harassment, and battering." They also want to "reconnect sexuality to a political analysis, to underscore the pro-sex wing of the women's movement, and to move feminism beyond the simplistic name-calling and dichotomies characteristic of the current debate" (xvi).

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Marie Hogeland's article "Against Generational Thinking, Or, Some Things that 'Third Wave' Feminism Isn't" attempts to "locate . . . different visions of feminism not in relation to generation, . . . or in relation to the naive vision of the history of feminist movement that names young women's feminism a distinct and separate 'wave,' but rather in relation to the most important and undertheorized issue in contemporary feminism: the relationship between consciousness and social change." To this end, she discusses the practice of consciousness-raising (CR) and explores its political meanings, in order to show that the real political differences in feminism aren't generational, but defined by different political meanings of CR. Her article and Jensen's are two I have found that attempt to get through the morass of articles and books that base their thinking about the third wave as defined around generations.

<sup>9</sup> Bonnie J. Dow's *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* attempts to "understand how feminist rhetoric and events were absorbed, structured, and represented in media discourse for public consumption" (xvi). And as such, her concerns are similar to mine, although she's writing from a feminist viewpoint that doesn't distinguish among different discourses of third-wave feminism.

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<sup>10</sup> Maria-Elena Buszek's "Oh! Dogma (Up Yours!): Surfing the Third Wave" is a recent amazing article that tries to make a case for "the (high, middlin' and just plain junk) culture of the '70s and '80s" as formative influences on the pluralities of third-wave feminism.

<sup>11</sup> An obvious exception to this claim is Madonna, who, even in her 1980s incarnations, appears as a figurehead of feminist power.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* is the best third-wave feminist book on the ascendancy of the culture of beauty in the 1980s.

<sup>13</sup> Faludi has written an almost-coda to her book in the form of a hilarious 1995 *Ms.* article called "I'm Not a Feminist But I Play One on TV," where she exposes Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Christina Hoff Sommers, among others, as "Pod Feminists," who, for her, are perhaps closer to antifeminist conservatives than to progressive feminists (32). In a sad way, though, this article could also be read as a second-wave feminist bashing of third wavers.

<sup>14</sup> An unsigned 1987 editorial in *Glamour* discusses the "reappearance of women in stereotypical female roles," wondering ultimately, "Is Hollywood Rejecting Today's New Women?" (100).

<sup>15</sup> David Considine's *The Cinema of Adolescence*, while the first book to touch on 1980s teen films, largely ignores important developments in the genre, due to its date of publication. Jon Lewis' *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* is useful but more interested in youth cultural representations in youth films. Vicky Lebeau's *Lost Angels: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* examines the ways in which psychoanalytic criticism can be used to study teen films, rather than the films themselves. Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* is an incredible, exhaustive, generic study of the films; however, it only marginally discusses teenage girls. Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* is ostensibly closest to my project here, in that she does analyze representations of teenage girls in slasher films, but she is more interested in the teenage male audience's reception of the films. Certain articles in Frances Gatewood and Murray Pomerance's *Sugar, Spice, & Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* are closest in spirit to my dissertation, but the book, I think, sacrifices depth for breadth of coverage. I'll be citing relevant articles from this anthology in the body of my dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> It could be claimed that all third-wave feminist discourses – two of which I discuss in following chapters – are postfeminist discourses, since they are distinguished by these fluid relationships to second-wave feminism. Indeed, my dissertation is based on the paradox that discourses of third-wave feminism that arose in the 1990s came out of the climate of the postfeminist 1980s.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Projanky, in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, breaks down the popular press manifestations of postfeminism in the 1980s and 1990s into five categories and many more subcategories. Her chapter "The Postfeminist Context" attempts to clearly unwind a very tangled mediated discourse.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, with spin like this, coming from a mainstream news source, is it any wonder that other periodicals got in the game? For example, *Los Angeles* magazine asked, "Is Feminism Dead?" while *Newsweek* depicted "Feminism's Identity Crisis" in an infamous article (qtd. in Faludi 484, 78).

<sup>19</sup> Susan Faludi's chapter "Backlashes Then and Now" does similar historical work, as does Johanna Brenner's comprehensive *New Left Review* article from 1993, "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: US Feminism Today."

<sup>20</sup> Rapp's "Is the Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism Postfeminism?" is a direct answer to Stacey's; they appeared in consecutive issues of *Socialist Review*.

<sup>21</sup> Extratextually too, Bolotin's article reflects a collision of real-world women and a healthy dose of 1980s upper-class privilege: in the middle of the text, there appears a full-column advertisement for Marvin Richard Ltd., a furrier; this ad is accompanied by a drawing of a woman in a natural Tanuki cape staring boldly out from the page.

<sup>22</sup> Another article by Stacey, "The New Conservative Feminism," lists a number of neoconservative "profamily" texts characteristic of the backlash (578). She defines "conservative feminism" explicitly as a "repudiation of sexual politics, the distinctively radical core of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s," as promoting a "'profamily' stance that views sexual politics . . . as threatening to 'the family,'" and as "affirming gender differentiation and celebrat[ing] traditionally feminine qualities" (561,562). Conservative feminists also, she claims, "believe that struggle against male domination detracts

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from political agendas they consider more important” (562). This article is worth quoting, however, in that it’s one of the first attempts to try and define the turn toward conservatism within feminism – Stacey calls this a “feminist backlash”; this is distinguished from (although is certainly a characteristic of) Faludi’s more generally cultural backlash of the 1980s (559).

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Pollack Petchesky’s article, “Antiabortion, Antifeminism, and the Rise of the New Right” argues that the New Right, in the elections of 1980, rode to power on a platform of antifeminism and antiabortion that stressed “privatism” and “private morality” as the cure-alls for the Right-identified problems with society: welfare, abortion rights, the disintegration of the family, etc. (208). It’s easy to draw a parallel here between the conservative ideology of privatism and the focus (whether from individual women or from the mass media) on individual achievement inherent in pseudo-feminist postfeminism.

<sup>24</sup> I’ll be looking at a specific type of pseudo-feminist postfeminist “commodity feminism” in my next chapter on Girl Power.

<sup>25</sup> I’m using an admittedly loose definition of “trilogy” here: Ringwald plays three different characters in two films directed by Hughes and three scripted by him.

<sup>26</sup> This is not to mention the two other films, both written and directed by him, that Hughes had out at the time: *Weird Science* (1985) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986). Both of these grabbed pieces of the box office and sections of the popular consciousness.

<sup>27</sup> I’m not quite sure what the following fact means in terms of my discussion of gender in this project, but, for the most part, female respondees ask if I’m writing about *Pretty in Pink*, while male respondees generally ask about *The Breakfast Club*.

<sup>28</sup> None of Ringwald’s co-stars in any of her Hughes films received as much press and praise as did she at the time; although one notable exception might be Anthony Michael Hall.

<sup>29</sup> These are important qualities, although it’s important to note that, as teenagers who live at home, the young women in the films are only conditionally free from the constraints of their age, and thus, perhaps, conditionally feminist. Feminist issues as such never explicitly arise in these films, although, as we’ll see, *The Breakfast Club* might be one exception to this claim.

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it’s no surprise that Hughes was an advertising executive before becoming a director; his films consistently advertise the promise of a shiny new life that can be attained with personal grit and moxie.

<sup>31</sup> Nadel discusses the suburban home as a privileged site in Hughes’ films.

<sup>32</sup> As Nadel explains, this often happens in all of Hughes’ films, regardless of the genre.

<sup>33</sup> I don’t know enough about cars to know if Jake’s car is a Trans Am; if it was, this fact would make material Sam’s birthday wish as well as reinforce my reading of Sam’s wish as being classed.

<sup>34</sup> This lack of agency is scarily signposted when Jake, in another misogynistic moment in this film, tells Geek he could “violate her ten different ways if [he] wanted to” when she’s passed out.

<sup>35</sup> Ginny, Sam’s sister, goes through a similar bashing as Caroline, seemingly because the preparation for her marriage – to an “oily variety bohunk” who is coded as being from a lower-class as the Bakers – makes her parents forget Sam’s birthday; this also impedes the eventual union of Sam and Jake. In the wedding sequence – where she’s reduced to a tangle of floppy limbs and embarrassing gestures – we see another example of Hughes’ suburban insularity and fear of the lower classes as translating into misogyny. Perhaps this explains the reason why Ginny and Caroline look alike: both are slim, blonde, and conventionally attractive, obvious foils for the unconventionally pretty Ringwald. What Ginny’s marriage says about Hughes’ class project, however, is potentially more confusing; he seems to punish her for either *not* adhering to her middle-class status or *not* being wealthy.

<sup>36</sup> Although Caroline (post-coitally? this fact is never explicit) fawns over Geek at the end of the film, and she says that she’ll be “okay” when she and Jake split up, half-hinting that she and Geek will be together, her partnering with Geek seems only temporary. At the same time, too, the ending sequence of Sam and Jake seems like a dream. It may be ostensibly “real,” but its dreamlike atmosphere (the way the sequence is separated from the rest of the film by a slow fade, its unnatural lighting scheme, its now-iconic tableau) might point to the fact that this reward is ultimately unattainable. This is not to mention the fact that, throughout the film, Sam seems to place Jake on a pedestal: he’s “perfect” and “ideal” to her. The concluding sequence, then, could be read as Sam’s middle-class desire for attaining only the image, if not the reality, of upper-class wealth.

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<sup>37</sup> In fact, all of Hughes' films with Ringwald might encourage the opposite advice, "Ditching shopping to go to class does make you a defective."

<sup>38</sup> The film also constructs the students' clothes and lunches along similar class lines. For example, Claire dines on sushi, clad in leathers and jewelry; Brian eats soup, apple juice, and p.b.j, and is dressed in a parent-approved manner; Andy wolfs down enough for three people and sports a letterman jacket; Bender doesn't eat and wears jeans, boots, and bandannas; while Allison munches on a Captain Crunch and Pixie Stix sandwich draped in formless dark clothes.

<sup>39</sup> It's almost as if, through her machinations, Claire has become an 80s version of Emma Woodhouse, Jane Austen's matchmaking and social-problem-solving heroine. Which means that Claire is also a cinematic precursor to Alicia Silverstone's Cher Horowitz in *Clueless* (1995, Amy Heckerling).

<sup>40</sup> The unconventionally attractive girl being made over into a conventionally attractive girl by another conventionally attractive girl is everywhere in the contemporary teen film. Similar scenes show up in *Clueless*, *Jawbreaker* (1999, Darren Stein), *She's All That* (1999, Robert Iscove), *Bring it On* (2000, Peyton Reed), and *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001, Joel Gallen).

<sup>41</sup> Claire's gift of one of her diamond earrings to Bender performs a similar ideological move, too.

<sup>42</sup> Ally Sheedy was named a "Brat-Pack Feminist" by Margy Rochlin in a *Ms.* article from 1986. In this article, she cuts down female peers of hers who sound like the pseudo-feminist postfeminists that Bolotin interviews: "These are women . . . who've grown up expecting certain things that they would never have come to expect had other women before them not gone out and done the things they did. Therefore, it seems ludicrous to me that no one wants to identify herself as a feminist" (14). This may be a great statement, but its essence boils down to women fighting against other women.

<sup>43</sup> Allison was definitely the one character I identified with when I first saw this film in high school; watching the film again while writing this chapter, I remembered more about what she did before her makeover (throwing her olive loaf on the statue, dancing like a spastic) than what she did after. It's almost not surprising to me that, for such a key narrative moment in the film, the scene where she walks towards Andy goes unremembered.

<sup>44</sup> *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1986, written by Hughes, directed by Deutch), while not featuring Ringwald, essentially regenders the story of *Pretty in Pink*, with Eric Stoltz as a working-class distaff Andie (both he and Ringwald's character have red hair) and Lea Thompson as his upper-class distaff Blane. It, too, looks progressive (especially in the character of Stoltz's friend Watts, played by Mary Stuart Masterson), but ultimately falls short of being so.

<sup>45</sup> The importance placed in Hughes' films on capitalism and ownership is even hinted in her name, which is pronounced I-own-a (as in, "I own a record store").

<sup>46</sup> This is a mindset also shared by Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*.

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, this theme is anticipated in the title of the film, taken from the Psychedelic Furs' song of the same name: in the song's cryptic lyrics, Caroline is a "working woman," apparently a courtesan or prostitute with multiple lovers: "All of her lovers / All talk of her notes / And the flowers / That they never sent / And wasn't she easy / And isn't she / Pretty in pink. / The one who insists / He was the first in line / Is the last to / Remember her name" (The Psychedelic Furs).

<sup>48</sup> In another non-feminist move on Hughes' part, mothers are generally out of the picture in these teen films (Andie's, Claire's, Jake's); when they are a presence, they are silent or ineffectual (Sam's, Allison's, Bender's, Blane's) or angry harridans (Brian's, Andy's).

<sup>49</sup> Baumgardner and Richards' book seems also to be the only recent feminist text that discusses Girl Power (under the guise of Girlie) as a feminist practice in an extended, serious, and intelligent way.

<sup>50</sup> Amy Lawson, one of the teenagers Jancee Dunn interviews, explains it this way, "Anything guys have an opportunity to do, girls can do. . . . There's not much we need to really fight for or argue for. . . . I think generations before us have done more work than we have – they worked for everything we wanted, and it's the same things we want" (108).

<sup>51</sup> *Sassy* was conceived in 1987 by Australian feminist Sandra Yates. Under editor Jane Pratt's guidance, it became a feminist alternative to the glut of boy- and clothes- obsessed magazines on the newsstands for teenage girls.

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<sup>52</sup> This is not to mention the fact that second-wave feminism (as well as the socio-historical climate of the 1960s and 1970s) seems to be essentialized by Girlies, if we take Baumgardner and Richards' definition above.

<sup>53</sup> I'm not claiming here that there is an escape possible from patriarchal culture in these two ways; in some respects, my next chapter looks at alternative cultural practices as a momentary escape from patriarchal capitalism.

<sup>54</sup> In a later article, McRobbie comes across as slightly more positive about what consumption might mean for young women. As she claims in "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity," "Femininity . . . perhaps most powerfully, exists as the product of a highly charged consumer culture which in turn provides subject positions for girls and personal identities for them through consumption" (173). It's easy to see the connection between this formulation and Girlie / Girl Power feminism. And while I like the idea that girls can create their own subject positions and personal identities, the means by which they accomplish this is, unfortunately, through the machinations of consumer culture.

<sup>55</sup> Two persuasive critiques of Wolf's tendency to set up a "straw woman" (Siegel 68) of second-wave feminism (a critical approach to second-wave feminism that unites Wolf with the Girlies) appear in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*; Deborah L. Siegel's "Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a 'Postfeminist' Moment" and Carolyn Soriso's "A Tale of Two Feminisms: Power and Victimization in Contemporary Feminist Debate."

<sup>56</sup> We could make the same claim about Girl Power in the 1990s, too.

<sup>57</sup> The director of the 1983 film *Valley Girl*, Martha Coolidge, feels that Valley Girls are imitating a character Laraine Newman portrayed on *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present) in the late 1970s, or even a different (although similarly-vernacularized) character played by Lily Tomlin even earlier (Klein, "Valley Girl" 17). This fact is supported in an article in *Teen* from 1983 which claims, "Long before the Zappas began serenading Valley girls, Laraine was playing Val-oriented characters on *Saturday Night Live*" (Watson 41). The only evidence I've been able to track down online or in my rusty memory is Newman's character Donut Rooter, from the video-only release *We're All Devo* (1983, Gerald V. Casale), where she plays a spoiled (Valley?) daughter. I'm not sure when her footage was filmed, but her character was similar to one I remember seeing on *Saturday Night Live* in reruns.

<sup>58</sup> Incidentally, Zappa the patriarch produced and mentored an all-girl group called the GTO's in the late 1960s. Girls Together Outrageously (or any other name with the initials G.T.O.) has been seen either as a (gonzo) successor to bands like the Supremes, the Crystals, or the Shangri-Las, or as eye candy for a predominantly male rock fan base of the time.

<sup>59</sup> If the (male) author of this piece had taken the time to research, he would have discovered that "kiss my tuna" as a Valley Girl put-down is more etymologically correct when used by a female (see Pond 59).

<sup>60</sup> To be fair, this article appeared in the *Times*' "Style" section.

<sup>61</sup> This would support Coolidge's claim that Laraine Newman created the Valley Girl on *Saturday Night Live*: her character might be more recognizable to viewers as a stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish-American Princess.

<sup>62</sup> After the August 1982 *Newsweek* article, a follow-up appeared in July 1985. Called "Return to the Dollies of the Val," it looks at what happened to the girls of the San Fernando Valley. It's hard to not read a little pathos in the authors' final line: "Now that a couple of summers have passed, the Val finally seems to be fully rad (very cool) again—at least in her own backyard" (Barol and Pratt 10).

<sup>63</sup> I can't tell if the use of the word "formidable" in Romeo's quote is intentional or not. I'd like to believe that it isn't, since, in this particular context, it conflates youth and Valley Girl with strength.

<sup>64</sup> See note 66 below for information about the authors; it's clear that, with the possible exception of Mimi Pond, all of them are too far removed from their subjects in age (and, perhaps, in education and social class) to be able to strive for any documentary "accuracy" about their subjects. This fact is telling, in that Pond's book is the most unbiased, interesting, and fun read.

<sup>65</sup> All of these are levels of separation that I'm guilty of perpetrating, too, as an east-coast twentysomething male graduate student in the early 2000s, writing about representations of a west-coast high school teenage girl subculture of the 1980s.

<sup>66</sup> I don't necessarily mean that the authors of these two books are, or were, Valley Girls. Mimi Pond, raised in San Diego, but living in New York when her book was published, was 26 in 1982. Pond is

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probably closer (in background, anyway) to a Valley Girl than Jodie Ann Posserello, who might be a pseudonymous creation of Sue Black's. She's given a "Note to Readers," where she says, "Oh wow, fer sure, someone's really gonna pay ME to tell THEM how to get it on in the Valley. I'm sure . . . but they did!" (4). Of the remaining authors, Glass is a "prominent Beverly Hills speech pathologist," as the back cover of her book tells us. And while I can't find any information about Mary Corey and Victoria Westermark, they do acknowledge the help of "Tiffany T. of Encino"; whether or not this is a pseudonym is unknown.

<sup>67</sup> Black and Posserello say as much: "That's the big difference between Val Girl Talk and Val Dude Talk. Valley Girls are animated and paint a total scene, using lots of words. Every subject has a connection with their universe. But the guys! If they can talk at all, and not just snort, they like to use like exclamations or these single words here and there 'cause that's like ultimately cool" (17).

<sup>68</sup> This might be due to the fact that Valley Girl, as a cultural phenomenon, arose in the consumption-obsessed American 1980s. In an article in *The Nation* from 1983, Barbara Ehrenreich saw it as a "minifad." She says, "the Valley Girls and their imitators satirize consumerism even as they celebrate it—making the whole enterprise look pointless and affected" (598). An important Girl Power film, *Clueless* (1995, Amy Heckerling) does just this.

<sup>69</sup> This also points to the fact that Valley Girls, as a subculture, are largely dependent on their wealthy parents.

<sup>70</sup> Of course, the film ends with an extended sequence at the prom, perhaps the ultimate validation for heterosexual couplehood with its crowning of a king and queen. The four friends all end up paired off with their dates. (Even Stacey, whose Ralphie is "Indian wrestling with the boys," is seemingly going to be with Fred, who has wiped cake off her face in the food-fight conclusion to the prom.)

<sup>71</sup> Two notable exceptions to this, of course, are Loryn and Tommy's brief tryst at Suzie's party, and the subplot concerning Suzie's stepmother's attempted seduction of Skip.

<sup>72</sup> This agenda is made unfortunately obvious in two pieces of promotional material for the film. The original poster shows Nicolas Cage in character as Randy (although wearing an outfit he doesn't actually wear in the film), to the right of a model dressed a Valley Girl, shopping bag in hand; this model looks nothing like Deborah Foreman. This figurative removal of the woman from the way the film is promoted, though, isn't nearly as ominous as her literal removal, which happens in a later video release of the film. This release retitles the film *Rebel Dreams*; the description on the back emphasizes Randy as the main character of the film, while the front cover features a photo of Cage, taken much later than his stint in *Valley Girl*.

<sup>73</sup> Both Nicolas Cage and Cameron Dye, whose characters are absolutely not the focus of the film from its beginning, are the most appealing of the young actors here.

<sup>74</sup> The fact that Martha Coolidge's previous film (her debut) was a docudrama called *Not a Pretty Picture* (1975) supports this reading.

<sup>75</sup> A scene in a hall in their high school ends with Stacey asking, "What's with Loryn, anyway?" The scene cuts to Loryn's head bobbing back and forth to "Girls Like Me." Is the audience supposed to see her with the same eyes as her friends do, as a sexually unashamed "girl like" she is, and condemn her for it?

<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in Pond's *VGGL*, Valley Girls are portrayed as pre-sexual girls. Her narrator even sounds afraid of appearing sexual: "But, god, when you really think about it it's just ICKY! I mean, who'd WANT TO?" (16).

<sup>77</sup> Not to mention the fact that she and Randy are going to the Valley Sheraton at the end of the film on Tommy's dime.

<sup>78</sup> Whether this was because mainstream publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek* ran (largely essentializing, mostly erroneous) features on Riot Grrrl, or because most of the writing I've read has been subcultural (that is, produced by women who are or were identified with Riot Grrrl) is a matter of semantics that I don't have the space to cover here.

<sup>79</sup> There's also the first recorded use of the phrase at a Stooges' concert in Detroit in 1967, when Iggy Pop asked the crowd, "Is it time for a riot, girls?"

<sup>80</sup> There is an obvious parallel here between Riot Grrrl's cultural production and the cultural production stirred up by the punk subculture of mid-1970s England.

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<sup>81</sup> Even the recent (2003) Ladyfest Philadelphia, at which I performed, pales in comparison to what I remember from scattered punk shows in the 1990s.

<sup>82</sup> I'm not assuming that Riot Grrrl exists in a monolithic, orthodox, state; in the ways that I'm setting it in opposition both academic feminism and to the punk rock subculture, I might be accused of making such an assumption. In some ways, as Marion Leonard hints in her article on Riot Grrrl and subcultures, Riot Grrrl itself escapes any "academic" interpretations by its constantly fluctuating and contradictory nature.

<sup>83</sup> And still hasn't, from what informal interviews with friends of mine more involved in the scene than I have told me. At one of the last punk rock shows I went to in Syracuse, NY, one of the (male) singers from one of the bands talked about how punk music has been co-opted by the mainstream. What started off as an anti-corporate diatribe ended with the phrase, "no chick would talk to you if you had blue hair," implying, perhaps, that all that punk rock boys really want is to meet girls.

<sup>84</sup> When I've taught punk rock and Riot Grrrl as examples of political and feminist practices in music, a number of my students have asked about Riot Grrrl, "Why are these young women so angry?" Their question here seems to point to the fact that, to a mainstream audience, punk rock as a subculture is more potentially frightening than politically progressive. And Riot Grrrl, by extension, comes across as even *more* frightening.

<sup>85</sup> Ednie Kaeh Garrison has written a wonderful article on the Internet's role in youth subculture and third-wave feminism. She, like Smith, applauds the ways in which feminist consciousness can be accessible through cultural technologies, and makes the point that the Internet seems to represent a coming-together of many different technologies: "The ability to record one's music, to type, print, format, and copy one's zine, to make one's video documentaries on a camcorder, to design and post one's website, without having to go through corporate, mainstream, commercial, official – and even adult – channels, makes a difference."

<sup>86</sup> An article in *Signs* from 1998 called "Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within" discusses the ways Riot Grrrl might work to be more self-conscious. From the article's introduction: "In the spring of 1997, Pennsylvania Riot Grrrl Jessica Rosenberg and *Signs* Program Assistant Gitana Garofolo convened four conference calls with ten Riot Grrrls from around the United States to discuss the movement in general and their own experiences in particular" (809). The article goes on to show Riot Grrrl as a movement with many faces and many internal contradictions.

<sup>87</sup> Or could still do, if the Riot-Grrrl-influenced Ladyfests are any indication. From the *Ladyfest* website: "Ladyfest is a non-profit, community-based event designed by and for women to showcase, celebrate and encourage the artistic, organizational and political work and talents of women. It will feature performances by bands, spoken word artists, authors, visual artists and more!!! It will include workshops, panels, and dance parties. This is a woman-run event but all are welcome to attend." As of writing, there have been over 20 of these events worldwide.

<sup>88</sup> A 2000 review by Gary Morris claims that Paramount executives were disappointed with the film's bleak tone. I can't find any information to support or debunk this fact, although considering *The Fabulous Stains*' jaundiced view of the media machine, I'm not surprised that the suits at a major Hollywood studio got a little anxious with it.

<sup>89</sup> The only exception, as far as I've been able to track down, is a tiny feature on Lane in *Seventeen* from 1981, which says, "She'll be a rock star in the film *All Washed Up*" (Miller 147).

<sup>90</sup> Given the film's obscurity, it's tough to make this claim, but with someone like Adler (no stranger to musical subcultures himself) on board, the producers probably wanted to corner a punk rock audience. This is strange, in that, by the 1980s, punk rock itself was gradually becoming more anesthetized and made palatable for mainstream audiences, to reappear as a shadow of itself in the charts as "new wave." Again, this is a distinction between musical aesthetics that I don't have the space to explore. In the end, though, we're meant to side with Corinne in this film over anyone else, punk or otherwise.

<sup>91</sup> The film, annoyingly, focuses mostly on the three singers of the bands as representative of the band itself. The Corpses remain largely hairy and anonymous, while the Looters get to say things like, "wanker" and "piss off" in British accents. To their credit, the filmmakers spend time on Tracy and Jessica in addition to Corinne, but one gets the feeling that the *Stains*, and the movie, by extension, is Corinne's show.

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<sup>92</sup> As played by Barry Ford, singer for the reggae band Merger that often played gigs in London as punk was dawning in 1977, Lawnboy might be modeled on Don Letts. Letts is the British Rastafarian who many credit with introducing reggae to the English punks. He deejayed at The Roxy, spinning reggae records for its punk clientele, toured with the Clash and the Slits, and filmed a documentary (really a collection of performances with spontaneous commentary from the bands) of the scene called *The Punk Rock Movie* (1978).

<sup>93</sup> As well as the obvious Riot Grrrl overlap, I hear a bit of overlap here with the Shaggs, the trio of sisters from New Hampshire, who recorded an album of folk- and pop- influenced songs in 1969, without being able to play their instruments or sing on key. This album, *Philosophy of the World*, is held up by music critics as one of the best examples of so-called outsider music in America.

<sup>94</sup> This song was originally performed and recorded by the Professionals – featuring Steve Jones and Paul Cook – in 1981, well after the Sex Pistols split up.

<sup>95</sup> I also can't help but think here of the Raincoats (an important all-female band from the later punk scene in Britain, whose early music and politics, like the Stains, is similarly shambling and feminist, and who were often cited as an influence on Riot Grrrl) and their song "Off-Duty Trip," also about soldiering. Its lyrics – "Woman, you're pinned up / On the wall in front of you. / A soldier's life is very tough: / Needs tender loving when fighting's through. / Join the Professionals!" -- connect domestic violence with violence overseas (Raincoats).

<sup>96</sup> The film, too, makes a point out of his incomprehensibility when singing the song; this, too, undermines his efficacy as a political spokesperson.

<sup>97</sup> There's something to be said here, perhaps, about the film's use of montage to defamiliarize the familiar, which, of course, is similar to Eisenstein's radical political uses of it.

<sup>98</sup> There's another instance of women's power of (re)naming in the film. When Corinne visits her cousin's house to use the phone, Jessica is told by her mother to clean her room. Jessica tells her that she wants to be called "Peg," instead of Jessica, from now on. Her mother tells her, "I gave you that name," and Jessica replies, "That's why it's so lousy." This instance, however, differs from the self-naming above, in that it's Jessica naming herself against her mother's wishes.

<sup>99</sup> Some examples of 1980s filmic career women are Sigourney Weaver's character Katherine in *Working Girl* (1988, Mike Nichols), Diane Keaton's J.C. in *Baby Boom* (1987, Charles Shyer), and Glenn Close's Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1987, Adrian Lyne).

<sup>100</sup> In terms of what the film could be claiming about the Stains' relationship to the world of music, it's illuminating that they begin their ascent on the same day that the guitarist dies—in the women's bathroom, no less.

<sup>101</sup> All in spite of one of the film's taglines, which reads, "These girls created themselves!"

<sup>102</sup> This report was presumably included in Alicia's portfolio when she applied for the national job.

<sup>103</sup> This is shown to be untrue when Corinne later demands the money from her unscrupulous manager so that she can give it to Lawnboy.

<sup>104</sup> Her statement brings to mind the teen film *Wild in the Streets* (1968, Barry Shear), where rock star Max Frost is elected president and locks away citizens over 30, promoting rock 'n roll in the process.

<sup>105</sup> One anonymous *Variety* reviewer notes, "Sequence [at end] can only have been an afterthought to the film as a whole to lend it a flimsy 'happy ending'" (16). This may be true, but I would see the ending more bittersweet than this reviewer does.

<sup>106</sup> The *Variety* reviewer reads the film in terms of the "current phenom of girl bands." The review continues, "It was undoubtedly the great success of such groups as The Go-Go's that prompted Par[amount] to finally release this Canadian-lensed shocker" (15). The music video that ends the film, in this respect, is true to its supposed origins.

<sup>107</sup> And especially tempting, when seen in the light of The Raincoats' song "Off-Duty Trip," mentioned in note 95 above.

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507 Taylor Street  
Bethlehem, PA 18015  
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[<http://acbleach.blogspot.com>](http://acbleach.blogspot.com)

### EDUCATION

#### Lehigh University

Ph.D. in English degree expected January 2004

Dissertation: "Girls Consuming, Girls Creating: Teen Films of the 1980s and Third-Wave Feminism"

In my dissertation, I argue that certain girl-centered teen films from the 1980s anticipated, dramatized, and promoted nascent third-wave feminist discourses. In their negotiations with feminism, these films contributed to the third-wave feminist discourses of the 1990s.

Comprehensive Exams: film and popular culture (major); contemporary American literature, composition and rhetoric (minors)

#### University College London

M.A. in Anglo-American Literary Relations, 1997

Thesis: "Aliens and Englishmen: The Wartime Films of Powell and Pressburger"

#### Wesleyan University

B.A. in English & Theater, 1996

### TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

American & British Film History  
Genre & Genre Theory  
Feminist, Marxist/Materialist, &  
Audience-Reception Film Theories  
Mass Communications

Cultural Studies  
Popular Music & Cultures  
Third-Wave Feminism  
Feminist Cultural Studies  
Gender Studies

### AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Lafayette-Lehigh Teaching Fellowship, Lafayette University English Department, 2002 – 2003

*The Crestiad* Adjunct Faculty of the Year, Cedar Crest College, 2002

Humanities Center Research Cluster Fellowship, Lehigh University, Spring 2002

Technology Fellow, Lehigh University English Department, Fall 2001

Graduate Research Assistantship, Clipper Project, Lehigh University College of Education, Summer 2001 - Spring 2002

Women's Studies Program Curriculum Development Grant, Lehigh University, Spring 2001

Lehigh University Teaching Fellow, Lehigh University English Department, 1998 - 2002

## PUBLICATIONS

### Book

*Easy Riding: The American Road Movie and Journeys of Transformation.* Greenwood Press, forthcoming, 2005.

### Articles

"John Hughes, Molly Ringwald, and the Postfeminist Teen Film," under consideration, *The Journal of Popular Culture*

"Hooray for Hollywood: The Creation of an Israeli National Identity in Amos Oz's *Panther in the Basement*." *Literature / Film Quarterly*. 31.1 (2003): 50-56.

"Feminist Adventures Close to Home." *Origyns: Reclaiming Our Feminist Voices* 1 (2001): 18-21.

### Reviews and Features

*PopMatters*, music reviews and features, 2002 - present <<http://www.popmatters.com>>

*The Morning Call*, Allentown, PA, music reviews and interviews, 2003

*RockerZine*, music reviews and interviews, 2001 <<http://www.rockerchick.com/zine.html>>

*SiteScene: A Monthly Review of Electronic Resources*, the American Studies Association's Crossroads Project, website reviews, 1999-2001

<<http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/asw/sitescene.html>>

*The Week*, University College London newspaper, film reviews, 1996 - 1997

## CONFERENCES

"Girl Power and 1980s Teen Films," Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture / American Culture Association, Pittsburgh, November 2002

"Gen(d)re and *Night of the Comet*," Popular Culture / American Culture Association, Toronto, March 2002

"Riot, Girls: *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* and Third-Wave Cultural Production," Lehigh University English Department Thursdays at Drown, Lehigh University, February 2002

"*Urban Legend* and the Teenage Girl Killer: A New Paradigm?," Popular Culture / American Culture Association, Philadelphia, April 2001

"Dis(s)-mantling The Ivory Tower in the New Millennium: It's an Inside Job," North East Modern Language Association, Hartford, March 2001 (co-writer)

"Teaching the Teen: Teenagers, Teen Films, and Technology in the Composition Classroom," Southwest/Texas Pop Culture Association, Albuquerque, March 2001

"Webbing Film and American History: A Marriage Made On-Line," Society of Early Americanists Second Biennial Conference, Norfolk, March 2001 (co-writer)

"'It Was Queer ...': Stephen Dedalus' Sexuality," 20th-Century Literature Conference, University of Louisville, February 2001

"Film and Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom," Central New York Conference on Language and Literature, SUNY Cortland, October 2000 (chair)

- "Powell, Pressburger, and Propaganda," Popular Culture / American Culture Association, New Orleans, April 2000
- "McDonagh, McPherson, and Irish Multiculturalism," 20th-Century Literature Conference, University of Louisville, February 2000
- "Humor in the Liberated Composition Classroom, or The Dumbest Pedagogical Ideas We've Ever Had," South Central Modern Language Association, Memphis, October 1999 (co-presenter)
- "The Politics of the Family in Caryl Churchill's Drama," Central New York Conference on Language and Literature, SUNY Cortland, October 1999
- "Falling Stahrs and Dying Swans: Anglo-American Hollywood Fiction," Midwestern Conference on Film, Language, and Literature, Northern Illinois University, March 1999

## **COURSES TAUGHT**

### **Instructor**

Cedar Crest College: (2000 - present)

Introduction to Mass Communication  
 Media Literacy  
 Introduction to Film  
 Mass Media and Culture  
 Public Relations

Lafayette College (2002 – 2003)

Gender, Sexuality and Popular Music  
 College Writing

Northampton Community College (1999)

College Writing, Computer Intensive

Lehigh University (1998 – 2002)

American Film Paranoias  
 Gender and Technology  
 Youth Culture in the 1980s & 1990s  
 Culture, Subculture, and the Individual  
 Writing about the Media, Computer Intensive  
 College Writing, Computer Intensive

Delaware County Community College: (1998)

College Writing

### **Teaching Assistant**

Lehigh University: (1998-2001)

History on Trial (Dr. Edward Gallagher)  
 Film and American History (Dr. Edward Gallagher)  
 Hitchcock's Films (Dr. Alexander Doty)

## **RELATED PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE**

### **Guest Classroom Appearances**

"*Subculture: The Meaning of Style and Punk Rock*," English 2: Border Crossings in America, Lehigh University, Spring 2003

"Teen Films and Third-Wave Feminisms," Introduction to Women's Studies, Lafayette College, Fall 2001

"Writing Conferences," Teaching Composition: A Practicum, Lehigh University, Fall 2000

"Grading and Evaluating," Teaching Composition: A Practicum, Lehigh University, Fall 2000

"Herbert L. Strock's *How to Make a Monster*," Gender and Sexuality in the Horror Film, Lehigh University, Fall 2000

### **Pedagogy Workshops**

"Thoughts on Teaching in a Computer Classroom," Lehigh University, October 2001

"Using BlackBoard CourseInfo in English 1," Lehigh University, August 2001 (co-presenter)

"Lehigh Students' Perceptions about the Differences between English 1 and English 2," Lehigh University, March 2000 (co-presenter)

"WebWare Options for Composition," Lehigh University, November 1999 (co-presenter)

"Using Film in the Writing Classroom," Lehigh University, April 1999 (co-presenter)

### **Writing Tutor**

The Center for Writing, Math, and Study Skills, Lehigh University, Fall 1999 - Fall 2000  
STEP/UP (Summer Transitional English Program / University Pre-Semester), Lehigh University, Summer 1999, Summer 2000

## **UNIVERSITY AND ACADEMIC SERVICE**

### **Web Designer / Web Manager**

The Center for Writing, Math, and Study Skills at Lehigh University, Fall 2000

<<http://www.lehigh.edu/~incent/incent.html>>

Reel American History, in association with Lehigh University's English and History Departments and American Studies Program, Fall 1999

<<http://www.lehigh.edu/~ineng/ejg/ejg-first.htm>>

The Madness of 445: A Collective *Lady Audley's Secret*, Fall 1998

<<http://www.Lehigh.EDU/~jfl2/445.htm>>

### **Research / Editorial Assistant**

Dr. Elizabeth Fifer, Lehigh University, Summer 1999

Dr. Barbara Traister, Lehigh University, Summer 1999

### **Administrative Service**

Faculty Advisor, Radio Club, Cedar Crest College, Fall 2003

Moderator, Publicity, Women's Studies Graduate Conference, Lehigh University, October 2001

Graduate Student Mentor, Lehigh University English Department, 1999 - 2001  
Judge, Williams Writing Prize for First-Year Composition, Lehigh University, 1999 - 2001  
Rater, SPEAK test, Lehigh University English as a Second Language Department, 1999

### **Language**

French, reading knowledge

### **OTHER SERVICE**

#### **Film & Theater**

Co-Cinematographer, Actor, *2003: A Race Odyssey* (Stephen A. Tompkins, 2003)  
Actor, Musician, *Tom Bierowski: Talking Book*, Lehigh University, April 2002  
Co-Cinematographer, *7 Films for 7 Novels: A Mockumentary* (Stephen A. Tompkins, 2002)  
Actor, *Movie without a Cause* (Mike Lund, 2001)  
Co-Cinematographer, Actor, *La Bananae* (Stephen A. Tompkins, 2000)  
Co-Producer, Co-Editor, *Hitchcraft* (Stephen A. Tompkins, 1999)  
Co-Producer, Co-Editor, Actor, *Mo' Better Monsters* (Stephen A. Tompkins, 1998)  
Projectionist, UCL Union Film Society, 1996 - 1997

#### **Music**

Disk Jockey, WMUH 91.7 FM, 2002 - present  
Music Director, Disk Jockey, WLVR 91.3 FM, 1998 - 2002

### **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Society for Cinema and Media Studies  
Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture / American Culture Association  
Eclectic Society

### **REFERENCES**

Dr. Alexander Doty, Lehigh University English Department, Drown Hall, 35 Sayre Drive,  
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Dr. Dawn Keetley, Lehigh University English Department, Drown Hall, 35 Sayre Drive,  
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Dr. James Brancato, Cedar Crest College Department of Communication, 100 College Drive,  
Allentown, PA 18104 | 610.606.3389 | [jpbranca@cedarcrest.edu](mailto:jpbranca@cedarcrest.edu)  
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