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**Cinderella goes to the Prom:
Constructing Rituals of Youth Culture through Teen Media**
—Sidney Eve Matrix

Introduction

“HELLO!!!! Lilly, I would think that you might have noticed that the prom plays a key role in the socialization process of the adolescent.”
—Mia, in Cabot, *Princess in Pink: The Princess Diaries*

I wasn't originally thinking of getting a pouffy dress. But as soon as I put it on, I felt like a princess. I love this dress, so that's all that matters.
—Kit, *Class of 2005*, Winnipeg, Manitoba¹

Youth culture is both reflected in and manufactured by its popular media productions. Through their media, teens and 'tweens participate in their own processes of enculturation in so far as they inspire and consume discursive frameworks that purport to explain adolescent experience. The

discourses of youth culture, and in particular for this paper, the ideologies of girlhood, are transmitted and reverberate between media intertextually. For the researcher of popular youth culture, this means that multimedia and cross-genre investigations are key, because, through examining the cross-pollination of ideologies in teen films and magazines, novels and TV shows, we can see how particular versions of adolescent identity gain legitimacy. What emerges in popular media are mainstream representations of teen female experience that, through citationality, become sedimented (Butler).

The meanings of femininity circulating in youth culture are disseminated to teens (of both genders) through the commercialization of everyday life experiences—something especially evident when we look to media representation of the rites of passage in adolescence, for example the high school prom. The “spring ball,” “formal dance,” “graduation dance”—

hereafter, simply the prom—is marketed to teens as the quintessential coming-of-age event, especially for girls. Only a generation ago, the word “prom” was a distinctly American term, since in Canada the preferred phrase to describe this ritual was the “formal” or simply “grad.” Similarly, the extravagant prom dresses that appeared in the pages of teen beauty and fashion magazines published in the U.S. but dominating the Canadian market (as is still the case today, not surprisingly, as this is consistent across genres of popular cultural media, including films and novels) were fun and inspirational, but largely unattainable and thus mostly irrelevant to Canadian teenagers. Unless one took a trip for some cross-border shopping, the fantasy gowns pictured in *Seventeen* magazine’s special prom issue were basically unavailable in the mid-range retail marketplace (read, the mall), as the following testimonial, from the David’s Bridal clothing retailer website suggests:

Hey, I loved my 2003 prom. I live in Toronto, Canada. On March Break I went down to Florida to visit my grandparents and I went to David’s Bridal in Clearwater, Florida. I fell in love with this dress the minute I saw it (I’m on the left in the peach dress!). I wish we had a David’s Bridal here. I know for sure, that if any occasions come up where I need a smashing dress, I will

be traveling over the border to Buffalo to go to David’s Bridal!!!...Thank you!!!!!!

Although David’s Bridal has not (yet), at the time of this writing, opened stores in Canada, the formal fashion situation has changed considerably. Not only are prom dresses sold in Fairweathers, Reitmans and countless other mall retailers nation-wide, but in addition one does not have to look very far or deeply to notice that, through their videos, films, magazines, advertising, websites and television, Canadian teenagers are inundated year-round with discourses about prom, in all of its extravagant American style. For more Canadian evidence, we only have to look to the recent publication of Toronto Fashion Television Channel host and megastar Jeanne Beker’s book *The Big Night Out*. Advertised as part etiquette guide and part how-to fashion-beauty book, Beker’s text for ‘tween and teen girls explains in its prefatory material that,

A big night out can be graduation, a prom, a family wedding, confirmation, or Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Whatever the occasion, it is a time when every young person wants to look her (or his) best. This is the book that has it all—tips on planning for the big day, a countdown for getting ready, how to look great in photos, a common-sense guide to party manners, and sound advice about making

sure the evening is safe as well as fun. It provides a get-ready plan, the scoop on the comfortable versus excruciating shoe debate, what to do if a zipper breaks, and of course how to accept a compliment gracefully. (n.p.)

The prom has arrived in Canada. Each spring, the window displays in an ever-increasing number of fashion retailers, the magazine racks in Chapters-Indigo booksellers across the landscape of Canadian shopping centres, and the life and fashion sections of newspapers all beckon high-school girl consumers with the fabulous spectre of the prom.

When we examine contemporary North American pop-cultural media representations of prom, what emerges is a host of ideologies about young womanhood, heterosexuality, and femininity. As John Fiske has pointed out about popular media in general, these kinds of pop-cultural productions are both oppressive and rebellious vis-à-vis the status quo, containing elements of evasion, jouissance, and the carnivalesque, while simultaneously reifying the most stifling, established, and dominant power relations. In what follows, I will examine how this play of positionalities occurs within the consumer space of prom, through the lens of a selection of American and Canadian teen magazines and one Hollywood film. The texts I study here suggest that North American female audiences of popular cultural productions are

invited to conform, resist, reinvent, adopt a skeptical attitude towards, playfully engage with, but never entirely disengage from, the prom event. This means that there are various (albeit a delimited range of) ways that teen audiences are reflected, imagined, and invited to imagine themselves through the discourses of promland, and this collection of prom performances contradict, overlap, compete, and yet do not cancel each other out. All of the representations of how to “do” prom promise that the participants will remember this magical and transformative night forever, while normalizing a stunning display of hypergendered and highly sexualized behaviors, acts of conspicuous consumption, and fantasy and fairy-tale role-playing. Promland promotes what Chrys Ingraham calls the heterosexual imaginary, a range of discourses regulating behavior in accordance with heterogendered norms—and it privileges this form of desire as the only legitimate one. This essay will examine some of these representations in detail, focusing specifically on what I identify as one key rhetorical pattern in youth media about the prom: namely, the operational discourse of hip consumerism.

The prom is hyped to such an extent in teen girl mass media that it might be more accurate to describe this cultural phenomenon as the “prom mystique.” Likewise we could refer to the fictionalized version of the spring formal dance that appears

in advertisements and Hollywood film as the space of “promland.” Within the prom mystique we can identify three rhetorical strategies that are intended to affect (and purport to reflect) the way teenage girls anticipate and prepare for this event. These three marketing discourses, used individually and together, are designed to shape girls’ expectations of the prom and drive their consumer behavior. To sell the prom mystique the media of youth culture employ first, nostalgic motifs and icons from children’s fairy tales; second, the appeal to rebellion, nonconformity, and individualism; and third, ideologies of feminism in the guise of girl power. All together, these strategies could be called hip consumerism. In what follows, I will trace how these three different varieties of commodified coolness are promoted within promland, in order to speculate about how they operate to enculturate girls as spectators, consumers, and participants in this coming-of-age ritual.

Prom Hype: Mythification

When I was a very little girl, I had this fantasy about going to a big fancy ball in a Viennese palace. . . . There I was, wearing an exquisite satin ball gown, in the arms of some handsome European count.
—Jeanne Bekker, *The Big Night Out*

It’s a girl’s dream to look pretty and dress

up. At prom, you get to feel like royalty.
—American Idol Diana DeGarmo, in *TeenProm Magazine*

It is safe to say that the prom rarely, if ever, lives up to the hype that precedes it. The media manufactures great expectations for this monumental event, which exaggerate its importance, fun-factor, and potential for romance. Marketed by magazine advertisers and editors as “the most important night of your life,” “a dream,” “a night you will remember the rest of your life,” the prom appears to require weeks of preparation, specifically involving beauty make-overs; every issue inevitably will include a “prom countdown” during which the reader must engage in hair and makeup rituals and purchase requisite cosmetic products from the publications sponsors as part of their metamorphosis. It is imperative that female teenagers successfully and thoroughly engage in these beauty and body make-overs, the magazines argue, if the night itself is to be sufficiently magical and transformative.

But the sobering reality for many if not most attendees is that prom involves huge expenses, disappointing and/or disappearing dates, and, for some teens, dangerous behavior such as unsafe sex, excessive drinking, and violence (Best). To the horror of many parents, teachers, and attendees, prom events are notorious for hotel after-parties that

include an extraordinary amount of peer pressure on teens to participate in high-risk activities. During prom season it is not unusual to see news headlines such as, "What Happens When High School Prom Parties Run Amok: Drunk, Disorderly and All Dressed Up" (Heath-Rawlings), or "Mounties Bust up Boozy Prom Party." No less tragically, there are also many fables of the enchanted evening being ruined by some ridiculous mishap that results in the "ruined dress," as is evident in this excerpt from an online chat board hosted by an American magazine, but utilized by Canadian teenagers:

My prom last year was to be that fairy-tale we all dream about. My dress, a figure fitting ivory gown, was selected months in advance. My dream date asks me out. The day of the prom, I get all dressed up. The limo picks me up first to take me to my date's house. I get out and start talking with his parents. I look over and see my boss, who is way cool, heading into her back yard two doors down. I start walking across the grass to show off to her. When I reach the first driveway, disaster. The driveway had just been tarred not 20 minutes ago. I slid down on my back side, then fell face first trying to get up. My \$340 dress, \$75 shoes, and \$120 day at the salon were a black, smelly, gooey mess. If that weren't [sic] bad enough, 6 of my classmates came down the street just then

and saw me. One took a picture and showed it around for awhile. It took my mom six hours to get the tar out of my blonde hair with gasoline. (Posted January 02, 2005 06:47 PM by penny; Location: Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Earth)

OMG...that's horrible! That's really too bad! (Posted January 07, 2005 03:56 PM by beyoutiful; Location: Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Earth) (YM)

Whether the prom turns out to be "that fairy-tale we all dream about," a bore, or a high-risk activity, it is clear that this rite of passage is an important invented tradition in North American society, one that has become part of our folklore (Hobsbawm).

Separated from the realities of the lived event itself, the mystique of the prom is incredibly resilient. This is because the ideologies embedded in what Michel Foucault might call the discursive formation of promland reflect long-established Western cultural values (or rules of formation) about individuality, transformation, heterosexual romance, and the pursuit of happiness. Although it has only been practised since World War II, prom is marketed as a normal part of life for teens, a natural event, and a key part of growing up. More specifically, it has been marketed to all teens but made available exclusively to heterosexuals, as the extraordinary saga of Canadian teenager Marc Hall attests. Claiming that

“a prom is a very important thing to a teenager,” Hall filed a \$100,000 lawsuit against his Catholic high school after officials refused him entry to the event with his boyfriend on the grounds that the homosexual “lifestyle” ran contrary to school values (Kalinowski).

As Hall’s story suggests, the discursive matrix of promland effects a naturalization of heterosexuality, accomplished in popular advertising for females that explicitly links prom fashion with bat mitzvahs, quinceañera, debutante balls, and other female coming-out rituals with religious, ethnic, and classed cultural connotations—normalizing the prom as just another “established” tradition. Perhaps most important in the media under review in this study is the fact that promland is marketed similarly and through the same vendors who bring us fashions and accessories for lavish white weddings—any glance at a magazine shows immediately that most prom dresses are sold through bridal boutiques—thus inextricably linking the prom to the wedding almost as if it were a trial run. Having said that, in light of the legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada and the proliferation of gay-wedding-themed products and services (showcased at the annual National Gay and Lesbian Wedding Show and similar events), it becomes more complicated to suggest that participating in promland as a dress rehearsal for a wedding is a predominantly heterosexual activity.²

Gay or straight, prom hype, as Canadian researchers Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell suggest, affects all teens in high-school culture, whether they attend the dance or not. Prom is, as researcher Sharon Mazarella observes, widely regarded as “the Superbowl of all dates.” A fleeting event, one night, but (not unlike the other coming-of-age celebrations mentioned above) one that involves months of preparation and most often requires considerable expense—interestingly, not unlike a wedding with its formal attire, flowers and limos, and a transformative mythos. Incidentally, these marketing narratives are redelivered as part of the hype that is Brideland, courtesy of the wedding industries and their media—a fact well documented in numerous recent studies of the lavish wedding as cultural phenomenon (Wolf; Ingraham; Freeman; Otnes and Pleck). From renting a limo and a hotel room, to buying flower corsages, scheduling spa days, tux fittings, and dress alterations, the consumer practices involved in the prom and a wedding with all the trimmings are almost indistinguishable. The continuity in mass-media representations of womanhood between the prom and the white wedding serves to sediment heterofemininity as the naturalized and normal mature female identity for all women.

The technologies of feminization that operate in youth media enculturate girls through romanticizing

and mythifying this heterosexual convention. Teen media successfully promote promland by connecting it to already normalized activities in youth culture, namely, conspicuous consumption and rituals of heterogender. To experience the prom, one princess dress and one princely date is required. Girls learn this long before they attend the prom, because teen media (magazines, TV, pulp fiction, videos, films) make explicit links between the prom, becoming a woman, spectacles of feminine beauty, experiencing happiness, popularity, and romance—in other words, teen media constructs the prom as a fairy tale.

Preparing a Princess: Cinderella's Transformation

Prom 2004 was a blast!! My date and I had a wonderful time on April 24th! Thank you soo [sic] much for helping me pick out the perfect dress! As they say...Prom is all about the dress and y'all really made me feel like a princess! I had many compliments from friends, family and soo many others! Again thank you soo much!
—Kim (DavidsBridal.com)

Prom priorities are changing. Years ago, the search was for the perfect date, now it's for the perfect dress.
—Sylvi Capelaci, Style Editor, *The Toronto Sun* ("Dream Dress" 49)

Each spring the women's magazines racks, stacked with beauty, fashion, and lifestyle monthlies, and bulging with dozens of bridal magazines, bloom with another variety of colourful glossy photographic catalogues featuring beaming young women attired in dream dresses. Girls in the intended audience for these catalogues pore over the costumes, devouring the details: flowing skirts of satin and lace, crinolines and fur capes, rhinestones, sequins, and crystal tiaras. Donning these magic frocks, the magazines suggest, is the ticket to experiencing romance and momentary celebrity. They symbolize that a girl has arrived. The perfect prom dress is marketed as the *pièce de résistance* that virtually guarantees a teenage girl's night will be magical—and full of romantic possibility.

And so, a dozen years before they will purchase serialized collections of ads called *Modern Bride* and *InStyle Weddings*, a yearly crop of girl consumers will shell out for the same vendors' representations of this female rite of passage. What they will find in each season is promland, where everyone is smiling and happy all the time, where limos bearing handsome boys in tuxedos are patiently waiting, where the perfect dress will magically transform an awkward teenager into an irresistible, glamorous young woman. Promland does produce a variety of versions of feminine beauty, albeit a limited variety, reflecting an (again limited) range of interpretive positionalities

vis-à-vis the prom, from the mildly oppositional or skeptical to the playful to the thoroughly seduced and utterly enchanted. Marina Warner comments that most of the folklore circulating in North American popular culture are stories that “seek to define, within a romantic contest, appropriate male and female conduct, to endorse the correct version and—usually—reward it.” The magazines for ‘tweens and teen girls cite these fairy tales repeatedly.

Examining online commercial prom testimonials verifies immediately that the fairy tale princess is the touchstone for girls when describing how they envision themselves at the prom and, if all went well, how they felt in their dress. This despite the fact that in blogs, noncommercial websites, and interviews with academic researchers the stories girls tell most often about the reality of the prom also involve dashed hopes and disastrous dates. **Still, the fairy tale princess narrative is a mainstay of prom industry advertising,** and it is a popular rhetorical tool for girls to describe their vision of the prom experience. In prom magazines, girls are encouraged to believe that “once upon a time” (in other words, fairy tale romance and the materialization of Prince Charming/Mister Right) is inevitable, and can happen any time, but is most likely to occur at the prom. Every issue of every prom magazine can be counted on to redeliver what we might call this **Cinderella imperative,** captured succinctly by a feature in the 2005 issue

of *Your Prom Magazine* that begins: “Once upon a time there was a gorgeous prom princess . . . you! And after reading these fairy tale tips, she went to the ball and had the most enchanted evening ever!” It’s a formula which advertisers know their target audience will find compelling or at least familiar, since it is a rehearsal of the same stories little girls are inundated with through the feminine sphere of mass culture, in books, ads for clothing, Barbie, and other toys—a master narrative that will follow them into adulthood through popular cultural productions for adult women. **Cinderella’s story operates brilliantly in mass media advertising, as Jack Zipes explains, because it is a fantasmatic liberatory tale that depicts a utopian world far more interesting and satisfying than the conditions of our everyday existence.**

The Cinderella imperative is tweaked for promland, so that it has a touch of superstar, pop star, or pop-idol status. In a majority of the photographs used to sell gowns to teens, models sport visual cues of both royalty and celebrity. To be “Red Carpet Ready,” as the headline from one *Toronto Star* feature article suggests, many teens are shown wearing tiaras, costume jewelry with elaborate “gemstones,” gloves and furs, and photographed in front of castles or mansions, alongside white horses, carriages, or limos (Capelaci). Similarly, bedecked in their prom finery, teen models are pictured among flashbulbs and images of cameras to suggest they are being pursued

by the paparazzi, as they pose on red carpets, safely within crimson ropes used to keep fans at a distance (Figure 1). Numerous textual references to princesses and celebrity stardom are repeated through ads and text, as some advertisers make the connections explicit, including the case of companies that sell knock-off look-alike gowns mimicking those worn by film, TV, and music stars to award shows, or retailers who direct their text to “American Princesses.” The celebrity-princess rhetoric is summed up nicely by *The Toronto Sun’s* style editor Sylvi Capelaci in a prom fashion feature:

For Cinderellas, the fantasy begins with a frothy pink, poufy princess ballgown—tiara and all. For other teen queens who picture themselves as the shining starlet demurely draped in satin, their inspiration comes from Oscar’s Red Carpet and Hollywood’s

leading ladies. (“Red Carpet” 48)

The Cinderella imperative is exhaustively promoted in pop culture, as ads for all kinds of products from cleaning agents to body creams are connected to magical transformations, relief from domestic drudgery, and the acquisition of youth, beauty, status, and wealth.

Promland’s use of this folklore is only one example of a larger phenomenon whereby, from girlhood to her wedding day and beyond, a wide range of female spectators and consumers are inundated with the manufactured desire to emulate Cinderella. The rhetoric of every woman, since she was a little girl, dreaming of that day, that

dress . . . is replayed endlessly in the media, part of the process of “girling” young women, enculturating them within discursive practices of compulsory

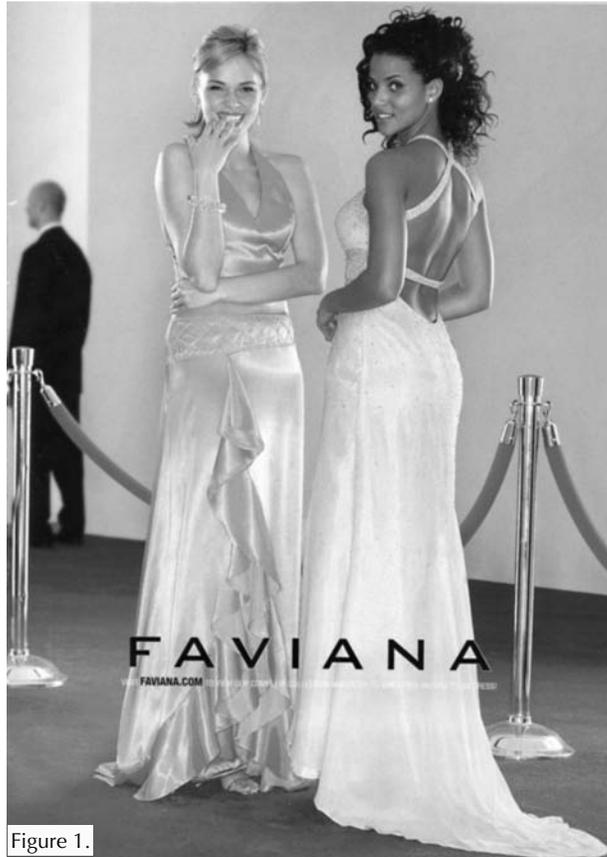


Figure 1.

heterosexuality (Butler). As Kay Stone observes, the image of the princess is recurrent “in various forms of popular entertainment, notably in romantic tales on television and in comic books, magazines and novels read almost exclusively by women.” Thus, Stone concludes, “Even women who have shaken the persistent princess in their daily lives return to her in fantasy through such popular materials.”

At moments in her life when she performs rituals of coming of age, a female who looks to pop culture for inspiration will find princesses, as if to suggest that these are the models and mentors women want.

Not all dresses are poufy white bridal meringue models; many of the designs promoted for teenagers to wear to the prom are what we might describe as vampy. These tight, sheer, slit-to-there sexy numbers are the inspiration for school dress codes and parental panic, and a great teaser for marketing purposes. For example, one story in the *New York Post* screamed the headline, “WOULD YOU LET

YOUR DAUGHTER WEAR THIS PROM DRESS?” and featured a story about (and illustration of) a particularly revealing design of dress that was proving to be very popular among teens (Figure 2). Journalist Danica Lo writes:

This prom dress is so skimpy, even the designer’s CEO wouldn’t let his teenage daughter wear it. But the dangerously revealing gown, prominently advertised in *Seventeen Prom*, *YM Prom* and *Teen Prom*, and on sale in a Midtown shop, is a top seller for the company this season.

And, sure enough, in an interview with the paper, Nick Yeh of Xcite (the company that designed the dress) admitted, “I was shocked when I first saw it, but now it’s one of our top 20 dresses nationwide;” nevertheless, he continues, “I have a 15-year-old daughter and, no, I would not recommend she wear this dress” (Lo). And yet, whether it is a princess dress or a vampy one, the folkloric discourse of metamorphosis is ever



Figure 2.

present: the rituals of prom are about a magical night when a girl becomes a woman, and what “type” of woman she becomes might be foreshadowed in her prom fashion savvy (virgin or vamp?).

In promland, girls consume mainstream and idealized representations of gender and sexuality that are at once empowering, entertaining, fun, and deeply confusing, even contradictory. This situation is not unlike what they will find in more mature publications such as *Cosmopolitan*. In Richard Keller Simon’s analysis, “almost every position the magazine takes in its essays, stories, and even in its advertising images is effectively countered by other sets of essays, stories, and images” (120). The result, Simon argues, is that the *Cosmo* reader is presented with a fragmented narrative from which she must assemble coherent messages about gender and sexuality. Therein lies an opportunity for a kind of creative agency—a point I will return to. Prom magazines place images of sexualized young women, wearing stilettos and glittering gowns with daring décolletage, alongside articles about going bowling after the prom and having fun with your (desexualized) “guy pals.” Illustrations of pastel plastic-packaged lipsticks adorned with flowers and sparkles with instructions on how to apply cosmetics—which assume it’s the first time a girl does her face—coexist with quizzes to identify your “prom persona” or “dating style”—which assume some amount of readerly

sophistication. Articles such as “The New Rules for Prom” advise teens that it’s no longer required for them to wait for “Mr. Right” to call and invite them to the dance, since they can go alone and manage just fine. But, on the following dozen or so pages, all the images of girls at the prom are suitably heterosexually coupled, and the monthly fiction feature is a stock romance narrative.

Teen media are seductive tools of enculturation that require critical negotiation and interrogation. And interestingly enough, as I will demonstrate, if we take a closer look at what at first appear to be trivial and disposable teen cultural productions like *Seventeen Magazine* and *Your Prom Magazine*, it becomes evident that these media actually deliver the tools for their own partial deconstruction or negotiation to readers. These media evidence a flexibility that gives teen girl readers (some limited) room to manoeuvre their way through the rules and rituals of being a teenager, and the ever-shifting regulations of what is cool and attractive. In other words, teen fashion media selling girls the prom mystique also are in the business of seriously addressing the angst of adolescence, humourously, sympathetically, and creatively. Teen magazines “endlessly reflect upon the reader,” writes Leslie Rabine, “who she is, what she does, what she wants, and what she thinks” (61). The magazines also encourage teen readers to use the products they are selling to construct “your own prom

style,” by envisioning the dance as an opportunity for creative experimentation, reminding their audience that they have the power to exercise their (consumer) choice (between dresses, cosmetics)—and luckily (or not) these publications offer guidance with these negotiations and all-important decisions about identity formation and self-presentation.

Thus the media of prom-land seek to win girl spectators’ trust by reassuring readers that there are hundreds of ways to look beautiful—cover taglines promise “768 prom looks” or “323 dress styles” and “12 prom updos that don’t suck”—all requiring the purchase of a collection of fetishized prom accessories (beaded bags and silver high heels, rhinestone hair clips and elbow-length gloves), the services of a team of professionals (hair, skin, nails, diet)—and of course, a dress, or more

accurately, *The Dress*. Underscoring its importance as the quintessential coming-out ritual for all girls, teen magazines focus on the dramatic dilemmas of

girls planning for prom. A standard feature of prom magazines are the cautionary tales, which will include numerous features, describing the terrible things that girls fear might befall them on this night of nights. A ruined dress is only the beginning and girls are warned not to fall on the stairs, knock over the photo backdrop, or spill a drink on their date, and to beware of bathroom tissue stuck to shoes, spinach in teeth, and embarrassing dance partners (Figure 3). In addition, magazines will print numerous “letters” sections to which girls send



Figure 3.

their true-life stories about prom night implodings. These “agony pages” (or “agony boards,” in online forums) are often tragicomic in tone, and through

them girls are invited to laugh at themselves and each other, to feel liberated by the freedom to be less than perfect—the implication being that these “oops” moments happen to everyone. This segment of the magazines demonstrates some of the reasons that girls might read the publications, even if they do not plan to attend the prom at all: here is a text-mediated readerly community where girls can bond (virtually) over shared experience, engage in empathy, find some “peer” advice and strategies, and escape into a partially fictional world (promland) where being a teenage girl is about having fun and not taking yourself too seriously. Of course, these magazines, and specifically the agony columns, appear to acknowledge teenage fears sympathetically, while at the same time promland’s marketers are in the business of amplifying and inspiring more anxieties and then (not coincidentally) offering to fulfill or fix them through additional purchases of fashion and cosmetic products. It is unlikely this irony is lost on readers, as many researchers have found that ‘tween and teen

girls are able to negotiate their experience of girl magazines critically—a point I will return to.

As feminist cultural theorist Mica Nava observes, a particularly interesting way to analyze the practices

of youth consumerism is to examine the complex dynamics through which disciplinary power is exercised and the means by which it is contested by young shoppers themselves. In this light, it is useful to consider one feature of prom magazines that deftly illustrates this compromised and conditional flexibility: the prom horoscope, or “promscope” (Figure 4). Magazines suggest that whether your star sign is Pisces or Capricorn could make a difference in how to self-present at the prom—and for each star sign there are



Figure 4.

corresponding ideas about colours, dress styles, and “looks” for prom. The promscope feature is one way for girls to assemble a path through, and negotiate the overwhelming range of, options featured on the pages preceding and following the promscope astrological feature. Then again, ignoring your promscope is

always an option, if the reader professes to be above such “superstitions” or just doesn’t fancy the fashions that editors have aligned with her birthday. Teen media outline the rules of prom consumerism and simultaneously delineate permissible ways to bend them, such that between the covers of these mass media texts are a range of discourses of conformity and engaged resistance for readers to select from. The only option that is noticeably absent is skipping out on the prom experience altogether.

A *Cinderella Story* and Girl Power: Cinematic Fairy Tales for Teens and ‘tweens

Some postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale’s production of gender only to re-inscribe it within some other unquestioned model of subjectivity.
—Christina Bacchilega

Prom isn’t the stuffy school dance it used to be! Check out what’s changed (and what’s stayed the same) about your favorite night of the year.
—“New Rules For Prom,” *TeenProm Magazine*

It’s safe to say that beauty, romance, princessness, and consumerism are intricately linked in the female imaginary, courtesy of mass media. Although the best known fairy tales transmit the values of a

culture, reflecting established social scripts, they also shift with each interpretation/retelling—thus **folklore narratives can reflect a challenge to the status quo or they can merely reflect it.** Depending on the version of *Cinderella* that is told, the heroine can appear **passive or active, docile or strategic, a victim of cruel fate or an agent in charge of her life.** “An examination of the best-known stories,” Marcia Liberman argued thirty years ago, “shows that active, resourceful girls are in fact rare; most of the heroines are passive, submissive, and helpless.” However we can’t ignore that, in many contemporary cinematic fairy tales, the opposite is true: from *A Cinderella Story*, to *The Prince and Me*, to *Ella Enchanted*, it is resourceful, courageous and risk-taking, active female teenagers who save the day, themselves, and their guy pals from whatever dire circumstances befall them. But they also, at key moments in the filmic narrative, find themselves dreaming of taking the easy way out of their teenage dilemmas—in other words, they pine for a princely rescue, however much they acknowledge its unlikely to happen—before they realize that they must be self-reliant, gutsy, and dynamic in shaping their own destiny. By focusing on the moments of passivity in cinematic folklore, Linda Parsons reaches the conclusion that it is still rare to find a tale that portrays heroes and heroines who truly stretch the boundaries of gender-appropriate behavior. However, I suggest that by focusing on the oscillation between

passivity and activity, a recurring plot device in these texts, we see evidence of a self-conscious, intentional, and ironic deployment of the modernized Cinderella fairy tale, specifically because it is malleable enough to be both critical *and* demonstrative of stereotypical gender performances. The ambiguity of Cinderella is one reason why media adopt it to sell a range of versions of femininity (and masculinity and romance) to generations of girls and women. Parsons notes that revisions of fairy tales such as Cinderella *can* be positively feminist in their representations of female self-determination and their critiques of patriarchal structures—even within versions that appear at first look to be simply re-enacting and celebrating traditional feminine scripts; for Parsons the issue is that these princes and princesses *rarely* break the mould.

The teen films that utilize a Cinderella narrative sometimes also incorporate the high school prom as part of the plot. The patterns in advertising and articles within magazines come together as a consistent narrative in films marketed to teen audiences. The discourse of hipness becomes a significant element of the prom mystique in *A Cinderella Story* (2004), a romantic comedy for teens starring Hillary Duff, a pop-star who is widely regarded as 'tween royalty—perhaps occupying the space vacated by Britney Spears. A close look at pop culture's cinematic presentations of the prom reveals that, although the

princess bride fantasy is clearly evident there, often it's subtly updated and made modern, edgy, and hip through the use of irony. In Duff's case, Cinderella in promland is updated by adding a bit of third-wave feminism, known as "girl power"—and the effect is a film that is about rituals of teen culture, nostalgia and romantic childhood fairy tale, and hip consumerism all rolled into one.

The opening sequence contains a voice-over by the heroine Sam who explains that once upon a time there was a girl who lived happily with her widowed father. The bliss of girlhood abruptly ends when he remarries and dies soon after. Sam is left at the mercy of her evil stepmother and stepsisters who force her to be their domestic servant and to work long hours at the family diner. Real life is miserable, as Sam is an outsider, nerdy and uncool at school. At the prodding of her fairy godmother restaurant manager, Sam disobeys her stepmother and attends the Homecoming Halloween dance, a costume prom. Resplendent in a borrowed wedding gown and white mask, Samantha makes a grand entrance at the prom filmed in spotlight, with a tracking shot that emphasizes her slow descent down a staircase while an audience of peers gape in silent awe (and, for the girls, overt envy) at this mysterious stunning creature. Sam/Cinderella meets her Prince Charming—who turns out to be Austin, the most popular boy in high school. At the stroke of midnight and just as she

is about to be crowned prom queen, the masked princess flees, inadvertently dropping her cell phone, the only clue to her identity. Predictably, the cocky but chivalrous Prince Austin retrieves it.

The morning after this enchanted night her lack of self-esteem returns and our modern Cinderella, Sam, is certain that Austin will not be interested in her in real life. Her fears are not unfounded, since, without the spectacle of her fabulous princess wedding dress and rhinestone tiara, Sam is invisible to Austin, who knows her only as an anonymous waitress, as “diner girl.” Importantly, the audience is intended to connect the donning of the poufy white dress with Sam’s victory of capturing the lead man’s interest.³ The connection between beauty-romance and female power through enacting a spectacle and securing the approving male gaze is explicit. As Iris Young suggests, “our pleasure in the fantasy of clothes is partly imagining ourselves in those possible stories” (208). Thus, within the diagesis of this film, the female spectator is encouraged to consume and celebrate the classic Cinderella fairy tale narrative: transformed by the perfect dress, our heroine enjoys a magical evening that culminates in romantic love and rescue. So where does the hip, girl-powered, edge occur in this film? Admittedly, in the end Sam negotiates and refuses to cash in on the magical fairy tale power inherent in the bridal dress. Yet for the theatre audience, the image of Cinderella and her

Prince Charming is powerfully present even after the credits roll—and this is partly to do with the fact that the poster for this film features Duff in her Cinderella gown.

Important, however, is Sam’s choice of accessories—posed in a poufy white dress, our Heroine opts for pink high-top running shoes (Figure 5). The shoes are all-important, signifying Sam’s implicated and ironic positionality vis-à-vis the dominant order of things. The magical moment of transformation in this modern fairy tale comes not through the perfect fit of a glass slipper, not through an active prince’s quest for a passive female awaiting rescue, but when Sam decides it’s time to depart from the status quo and believe in herself. It is here that this film complicates the traditional romance narrative to become closely aligned with mainstream third-wave feminism. Empowered by the bliss that resulted from her remarkably successful performance of beautiful young womanhood at the prom, Sam becomes determined to make her life happen instead of waiting for Austin to recognize her worth. With a surge of self-confidence—notably not inspired by being chosen as the prom queen, although of course, she was—Sam confronts her stepmother, refusing to be a domestic servant any longer. Moreover, she gives up her investment in “useless” Austin becoming the perfect boyfriend, and exclaims, “the thing is, I don’t care what people think about me . . . because

I believe in myself. And I know that things are gonna be okay.” Luckily, Austin sees the light and becomes less useless, and so, consistent with the happy ending viewers expect, Sam gets both Austin and an acceptance letter to Princeton University. This girl heroine is able to wear a princess dress and get voted prom queen and achieve her personal educational goals and aspirations. The boy is really just icing. She has her whole life ahead of her.

Notably, in *A Cinderella Story*, we can’t bet on the prince—to borrow a phrase from Jack Zipes—as part of the joyous conclusion, because Sam’s happy ending is really about her own individual empowerment, self-actualization, and transformation into a liberated young woman, not into someone’s betrothed. Again, this is a significant departure from the code of romance narratives in which a young woman’s worth is determined by her affiliation with boys (Christian-Smith). In both *A*

Cinderella Story and *The Prince and Me*—another cinematic adaptation of the same fairy tale released the same year for the same audience—the heroine

elects to pursue her life’s educational goals over settling for life with even the cutest and wildly richest boy. Both of these teen (or “tween”) films show that the discourse of girl power is compatible with the Cinderella narrative, and the result is a portrait of girlhood with an active heroine who has agency, ambition, and self-determination, yet can still play dress-up. In this film about the life-changing event of the prom, Sam as Cinderella manages to be a hip girl heroine who is also the belle of the ball appearing onscreen in a bridal gown now being

sold to teenagers by David’s Bridal in *YM Prom* and *Seventeen Prom* (Figure 6). In other words, the sex-gender ideologies represented through these discourses about romance are seemingly contradictory but, in fact, layered and embedded, so



Figure 5.

that audiences are offered a selection of interpretative positionalities to choose between and among—ranging, as John Stephens proposes, from the passive to the interrogative.

And thus the synergy of the three marketing strategies of the prom mystique are illuminated: with a little help from the fairy godmothers at David's Bridal, Cinderella the hipster uses girl power to make the captain of the football team drop that ball and follow her to Princeton. After viewing this fairy tale film featuring a fictional prom, and watching Sam/Hillary Duff negotiate her implication in the Cinderella imperative, girl consumers are welcome to demonstrate that they too refuse to buy into outdated ideals of passive femininity by actively (and ironically) buying a sequined white wedding gown, (apparently) symbolic of rebellion and nonconformity. As Stuart Hall states, the operation of a discourse like the hip

celebrity-Cinderella in prom-land requires a system of icons or codes immediately recognizable to the target audience; in this instance, it is *The Dress* as well as Hilary Duff's pop-star persona that operate as icons to effectively transmit a message to the teen audience. Once that message is decoded, it reveals a connection between consumer behaviour and empowerment, self-actualization, liberation and pleasure. Seductively, *A Cinderella Story* transmits the message that *buying into* the prom and its costuming, posing, and hypergendered performativity does not necessarily mean *selling out* female independence, adventurousness, or forfeiting the cool factor.



Figure 6.

From Your Prom Magazine to Fashion18: Hip Consumerism

Fairy tales can be told and retold so that

they challenge and resist, rather than simply reproduce, the constructs of a culture.
—Maria Tatar

Proms are much like weddings: women who might normally reject the conventions of femininity suddenly find themselves strangely seduced by their appeal.
—Amy Best

In youth cultural media, we get versions of even the most feminist, rebellious, and hip anti-princess young women unconsciously harboring long-buried Cinderella fantasies. The motif of Cinderella-with-an-edge is cited in chick lit novels like *Slim Chance* by Canadian author Jackie Rose, wherein a young newly engaged independent (pro-feminist) and professional (pink collar, entry-level) female protagonist is shocked by how instantly and utterly she is seduced by the princess bride imperative, finding herself unable to think of anything but shedding twenty pounds and snagging what many women consider the pinnacle of wedding gowns, a highly coveted and fetishized Vera Wang design. While she confesses she has not given much conscious thought to getting married before, and although she's been engaged for less than a week, Evie admits sheepishly that "I *do* have a few ideas" (40), about the upcoming nuptials, courtesy of the "stack of reference materials" in her

bag, including the heavyweights (literally, since these glossy magazines can sometimes run inches thick) *Martha Stewart Weddings*, *InStyle Weddings*, and *Modern Bride*. Those ideas revolve around diets and dresses, as Evie reflects,

So let's see . . . that gives me . . . about nine months. Plenty of time. But what about The Dress? How can I buy The Dress anytime soon in this state? I've at least got to be able to go dress shopping without feeling like a cow. That settles it. Starting today, I've got to get serious. (48)

Inspired by advertisements for lavish white wedding fashions dominated by images of the magical transformation into a perfect princess, Evie embarks on a quest to lose weight, to the dismay of her fiancé, from whom she grows increasingly and dangerously estranged.

Likewise on TV shows like *Sex and the City*, websites like *Bitch Magazine: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, and *indiebride.com*, we find stories of even the most sophisticated, professional, independent young women confessing their secret and guilty pleasures of wanting to dress up as fairy tale princesses. The trend is summed up nicely by both the cover art (Figure 7) and the title of Susan Jane Gilman's latest autobiographical book, *Hypocrite in a Puffy White Dress*,—a follow-up to

her first bestselling novel chronicling the challenges of modern young womanhood, entitled *Kiss My Tiara*. At the outset of her wedding planning Gilman writes,

The biggest issue was, by far, The Dress. Quite simply, I refused to wear one—at least not a traditional white one. My plan was to be “the Anti-Bride” and walk down the aisle in scarlet or black. More than anything else, big frothy wedding dresses struck me as silly and infantilizing . . . the couture of Cinderella wannabes. (322)

With seeming inevitability, however, Gilman is seduced into donning (and later purchasing) a spectacular, voluminous, beaded, sweeping, sequined, lace-trimmed, glittering princess gown which makes her feel first, flabbergasted, and second, beautiful, regal, glorious,

in short, like royalty. The same consumer fairy tale is repeated in countless contemporary feminist texts, including most remarkably in the middle of Jaclyn

Geller’s *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique*, a scathing critique of the wedding industry and the women who buy into it. These narratives about conformity, feminism, and the spectre of the white wedding dress are critical to consider in light of the fact that the prom is marketed as a practice run, or parody of the lavish white wedding (Butler; Best). Retailers who can attract and satisfy the dress dreams of teen prom-goers have a good chance of seeing repeat customers sporting engagement rings, as is evident in the following testimonial on

the David’s Bridal website:

Prom was wonderful! I was stressing out about

hypocrite in a pouffy white dress

tales of growing up groovy and clueless

“Thank you, O Lord,
for sending us
Susan Gilman’s tales...”
—FRANK MCCOURT



Figure 7.

finding the perfect dress that no one would have and I went online and found it! I called my local DB and they had it in! me and my mom rushed to the store and I bought it! I was so excited! I got many compliments and my boyfriend said I looked beautiful! thanks DB! I'll be back some day for my wedding dress!
—DavidsBridal.com

Cinderella's rags-to-riches (or ordinary-to-fabulous) story operates as one node in a discursive network that is targeted toward an audience occupying the liminal space between girlhood and young womanhood. The result is a bevy of pop-cultural fictionalizations about this coming-of-age ritual that both cite and depart from traditional versions of femininity and womanliness.

This indeterminacy is hardly surprising. As Gail Fauschou writes, echoing many other theorists, fashion “can constitute a site of freedom or restriction, submission or rebellion, eroticism or domination, identity or difference” (69), but most importantly, any critical analysis of fashion “must be aware of the intricately entwined relations not only of power but also of desire and play.” So much seems to depend on *how* The Dress is worn, (with running shoes, for example) and what ratio of irony to conformity is established and communicated by its wearer. For example, if they are reading the spring

issue of *Fashion18*, a Canadian teen magazine, girls are confronted with numerous variations on the celebrity-Cinderella theme that illustrate what Roland Barthes calls vaccination logic: an anti-princess discourse is present in small doses to inoculate the reader so that she may still participate in the pleasure of prom culture as a hip consumer, indulge in nostalgic childhood fantasies, and play dress-up games with elaborate costumes. In *Fashion18* the familiar prom princess fashion photograph spread of designer dresses exists, but the photographic setting is not a castle or garden but a “greasy spoon” diner. To tip off readers that there is definitely something different, something edgy, about this version of promland, models are posed with fries, malts, and burgers—hardly food fit for a princess?

Sprawling in booths looking alternately bored and playful, the models exhibit an awkwardness that does nothing to display the formalwear to its greatest advantage. The 1950s *mise en scène* is an ironic and nostalgic throwback to a mythical time when life was simpler and binary sex-gender roles were clear. The staging operates as a commentary suggesting that these teens, although dressed in their formal finery, are nevertheless doing the prom differently. This is clearly self-conscious play in promland, since you would not find a princess at a greasy diner. Or would you? Of course, this is exactly the premise of *A Cinderella Story* and the predicament of invisible

Sam, a.k.a. "diner girl." A few pages further in *Fashion18*, the reader will find predictable articles on how to pick the correct prom makeup to match the reader's personality and dress, and prom hairdos to make yourself princess perfect.

Yet even further into the publication is an article on boycotting the official prom and opting instead for an anti-prom party. "Does the Prom Make You Want to Puke?" asks the headline, alongside a film still from the cult horror flick *Carrie*, "then have an anti-prom throw-down!" The article explains how to mark this rite of passage by organizing an alternative celebration. Interestingly the writers suggest making the anti-prom into a costume ball (another citation of *A Cinderella Story*). That *Fashion18* published this one-page prom parody seems evidence of considerable self-consciousness. The author takes her own publication to task for incessantly "shoving prom down your pretty little throat." This inoculation does not, however, displace the cumulative weight of hundreds of pages of ads for prom dresses and makeup in this magazine, nor is it intended to. Instead this editorial appears because *Fashion18* knows that its readers might see themselves as too cool for the prom played straight. The same hip consumerist logic appears in a feature article by Bernadette Morra in *The Toronto Star's* fashion section. With the headline "Show your edge on prom night," the feature advises teen readers that they should "Raid grandad's closet

for a suit; add punk concert pins; [or] crazy socks [when] dressing for the prom"(HO2) This ad-hoc approach to prom fashion has just enough irony to maintain its edge, demonstrating how the rituals of promland consumption involve both acts of conforming (wear formal wear) and flourishes of individuality (punk pins). So, enacting what Raymond Williams calls the magic of advertising, the magazine incorporates the spectators' critical skepticism, and replies with another version of promland, characterized by edgy humor. There is a requisite cool-sexy factor that must be carefully orchestrated to fit with the girly-princess element; and as in *A Cinderella Story*, the "anti-prom" costume ball still sells expensive gowns to teens, so there's no harm in it from a vendor's perspective.

Gender Performativity in Promland

I had been looking forward to my senior prom since I was old enough to know what a prom was. And I had always known I wanted a red dress. When I was browsing online I found it! My ideal dream dress! I had to have it! So I went to the store closest to me to find it and they didn't have the right colour! So I called another store, and lucky me they had it, and in my size too. So I drove 2 hours away to try it on, and it was perfect on me! I did get my dream dress after all, and I received

so many compliments all night long, even from strangers at the restaurant! I felt like a princess at a ball, and of course I had my handsome prince to share it all with! Thanks David's Bridal!!!!
—Nissa, Class of 2004 (DavidsBridal.com)

Hi, I'm Jena. I went last September looking for a perfect dress to wear to the Ball in May, I knew I wanted to have a simple and elegant dress I went over to the sale wedding dresses and found the perfect dress for me. So thanks to David's Bridal my fairy tale dream came true.
—(DavidsBridal.com)

Which shall it be: the red ballgown or the white wedding dress? In fact the dress is, of course, only the beginning of the intricate set of beauty rituals outlined in promland to complete the magical transformation from girl to young woman. Just like Cinderella who is rescued from domestic slavery and the wasteland of her mundane peasant life through the acquisition of a magic gown and glass slippers, the promland mystique advertises beauty products and fashions as the tickets to a girl's enchanted metamorphosis. In the process, as Leslie Rabine argues about women's fashion magazines, these representations "inseparably entangle signs of oppression and liberation within the images of the fashionable female body" (60). As such, it is important to consider the factors of resistance,

play, and pleasure involved in the beauty- and body-practices that are part of participation in promland, and what we might call the strategic deployment of femininity as a textually-mediated interpersonal discourse (Smith 37).

The prom magazines and films in which the prom features prominently always supply audiences with an enormous amount of information about how to transform oneself to be "prom ready." This practical knowledge or code of conduct is useful for young women who seek behaviour guidelines, but also provides instruction in femininity and artifice, the skills in cosmetics and costuming associated with heterofemininity. Herein lies one justification for Canadian teens to buy the magazines even if the dresses advertised are unavailable for purchase, as was the case until recently when several brands began to be sold in local Canadian retailers and through bridal boutiques. In so far as they are featured in Hollywood film and the pages of *Seventeen Prom* and *Fashion 18*, the beauty rituals associated with promland look like a lot of fun. Usually performed with a group of friends, adventures in dress-shopping sprees and beauty make-overs appear as imaginative opportunities for creativity and play (Best). And it is certainly the case that real-life explorations in prom shopping allow some girls to flex their spending power, bond with their buddies and mothers, and experiment with versions of femininity. A feature in

The Toronto Sun told the story of 17-year-old B.C. high-school student Chelsea Lee who

(with her mom) traveled across Canada to find the perfect prom dress and eventually hired a Toronto designer to fashion a one-of-a-kind gown according to her strict directions and vision. Chelsea was underwhelmed by all the “fairy tale poufy pink princessy” dresses she found in stores and instead wanted something sleek, sexy, dark coloured and unique. (Capelaci, “Dream Dress”)

As Chelsea’s willingness to shop till she drops, but resistance to the “princess imperative” signified by the overrepresentation of “poufy” pink gowns saturating the market suggests, girls primping for the prom may purchase all sorts of products and perform different beauty rituals with or without fully identifying with ideologies of compulsory heterogender connected to the Cinderella mythology (Mangleburg and Bristol). In this way, the magazines become significant to readers because they demonstrate a range of “types” of womanliness that are available to young women—again, not without omissions. Considering Judith Butler’s now-famous observation that the appearance of natural heterogendered identity is accomplished via the repeated enactment of particular stylizations of the body, we might wonder how to distinguish a truly resistant performance

within promland. I am not suggesting that opting out of the prom is the only resistance possible. Instead I am interested in the complex ordering and operation of the discursive formation that is promland, located within a productive relationship between spectators/audiences and the textual media of youth culture.

Through a Foucaultian feminist theoretical framework (Bordo; Bartky; Sawicki), the micropractices of prom prep appear to be excellent examples of how the technologies of gender operate to discipline docile female bodies and subjects. In her analysis of the beauty myth, Naomi Wolf explains that the seemingly harmless rituals of makeup and dress-up associated with the prom contain ideological imperatives that mandate behavioural modification and encourage rigorous self-examination and monitoring—though they are marketed as harmless girly fun and blissful self-indulgence. And yet, to acknowledge that there is a code of femininity at work in the texts of promland does not foreclose all possibilities for teenage readers’ agency—in fact, quite the opposite. Through their engagement with the prom mystique in mass media representations of this event, teen and ‘tween readers are encouraged to practise actively creating themselves. This analysis assumes a dialectical relationship between the text and the reader, between the teenage girl as an agent and the codes of sex and gender in the texts and the consumer marketplace

they represent. This active interplay is overtly figured in the magazines themselves, with cover taglines that encourage readers to mix and match looks, experiment with styles, and engage in fantasy. Within the “interpretive circles” (Smith 1988) provided by these publications, girls are not only encouraged to experience pleasure in the masquerades of femininity while maintaining a slightly skeptical but engaged and curious engagement with these heterofeminine ideals. More interestingly, they are repeatedly encouraged to demonstrate their edginess and resistance, nonconformity and (consumer) sovereignty by finding the most distinctive dress (extreme retro pouf, shockingly vamp), the coolest accessories (punk pins, running shoes), and the most unique and unlikely after-prom-party venue (diner, bowling alley). In other words these magazines and films suggest what Stuart Hall has called a kind of resistance through rituals, by flirting with subcultural (punk) fashion, for example—enacting the process by which an individual’s identity and values are expressed through their subtly “subversive” conspicuous consumptive choices, and thus posing no threat to magazine sponsors like David’s Bridal (Heath and Potter).

Teen media assumes that young girls and women take pleasure in acting out fictions, and yet are savvy and skeptical consumers of cultural messages and commodities marketed to them. The authors and

advertisers in promland know, just as Janice Radway revealed in her work on women’s popular culture and readers of romance fiction novels, that teen and ‘tween consumers willingly engage in the playful, pleasurable fantasy of romance fairy tales—while at the same time seeing themselves as implicated and resistant participants. Radway found that “readers are quite willing to acknowledge that the romances that so preoccupy them are little more than fantasies” (204) which bear little or no resemblance to their daily lives; nevertheless female audiences engage in mass media fashion/beauty and romance literatures as a form of escape, inspiration, or self-relection. The discourse of hip consumerism in teen magazines and films acknowledges explicitly that girls can enjoy the prom mystique without making an absolute commitment to or identification with its ideologies (Moore). Promland is a discursive “girl’s space” to adopt a term from Angela McRobbie, in which resistance to heterogendered norms might take the form of performing highly fetishized and/or sexualized versions of femininity—as a way to disrupt the institutional space of the high-school gymnasium, where, for example, on most other days girls might be required to wear school uniforms or conform to restrictive dress codes. This type of resistance might seem reactionary and futile, but we can read girls’ pleasure in promland and its rituals as experiments with conformity and disruption of norms, trying on

and contesting the hegemonic versions of femininity and the limited narratives available about sexuality and gender for young women to understand themselves and their lives. In Iris Young's analysis, "one of the privileges of femininity...is an aesthetic freedom, to play with shape and colour on the body, to don various styles and looks, and through them exhibit and imagine unreal possibilities" (208). These "theatrical imaginings" serve girls and women in the process of negotiating discourses of sexuality, gender—and importantly, power (Young 208).

The girls and the advertisers that target them understand that a desire for the commodities of the prom mystique and being "susceptible to a seduction by a shiny surface" (Thornham 141) does not in itself serve as evidence that the consumer is irrevocably and passively indoctrinated—they might just as easily be seeking playful pleasure in fictions (Thornham 141; Kellner). The rhetoric of *too-hip-for-the-prom-but-wouldn't-miss-it!* characterizes much of teen media culture, part of a strategic trend designed to gain the confidence of audiences who find conspicuous but hip consumerism appealing (Frank).

The jouissance of preparing for prom is part of the ritual of girlhood for all teens, but more intensely for those who can physically attend the event. And yet, when participation in the prom assumes its attendees will don lavish dresses, identify as heterosexual, and feast and dance all night, **some teens will be left out**

of the celebration by virtue of not fitting into, nor seeing their lives and values reflected in, or simply not having the resources to participate in these rituals. Religion, cultural tradition, sexual orientation, physical ability, economic class, or geographical/regional location—there are numerous reasons for teens to forgo the prom experience. Obviously, when mainstream youth media normalizes the prom ritual as the quintessential coming-of-age event, and promotes it as an essential, normal, and natural step toward adult femalehood, issues of exclusivity arise. **Within the pages of promland magazines, however, there is a suggestion that "everyone" is at the prom,** visually communicated through the use of a diverse range of male and female models from the spectrum of racial and ethnic heritages. One might expect to find exclusively white, blond, slim female models prominently displayed in the magazines, but in fact this is not the case. Although it may be true that models who fit these physical specifications are overrepresented in ads, an entirely unscientific and informal investigation of the teen prom magazines reveals that there are far more female models of Asian, African, Caribbean, and mixed racial heritages than are to be found in adult women's magazines such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan*. This is not to suggest that in the visual economy of promland, there are no overt and predictable patterns of racialized and sexualized representation. Almost without

exception, in advertisements where there are two or more female models photographed, the one with the lightest hair and skin tone will be foregrounded; moreover, the physiques of most models are extremely slim and Barbie-esque, while their hair is long and straight(ened). Finally, if female models are posed with male models, it is most likely that Caucasian girls will be seductively posed with white men, and exceptionally rare that they will appear with men of colour; and, extending this pattern, it is more likely that women of colour will be posed with white men than with men of colour—in fact there is a noticeable absence of dark-skinned male models in the genre of prom fashion advertising altogether.

As Angela McRobbie found in her studies of girl media (in the 70s and in the U.K.), teen magazines like the ones examined here assume a common experience of girlhood, a kind of exclusive sorority. By promoting the notion that all girls go to the prom the magazines effectively transmit an ideology of girlhood that disallows or disqualifies other modes of female adolescence and performances of young womanhood. And Judith Butler argues that it is exactly these exclusionary ritual performances of gender, the ones that make girls intelligible as young women, which mark other subjects as outsiders, disenfranchised and even culturally abject bodies. The legal battle of gay teen Marc Hall demonstrates clearly that the stakes are very high for teens where

prom is concerned.

Conclusion

The buying of commodities and images can be understood both as a source of power and pleasure for women (it has indeed given them a sense of identity, purpose, and creativity) and simultaneously as an instrument which secures their subordination. —Mica Nava)

The impact of one fairy tale film is amplified when the heroine's dress appears for sale from a bridal salon in every issue of teen magazines that spring—a cultural arrangement that Amy Best describes as a triangulation of romance, beauty, and consumerism. The meanings of youth cultural productions are constituted dialectically, between the text and its audience, and intertextually, through the relationships between medias and audiences—so reverberating messages about the prom are especially powerful in constructing the range of subject positions available to teen girls. To focus on these media as key sites of analysis in the emerging field of girls' studies requires the researcher to overcome several intellectual (and perhaps generational) biases/divides at once. First, the world of teen fashion beauty magazines and romance comedy films seems disposable and trite.

Young women will deny taking these media too seriously, that is, if they can even overcome the cultural stigma that is attached to consuming them, and admit to even looking at them (Mangleburg and Bristol). Second, to take trendy young female fashion seriously is also somewhat of a novel concept unless one is in the fashion-beauty-advertising industry itself. Joanne Finkelstein proposes, "There's been a strong intellectual tendency to condemn fashion as a frivolity because it bestows too great an emphasis on the trivial, and this has worked to protect fashion from the attention of those who deem it an important cultural field" (233). However, representations of the prom and its fashions in mass media are significant because, as Judith Butler has suggested, when depictions of youth experience are repeatedly cited across media, eventually they get "fixed" as the norm. Teen pop-culture constructs and appeals to an audience of young women hungry for representations of their lives, directions through the wild terrain of high school and adolescence, looking for stories that soothe and inspire. Through a network of intertextual references between youth cultural productions, the prom mystique becomes sedimented and stabilized until it seems to be what the story of prom "is." This is an example of the way that mass-media marketing constructs and commodifies the rituals of youth culture and controls the conversations about gender and sexuality. Also importantly, this process

explains how promland becomes part of the stories that our culture tells about young womanhood. And the Cinderella mystique is there, following women from girlhood through adolescence, waiting to congratulate us, suffocate us, decorate us, if a few years post-prom, we venture into brideland.

Judging by the content of teen fashion-beauty magazines and Hollywood films for 'tween and teen audiences, the prom is a tremendously important social ritual in the formation of adolescent female identities. The prom is represented as a liminal space where girls become young women, transformed by their participation in what appears as a costume ball. The adoption of a modernized Cinderella motif is a key part of the discursive formation of promland with its narratives of metamorphosis, happily-ever-after, and female liberation and empowerment. Through Hollywood cinema and mass-marketed magazines, the prom becomes a vehicle for the circulation of ideologies about love and individualism, and prescriptive ideals about gender, class, and sexuality—all wrapped up in seductive visual spectacles on glossy paper and the silver screen. It is here that we see the interlocking of romance mythology with practices of accumulation and consumption. Moreover, within and alongside these predictable representations and practices are messages about agency and personal expression, about awakening and discovery, creativity and

independence—ideals that are compatible with the trend of hip consumerism and third-wave feminism (Trites).

And what do teen girl readers actually do with these images and stories? Do they imitate them, criticize them, strive to achieve them? This paper has focused on the representational and intertextual politics of the films and magazines. But much feminist research exists that demonstrates teen girls' reading relationships to mainstream fashion-beauty magazines is best described as negotiated (Humphrey; Crane; Kreshnel). Canadian feminist researcher Anna Humphrey concludes that "preteen, teenage, and college-aged women are all capable of negotiating the texts of magazines to include their own needs and views" (19). Often, Humphrey and others argue, girls view these texts as entertainment, or as educational but not dogma, as inspirational

but not imperatives—as flexible cultural texts. Marie Tatar has remarked, "we create new tales not only by retelling familiar stories, but also by reinterpreting them." Through promland the Cinderella fairy tale is revisioned and recited, circulating in the media of teen culture as a fantasy about girl power, conspicuous consumption, and coming of age. The media of promland target a 'tween/teen audience whose desire for self-expression, agency, and autonomy coexists with the residue of childhood dreams about handsome princes, fairy godmothers, and magic dresses. An updated, contemporary, and hip Cinderella narrative is an effective element of prom hype, encouraging teens to participate in a social ritual which involves both an enactment of (sometimes) oppressive heterogendered norms, and an opportunity to experience the pleasure of gender play through self-stylization.

Notes

¹ Kit McLeod, quoted in Binning (2005).

² Moreover, although it lies outside the scope of this paper, the rise of gay proms is a significant spin-off effect of the media attention generated by Mark Hall's case. For example Toronto's "Pride Prom" event, organized by Supporting Our Youth (SOY), a group that works with gay youth and the Toronto District School Board is billed as "a chance for gay, lesbian and transgendered students to let their hair down" (Tchir). See <<http://www.soytoronto.org/current/prideprom.html>>

³ Another familiar and subtle narrative emerges here about the

transformational power of a woman's love—since in keeping with the fairy tale form, Sam's beauty and affections transform the mildly beastly/cocky/materialistic Austin into a much more princely form (loving, sensitive, down to earth)—a metamorphosis that was predicted by his role as captain of "the frogs" football team (Warner). Although my focus in this paper is on girl consumers and the prom, it is interesting to consider the discourses of masculinity as they figure in *A Cinderella Story*. As Marcia Liberman notes, the prince in modern cinematic fairy tale is always rich and handsome, both before and after his "metamorphosis," while the lead female progresses from rags to riches.

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