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Lenore Wright

Baylor University, Lenore_Wright@baylor.edu

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The Wonder of Barbie: Popular Culture and the Making of Female Identity

The popular doll, Barbie, has evoked a steady stream of critical attention since her debut in 1959. Though Barbie serves primarily and properly as a toy for children, much of this attention has been generated by the secondary role she plays in popular culture—artifact of female representation. Barbie is no ordinary toy. She *mimics* the female form. She *stands for* woman within the games of make-believe in which children involve her. She *functions as* a tool for self-imagining. It is Barbie's secondary nature as a representation of woman that creates special quandaries for feminist aestheticians, quandaries that are both cultural and philosophical.¹ Included among the former are America's attraction to public personas, the influence of the acting industry on female representation, and the tacit roles iconic figures play in shaping the attributes of female beauty. The philosophic issues raised by Barbie's presence in children's play include the ideas imbedded in the concept of 'play,' Barbie's aesthetic and ontological status as a prop in games, and the effect of games and props upon gender, self-identity, and self-imagining. These concerns and issues have become intertwined in discussions of self-identity. Further examination may help to distinguish the cultural issues from the philosophical issues that female representation raises.

My aim in this paper is to explain and critique how female representation in popular culture shapes female identity. I begin by explicating the representational relationship among the following popular culture items: (1) toys that are depicted as female (2) images of women in advertising, and (3) televised representations of women. This is no small task. By adapting the analysis of games put forward by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis and Make-Believe*, I argue that Barbie *qua* representational female toy functions as a "prop" in the world of make-believe games. As such, Barbie allows children to explore identity without stipulating rules for identity-formation, thereby encouraging them to "play" with their senses of self in an empowering way. Next, I examine the depiction and posturing of women in print advertising and compare female to male representation in the advertising world. I focus particular attention upon the flawed views of women conveyed by bra advertisements, e.g. Maidenform Bra ads. I then discuss the challenges these images pose for self-identity, and I argue that unlike the games evoked by Barbie, advertising fosters a closed interpretative system, a system that promotes deterministic and negative views of women and female identity. Finally, I look briefly at key representations of women on television (dated and recent). I contend that like advertised representations of women, women of television are subject to a closed interpretative system that "reads" them against established female archetypes: nurturer, vixen, or victim. To combat the negative effects of these representations of women in advertising and on television, I argue that women must engage female representations in popular culture as children engage props in their imaginative games—as artifacts that coordinate but do not determine identity. By adopting an interpretative stance that invokes the sense of play and wonder present in games, we can create a space within the process of identity formation in which women can see (and read) themselves *not* as fixed objects within a closed system of commodification but instead as self-

determining beings.

I. Barbie Dolls and Female Representation

In a recent edition of *In Style* magazine, staff members created a “perfect, timeless beauty” by transposing the photographs of “beautiful” women onto one another.² The resulting computer generated image resembled a cross between Rachel Welch and Cindy Crawford, a figure whose face looked hauntingly like Barbie’s.³ The popularity of Pamela Anderson Lee (formerly of *Bay Watch*), Heather Locklear (formerly of *Melrose Place*), the “Barbie” twins (calendar models), and other Barbie look-alikes provides further evidence of Barbie’s aesthetic appeal, an appeal that as Kathleen Grassel observes, extends beyond the domain of childhood games and make-believe worlds. She writes, “Around the world, Barbie became an icon aspired to by both mothers and their daughters who identified desperately with the rich, blonde Barbie from that rich, blonde country.”⁴ Barbie’s portfolio reflects her financial success, independence, and material wealth: a “dream house,” a town-house, a convertible, a pool, a camper, a Jacuzzi, a couture wardrobe, a horse, a dog, and so on.

Barbie raises important questions for a study of female representation. Included among these questions is the role of gender expectations in identity-formation. What is the effect of Barbie’s aesthetic and materialistic self-presentation upon young girls? Clearly she presents an image that few women will ever attain and fewer still will strive to attain. But does this fact make Barbie *deceptive*? What illusory beliefs about femaleness might Barbie foster in young girls and boys? Kara Riddick offers this response: “Many mothers see Barbie as a negative influence; not wanting to teach their daughters that they have to be blonde and beautiful to get a boyfriend or a career, some women do not allow Barbie’s into their homes.” She adds further, “Barbie has always been an easy scapegoat for feminists.”⁵ With her impossibly long legs, big eyes, and extensive bank account, Barbie garners female power through appearance—physical and material. The reality is that such power is fictitious, apparent, and even mythic. But not everyone, nor every feminist, agrees. “Some feminists actually believe she is the symbol of female emancipation because she works and does not have to depend on men for her wealth and possessions,” Riddick argues.⁶ Barbie, in this reading, is both beautiful and empowered.

I remember vividly my first Barbie. I received her as a Christmas present when I was six years old. Additional dolls appeared over the next six years. They varied in age, exhibited multiple skin and hair color, and were both male and female. Some referenced particular human beings, for example, I owned the Donny and Marie Osmond dolls. Others were “theme” Barbies: Malibu Barbie, Holiday Barbie, and Wedding Barbie. My cousins sometimes “played Barbie” with me. But mostly I played alone. Though my own mother never worried about the possible negative effects Barbie might have upon my sense of value or my sense of self, I appreciate the concerns of mothers and fathers who see Barbie as overtly sexual, shallow, and materialistic, and, who, therefore, fear that she may conceal the truly valuable facets of femaleness. Despite the validity of these concerns, my own experiences with Barbie dolls have played out in a different way.

I became a philosopher while playing with Barbie. It occurred during one of my solitary playtimes. I was seven or eight. It was summer. While placing “Tina” and “Beverly” into their bathing suits and arranging “Amy” so that she would fit comfortably into a pool-side lounge chair, it suddenly

dawned on me that I could name one of my dolls “Lenore”; i.e., that I could assign my own name to a Barbie. I realized further that if I named my Barbie “Lenore,” she could represent me in my fictive Barbie world of make-believe. That meant, so I thought, that I could participate (albeit in a fictional way) in the lives of my Barbie dolls. I could become one of them, and they could become extensions of me. This thought fascinated me. I began thinking in rudimentary ways about self-identity. “What makes me, *me*?” I wondered. “And how is Barbie different from me?” I thought about this question as I placed “Bob” into the red convertible and drove him to the store to buy ice-cream. “Perhaps my corporeal nature—arms, legs, blood—distinguish me from my dolls,” I thought. Yes, this seemed true enough. But then another thought appeared in my mind, a *Cartesian* thought: “I can think and Barbie can’t!” I knew this to be true also. But this thought was not new to me. I had already intuited that Barbie did not possess a soul or mind. Yet I had inferred also that like me, she had an identity. She was Ken’s girlfriend, Skipper’s sister, and Kelley’s friend. “Does her prescribed identity—her name, her job, her maternal role—make her who she is?” I wondered. “Am I, then, ‘me’ because of my prescribed identity—‘daughter,’ ‘sister,’ and a host of self-chosen career persons: nurse, teacher, *Avon* salesperson, and judge? I could not decide. Then I began thinking a bit about games (this was my Wittgensteinian moment). “Am I different from Barbie because I speak a language she does not speak; because I live in a small house with my parents and brother; because we are each a part of two uniquely arranged worlds?” My thoughts continued along these lines for some time.

The imaginative acts created by my play with Barbie dolls opened my mind to deep truths and wondrous possibilities. What I had been doing with my Barbie dolls—allowing them to represent and refer to people in the world, myself included—is hardly different than what children do with toys everyday, everywhere.⁷ Children engage their minds in imaginative acts. That is, “they imagine that *p*, they entertain the proposition that *p*, they attend to and consider it.”⁸ And as Kendall Walton argues, these imaginative acts “provides practice roles one might someday assume in real life...helps one to understand and sympathize with others...enables one to come to grips with one’s own feelings...broadens one’s perspectives.”⁹

Amanda Kingsbury, author of “Social Structure of the Playground,” has observed girls and boys choosing their playmates and using their toys in play acts. Her observations support Walton’s claim that props in games of make-believe—like Barbie within a fictive world created by girls—allow children to explore their own identities vicariously through their toys. She writes, “there is usually a continuous story being told about what Barbie’s doing, where she’s going, and what she’s thinking.”¹⁰ As children turn over and engage the propositions they have in their minds—the possibilities that may exist in the fictive worlds of their toys—they begin to believe in those possibilities: they begin to “make-believe.” Even though I “knew” that Barbie could not speak, think, talk, or walk *really*, she certainly did these things vicariously through me. More importantly, the fictive world I created for Barbie in my mind was spatially and logically parallel to my world, though it was temporally distinct. In my imaginative world, it was possible for Barbie to animate herself *if and only if* I was sleeping. Whenever I awoke, she returned to her inanimate state.

Such cognitive processes occur during all games of make-believe, not solely in games that involve dolls, toys, or other “props.” But props assist in the coordination of imaginative acts. For example, I might look up at the sky and see a cloud that I imagine to be a horse. I can then imagine myself to be riding that horse, up above the trees, galloping toward the sun. The cloud in this example is the

prop in my imaginings. And as Walton argues convincingly in *Mimesis and Make-Believe*, these props, "... dolls, toy trucks and representational works of art contribute to social imaginative activities..." (21). But how is playing or make-believing with props different from role-playing or pretending? According to Walton's argument, games that involve props are different from non-prop imaginative activities in that prop-filled games generate fictional truths. He writes, "snowmen, dolls, and toy trucks are designed by their makers to induce those who see or use them to imagine men, babies, and trucks of certain sorts" (21) By "fictional truths," Walton means propositions that are true in some fictional world or other. For example, it is fictionally true in my Barbie world that Barbie wakes up and animates herself whenever I am sleeping. It is also fictionally true that Barbie is Marie Osmond or Joni Mitchell or even myself. Props, by their nature, make propositions fictional.

How do props generate fictional truths? They prompt—"mandate," says Walton—the imaginings of propositions. More specifically they cause children's minds to consider the possibilities that, for example, a doll *is* Marie Osmond, that Marie is an ice skater, that Marie likes chocolate ice cream. As stated above, props generate fictional worlds, worlds in which Marie Osmond indeed likes chocolate ice cream and is an Olympic-medalling ice skater (if this is what the imager wishes for her). As Walton sees it, props function only in human settings wherein the game in question (e.g., playing with my Marie Osmond Barbie) dictates a doll's fictional state (35-43). So in the above example, the doll *represents* a real person, namely, Marie Osmond. The doll, then, might also refer to Marie Osmond, the sister of Donny Osmond. As a prop in a game, the doll enables the child player to represent (and grapple with) relations that are reflected in the world.

In games that invoke daydreaming—in imagining a cloud to be a horse that I am riding toward the sun—props are *ad hoc*. I can imagine the cloud to be something other than a horse, but my imaginative act is constrained by my ability to see images in the clouds and to use these images to sustain my daydream. By contrast, toys are *intentional* props; that is, they were designed with the intention of serving as props in games of make-believe: "Dolls and toy trucks... are designed to be props; they were made specifically for that purpose. Moreover, dolls and toy trucks are meant to be props in games of certain kinds, ones in which they generate certain sorts of fictional truths: dolls are intended to 'count as' babies (or women, as in the case of Barbie) and toy trucks as trucks" (51). Barbie *represents* woman in the child's imaginative world wherein woman "stands in as an object for and elicits propositional claims about women that are not true of real women." ¹¹

Though all toys are designed to be props in games of make-believe, there are important differences between self-representational toys and non self-representational toys. For example, toy trucks and building blocks represent equipment and tools and generate fictional truths about real trucks and real building materials. Barbie dolls represent self-sustaining human beings, and, therefore, they generate fictional truths about real women. These fictional truths are both general and distinctive; i.e., they refer to individual girls or women, individuals who are identified as members of the class of "females," but who are also individuals with distinct identities (these include self-created identities and identities that emerge out of their familial and social relations and roles). Carol Moog articulates the important difference between dolls and non self-representational toys (such as trucks and blocks) in this way: "Unlike any other kind of toy, a doll can look back when it is regarded by its owner; it elicits a strong personal attachment. This attachment occurs not because of the particular way it is produced or dresses, but because of the way human beings operate

psychologically. Children have a built-in urge to attribute feelings to objects that even vaguely resemble human physiognomy—an urge to attribute ‘aliveness.’”¹²

Some dolls are sold with identity cues that are highly suggestible—e.g. “Baby Suzie eats and talks just like real babies!”—but these cues do not *fix* the identities (or the function) of dolls within imaginative games. The imaginary worlds these dolls prompt are fleeting and in constant flux. And the playmates, the props, and the imagined worlds themselves remain in a state of revision. Thus, the modal possibilities for dolls remain open to the imaginer so that within the innumerable worlds of Baby or Barbie, the identities of Baby and Barbie are not stipulated by the toy maker, but rather by the imaginer (the child playing with the doll). Baby Suzie can become Baby Mary then Baby Carmina then Baby Jasmine. And Barbie Marie Osmond can become Barbie Eliza Doolittle.

Alternatively, the modal possibilities for toy trucks and building blocks are circumscribed by their shapes and by their prescribed functions. Toy trucks move objects from one location to another, and building blocks work together to form buildings. Trucks, then, generate truths about the imaginary “construction site” on which either the truck or the building blocks are working. Though children do indeed create varying story lines as they move their trucks through the mud or build a cathedral from the ground up, their use of these items *as props* is controlled as much by the props’ design as their own imaginations. Hence, the truths about the fictive world created by play with trucks and blocks are determined by the game itself (by the games’ rules), not by the imaginer. *There are no such rules in the game of Barbie.*¹³ Again, the doll maker’s cues are suggestible, but they are non-deterministic. (And moving dirt is certainly less complicated than having a life.) These facts—that Barbie has an identity, and that a child who lives imaginatively and vicariously through Barbie has the freedom to stipulate Barbie’s identity—distinguish dolls from other childhood props.

Walton refers to this specific kind of representation as ‘reflexive representation.’ “A [baby] doll directs players of the game not just to imagine a baby but to imagine the doll itself as a baby...so it generates fictional truths about itself; it represents itself. Let’s call it a reflexive representation.”¹⁴ Because Barbie is both symbolic and representationally reflexive, she represents woman not only as a non-particular member of a gendered human class, she may also represent a particular woman with a name and real-world identity; i.e., whomever (or whatever) the imaginer stipulates for her. The fictional truths that the non-particular representation generates are suggested by, *but are not determined by*, Barbie’s figurative nature. To the horror of many female playmates, some boys readily use Skipper as a handgun or Kelly as a grenade. Walton explains:

They (dolls) do have the function of serving as props in games of make-believe. Yet...it is not clear that dolls have the function of serving as props in a sense which implies that there is a prescription to play certain sorts of games with them. Doll makers expect that they will be used in certain ways, and it is customary to use them in those ways. But is there any sort of requirement that “appreciators” of dolls use them in these ways? [He continues this argument on a subsequent page] It is not obvious that the propositions fictional in games in which it is the ‘function’ of dolls to serve are ones that people, qua appreciators of dolls, are mandated to imagine. ¹⁵

This argument applies to play with Barbie as well. Though the imaginer is free to imagine Barbie in a variety of ways, once Barbie’s identity has been assigned to her by the imaginer (once the

imaginee makes a choice about whom Barbie represents) her representation and the fictional truths she generates—the truths about the *particular* woman with a name and real-world identity that Barbie represents—may be strongly shaped by cultural representations. (And this shaping extends beyond children’s play to children’s self-representational acts). For example, many young girls desire to be like Serena Williams and Jennifer Lopez, and they attempt to emulate them in look and in action. In order for this emulation to be effective—in order for us to see Serena or Jennifer in them—girls must adapt themselves to Serena or Jennifer’s “look” in every way possible: dress, jewelry, hair-style, speech pattern, body-language, and walk. Some children carry this act of emulation over into their play with Barbie. But here the cultural influence is less obvious and the need for correspondence unnecessary. Barbie’s effectiveness as a representation of Serena or Jennifer is *not* dependant upon even an approximate emulation of Serena or Jennifer because the only person for whom this representation matters is the creator of the representation—only he or she must be able to recognize Serena or Jennifer in Barbie. So long as Barbie’s representation corresponds to the creator’s internal impression or vision of Serena or Jennifer, Barbie has achieved Serena and Jennifer’s “look.” Any emergent correspondence between Barbie and the real-world person whom she represents is an accidental feature of representational play, not a necessary one.

Consider as a corollary case children’s creation of and interaction with imaginary friends. For the imager, the “imaginary” friend satisfies the psych-social criteria necessary for friendship, and this satisfaction enables the imager to recognize and play with his or her imaginary friends in ways that matches up with his or her play among non-imaginary friends. Though no one besides the imager is able to interact with these imaginary friends, the imaginary friends are an important and effective part of the imager’s make-believe world. Likewise, though the cultural influence of the media shapes a child’s play, the imager retains the ability to assign Barbie an identity and cultural role that satisfies his or her own imagination—no one else’s. Insofar as Barbie allows representation of cultural icons to be open and un-mandated, Barbie encourages a creative interpretation of identity and image-construction. It is precisely this openness that I believe vindicates Barbie as a toy. Let me explain further.

Through the imaginative interaction with dolls, children partake in a creative, exploratory form of imagining about themselves and the potential roles they may play in their adult lives. Barbie is the source of these imaginations and sometimes the medium in which they become expressed. Little girls and boys are willing to cut Barbie’s hair, they sometimes give Barbie tattoos, and they try out different clothing styles on her.¹⁶ They assign Barbie varying societal roles. Often they make her a mother and wife, even though Barbie and Ken are not and have never been sold as a married couple (Ken was introduced onto the market in 1961 as Barbie’s “handsome steady.”¹⁷) Children instantiate many of the possibilities they first imagine in their fictive Barbie worlds. Though these alterations reflect images that are, by and large, acceptable within the larger culture, they illustrate the impulse of humans to alter their own appearances (vicariously through Barbie, in this case) and to conform to an image that they deem acceptable and beautiful, whether or not their peers or siblings agree with them. No one can escape the cultural influences with which television and print advertisement bombards us—it seeps in despite censoring parents’ best efforts—but Barbie offers children a safe and creative arena for modeling and formulating their own images of what is beautiful, images that may not conform to their parents’ aesthetic. In so doing, Barbie reinforces in children the idea that identity is not merely a process of self-discovery, but also a process of self-creation. Printed and televised images ignore the creative dimension of self-identity by presenting

definitive and clear ideas about what is and is not beautiful, what is and is not feminine, and what is and is not culturally acceptable, separating the viewer from the process of beauty construction that is alive and well in the fashion, hair, and design world. By making the viewer into a passive voyeur who merely peers into the lives of cool, hip, beautiful people, television and print ads encourage women to emulate one of the many “acceptable” images of femininity before them. Viewers are not invited into the media-driven world of image production to assist in the creation of feminine identity.¹⁸

The interplay between fictive and non-fictive objects in representational acts raises both interesting and serious questions.¹⁹ Included among these are, “What is the representational and referential relationship between toys that represent women and women themselves” and “How do representational objects of women influence women’s views of themselves?” These questions are difficult questions, as Kendall Walton aptly notes, *not* because the existence of borderline cases makes understanding representation difficult, but rather because “we cannot easily say why something does or does not count as representational, or why it is borderline, or what one would have to learn about it to decide.”²⁰ In the following section I turn my attention to the fictive world of advertising and analyze the effect of female representation in advertising upon female identity both culturally and individually. I once again appropriate Walton’s analysis of reflexive representation to explain the role of women in advertising.

II. The Representation of Women in Advertising

Filmmaker and cultural theorist Jean Kilbourne outlines the impact of advertising on gender identity in “Killing Us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising.” According to Kilbourne, the average American is exposed to more than fifteen hundred ads a day and will spend 1.5 years of his or her life watching television commercials.²¹ Kilbourne’s research suggests further that Americans, particularly young Americans, are encouraged by these ads to see themselves and their lives as problematic; i.e., in need of some or another “solution.” And more often than not this solution appears in the form of a product. Stuart Ewan and Bernard McGrane support Kilbourne’s findings. According to Ewan, a new approach to advertising emerged in the 1920’s, one that focused less upon products and more upon the lives and emotions of consumers. McGrane argues further that this approach created a subtext of advertising that says “You are not o.k., you need help, you need salvation.”²² This trend continued through the 50’s and 60’s wherein people reported increasing feelings of discontentment, a discontent that they have attempted to ease with the aid of marketed goods and services.

Much of the \$130 billion dollars spent on advertising annually is targeted at adolescents.²³ Advertising exploits adolescents because their consumer inexperience makes them a vulnerable marketing group and because their insecurities inhibit them from rejecting the cultural messages produced by advertising. But adults, who are presumably experienced consumers, are equally incapable of resisting these messages. Kilbourne writes:

Far from a passive mirror of society, it [advertising] is an effective medium of influence and persuasion, both a creator and a perpetuator of the dominant attitudes, values, and ideology of the culture, the social norms, and the myths by which most people govern their behavior. Advertising performs much the same function in industrial society as

myth performed in ancient and primitive societies...²⁴

As in the case of teenagers, advertising encourages women to let their looks problematize their lives. “The essence of ‘feminine beauty,’” writes Kilbourne, “is vigilance and artificiality. Men may be expected to enhance their appearance...but women are supposed to transform themselves”(102). Over 2 million American women have silicone breast implants. Over one million dollars is spent every hour on cosmetics (100). The culture’s aesthetic expectations of women are reinforced in printed representations of women. For example, a cartoon in the June 2002 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* features a young, beautiful princess who peers into a magic mirror, apparently asking “Who is the fairest of them all.” The mirror replies, “Before I answer that, may I suggest an alpha-hydroxy lotion?” This cartoon suggests that even the fairest of them all could be fairer. But who is culpable for creating in women the desire to be aesthetically fair (and ever fairer)? The individuals and groups interested in women either financially or sexually (or both). Financially interested parties include but are not limited to product creators, advertising agencies, retail companies, plastic surgeons, beauticians, and personal trainers. Sexually interested parties include both the men who gaze upon women, and the women themselves who seek approval from men and unconsciously solicit the male gaze.²⁵ As Mary Devereaux argues, women [presumably heterosexual women] evaluate themselves by the standards established by the male mind: “...women throughout their lives expend enormous amounts of time and energy and money making themselves ‘beautiful.’ In undertaking this costly process, women judge themselves according to internalized standards of what is pleasing to men.”²⁶ These standards—Caucasian standards reflective of the white, middle to upper class audience implied by these ads—include a “healthy” look (bronzed skin gives this appearance); strong bone structure (underweight models assist here); and most importantly, *youth* (the use of teenage models serves this purpose).²⁷ “America worships youth and hates growing older,” writes Carol Moog, “coupled with the fantasy that if Americans consume perfect diets, aerobicize themselves into perfect bodies, and hem up their wrinkles into perfect faces, they will never get old and die....”²⁸ To be beautiful, one must be flawlessly built, sculpted, wrinkle-free, and eternally young.

With the exception of recent Nike Ads that equate female beauty with strength and courage, magazine ads reinforce impossible standards of beauty for women by creating and featuring an “ideal woman”: thin, tall, long-legged, young, vibrant, sexy, and beautiful. Print advertising encourages women to emulate the ideal woman by generating the same look over and over again; i.e., they print images that feature the same thin woman, the same sexy look, the same ideal of beauty. In advertisements that feature women and men together, Kilbourne notes, “women are generally subservient to men in ads, both in size and position. Women are often shown as playful clowns, perpetuating the attitude that women are childish and cannot be taken seriously, whereas men are generally portrayed as secure, powerful, and serious.”²⁹ She also observes that men are typically clothed in dark attire while women often are made to look virginal, angelic even, in light, flowing garments. Men often appear to be actively engaged in the world—playing a sports game; arguing in the courtroom; attending a meeting—while women are objectified or passively interested in their environment. They are “shown almost exclusively as sex objects or as housewives...Men are generally rugged authority figures, dominant and vulnerable.”³⁰ Kilbourne’s analysis is corroborated by the following advertisement for Samsonite, a company specializing in travel products.



The larger than life male figure is thrust into the center of the ad; he assumes its entire frame. Leaning forward, he hovers over the viewer as if to say, “Hey, are you looking at me? Do you see my cool, dark blue rain coat?” His hand—a symbol of male power—is nearly as large as his face. His eyes are fixed. He is watching the viewer; he is soliciting our view in return. The perspective has been distorted so that the female figure, who appears in the right, bottom corner, appears to be a third of the size of her male counterpart. Her weight is shifted opposite his, and her head is tilted up and back instead of down and forward. Her arms are extended out from her waist as if to keep her from toppling over. Her face is out of focus—does she even have eyes? She seems oblivious to her environment as she unwittingly follows the confident male leader in this fictive travel adventure. The man controls the story told by the ad. The woman is vapid, unstable, and passive. She is not worth noticing.

More threatening to women’s identities are ads that depict women as wounded and weak, like the following example from the Christian Dior Fashion House.



Here the woman is depicted as an animal. She not only wears fur, she clutches an alligator skin purse whose pattern is repeated in her skirt. Behind her we see a leopard print fabric. Her hair is

tousled and wild, her eyes open, her mouth slightly relaxed, teeth exposed. But she is a wounded animal, a dismembered³¹ creature. Rather than appearing on her feet or even on all fours, poised to attack her prey (presumably the viewer), she is positioned onto her back, legs thrust upward and elongated, cut off at the knee. Her right hand is missing except for a thumb, and her left hand—minus her fingertips—juts out from behind her leg to grasp the leopard print fabric. The left half of her face is photographed in shadow. And rather than face her prey, she observes it from the periphery. Though this position is not atypical for cats who attack using their claws, her claws are cut off. Her strength and skill are diminished, her power thwarted.

These two examples typify the representation of women in contemporary advertisements—incomplete and flawed. Research-based writing over the past ten years has linked women's bouts of depression and feelings of inferiority to their belief in (either consciously or unconsciously) a media-controlled ideal that they fail to achieve. Donna Davenport and John Yurich have studied the relationship between social expectations and self-identity extensively. They report that women's psychological problems result not only from their belief that they have a lower social status than men but from their attempts to conform to the prescribed ideal image of woman.³² When women fail to conform to the objectified ideal representations surrounding them—and they inevitably do—they become devalued by themselves as well as others. Kilbourne writes:

The constant objectification can lead to callous disregard for others or to fear that a woman's entire value depends on her appearance. The culture worship of the adolescent female can lead to unrealistic expectations for the future and can contribute to a lifelong rage against women by rejected men. The ideal image harms all women, whether or not they approximate it briefly (there is no other way to do so) in their own lives. It makes most genuine women at best invisible, at worst the targets of contempt and hostility.³³

The devastation caused by an impossible ideal results not only from the devaluation of women but also the slow stripping away of their power, both political and sexual. This process of devaluation and un-empowerment is typified in the ad history of The Maidenform Bra Company.

In her seminal work *“Are They Selling Her Lips?” Advertising and Identity*, psychologist Carol Moog describes how the “women's lib” ads produced by Maidenform in the late fifties capitalized upon women's new-found desires to exert power in the world. She writes, “Ads like the lady lawyer who ‘dreamed I swayed the jury in my Maidenform bra’ unleashed and exposed the secret fantasies of traditional women of the fifties and invited them to step brazenly into dreams of power and influence” (22). Moog adds, “I see the ‘I dreamed...’ campaign as a kind of emotional road map for women's lib activities that came to the surface in the seventies.... Women interacted with the ads in spite of themselves because they were already gearing up for the kind of real-life dreams they made happen when the feminist movement took hold” (23). But then came the sixties and along with it, the dispensation of the bra. Maidenform's advertising agency abandoned the profitable ‘I dreamed...’ campaign in favor of a softer, sweeter woman. After eleven years of work, the Daniel & Charles Advertising Agency launched a new Maidenform campaign, the most controversial ad campaign in the history of the bra. Moog explains.

In a reincarnation...she [the Maidenform woman] was still depicted doing active, even aggressive things, like commuting to work, reading *The Wall Street Journal*, going to the

theater, or being a lawyer. She was daringly clad in her matching bra and panties. *But now there were men in the picture!* They appeared disinterested, oblivious to the delectable spectacle of the “Maidenform Woman. You never know where she’ll turn up.” The men were shot slightly out of focus. They were deeply absorbed, eyes discreetly everywhere else but you-know-where.... What was really most offensive [about these ads] were the self-indulgent, narcissistic posturings of the men in the picture. For the woman wearing a Maidenform bra, the experience was no longer a good dream. It was a bad dream. It is humiliating on the deepest levels, where our feelings of self-worth are most fragile, for any of us to expose ourselves at our most naked and vulnerable...and make no impact whatsoever.... (25-7).

After the launch of this campaign, the Maidenform Bra Company was flooded with letters from outraged men and women. Moog writes, “Despite being pictured in the trappings of power, this Maidenform woman ended up looking weak and vulnerable.... Women bought the bras but were left with images of themselves as ‘sweet nothings’—ironically the name of one of Maidenform’s best-selling lines.”(27). Remarkably, public outrage over the ad prompted a backlash against the depiction of women in advertising, but the backlash disguised a deep-seated belief about women’s own inadequacies—after all, women continued buying the bras. Rather than re-directing women to garner men’s attention in non-visual ways, (via common hobbies or careers), what these kinds of ads invite is for women to look into the “media mirror” and decide how they do (or don’t) measure up to the Maidenform woman. Again, Moog offers an insightful analysis of this phenomenon:

Everybody struggles to develop a sense of security, a sense of personal identity. But most of us end up constantly glancing around to see if we measure up to those around us—and that includes supercharged media models. We hate ourselves for it, especially if we can see exactly what buttons the advertisers are pushing, but many of us buy into the images just enough to wish we could do it all...or could be that thin or that rich or that happy or that confident. And then, telling ourselves we’re not affected by advertising, we find ourselves shelling out for the product (33).

The imaginative acts prompted by the use of women in advertising are *for women* an “imaging from the inside” or “imaging *de se*.” It is “a form of self-imagining characteristically described as imaging *doing* or *experiencing* something or being a certain way.”³⁴ By constantly competing with the images in advertisements that commodify women, advertisements wherein female models function as products, women reduce themselves to ‘sweet nothings.’³⁵

A lamentable number of bra and lingerie companies continue to create products and lines that foster women’s insecurities about their bodies and self-images. Included among these are Victoria’s Secret “Miracle Bra” and the “Wonder Bra” created by Canadian designer Louise Poirier. Debuting in the U.S. in 1994, the Wonderbra was “an instant phenomenon and sold at a rate of one every 15 seconds, quickly becoming the nation’s top-selling push-up bra.”³⁶ The Wonderbra created a renewed interest in lingerie that in turn led to the launching of thematic fashion lines, including their ‘99 “Dangerous Liaisons Collection.” Changing lingerie fashions have in part redefined the image of the sexy woman. The first Wonderbra model was the top-heavy Eva Herzigova. As Wonderbra began redefining itself as “more than a push up bra” they looked for a model who could adapt her look to the various theme lines. They found her in Sarah O’Hare, who according to their

official web site, “embodies Wonderbra’s spirit of confidence and fun. Her personality has the sparkle and touch of mischievousness that is so much a part of the Wonderbra mystique.”³⁷ The evolution of the Wonderbra reveals the evolution of female representation in lingerie. The once boisterous, proud, and liberated women who donned Maidenform bras in the fifties have been replaced by a young mischievous woman who is excited by “dangerous liaisons” and needs “Wonderbras” to make her life worth living.

Like the play world of dolls, the world of advertising is a fictive world that generates fictive truths about women. Ads selling products such as watches and hair-spray serve the same role as toys in children’s games: they allow the viewer/potential user to imagine his or her life as if he/she were living the life presented in the ad. Because of the visual/aesthetic choices made by ad designers—large-scale use of models, small-scale depiction of products, distortion of the lens, and the use of airbrushing techniques—imaginative acts are provoked in the minds of viewers, acts which ask (perhaps even command) the viewer to imagine his or herself as that person. Again, this ‘imagining de se’ is an imagining about doing or experiencing something or being a certain way. It is an imagining from the inside out—an imagining about what one *could* be *if* one were only young, thin, and beautiful. Unlike the models in advertisements, dolls are representational and reflexive: they are open to the logical possibilities created by the fictive world in which they function as props. They prompt imaginative acts about one’s anticipated role in society (or in the “pretend” world of play). And these imaginative acts do not take the form of ‘imaging de se’—they are not conditionalized by one’s present situation or public identity—rather they allow one to set aside the “rules” or regulations that co-define one’s self in the world, and represent oneself as whomever or whatever one so desires. The range of meaning and significance of these imaginings is great.

Unlike the fictive world of dolls—a world of make-believe filled with imaginative self-representational acts—the fictive world of advertising interprets self-identity as a passive act of self-discovery, not a process of self-creation. By choosing models whom exemplify a singular image of femaleness, advertising tethers femaleness to a specific aesthetic, thereby tacitly connecting women’s worth to her looks (and more specifically, to whether she embodies the ideal endorsed by the media-driven world). Though there is some variety of representation in today’s market (more and more Asian, Latino, and African-American women and men appearing in popular ads) these varied representations code a singular image of femaleness: young, vibrant, and thin. This interferes in the process of female identity formation in two ways. First, these representations create a mythic culture in which nonrepresentational images of women become the primary representation of women. This occurs *not* because advertisements promulgate false images of the female form—clearly thin and young models are women too—but because they promulgate the false belief that the perfect woman (the “real” woman) is young and thin. To put this more directly, advertising ties a woman’s value to her age and body fat content. After all, we see only young, thin women enjoying a life of leisure (and pleasure) in the world of advertising. And in a world where the average woman—a woman who also enjoys leisure and pleasure—wears a size 12-14,³⁸ women must come to terms with these mixed messages as they process the meaning and value of their own lives. In the face of this conflict, many women conclude that they have failed as women because they do not emulate the primary, perfect, “real” woman of advertising. Secondly, unlike the make-believe world of dolls—a world that prompts imaginative acts through the use of props and allows participants to see themselves in open, unfixed ways—the world of advertising dissuades women from this imaginative process by creating one and only one “prop” (the same ideal image of woman) that is

then reprinted over and over in the media. The empowering sense of “play” that shapes the imaginative acts of children whenever they consider the possible identities and variable roles they may assume in their lives—not to mention their own aesthetic and mode of self-representation—is absent from the fictive world of advertising. Dolls like Barbie reinforce the idea that self-identity is in part a matter of self-creation, but advertisements reinforce the belief that self-identity is merely a matter of self-discovery.

III. Female Identity on Television

When Lynda Carter flashed her gold bracelets and bare shoulders in 1975, American girls put down their Barbie dolls and put on satin tights.³⁹ Though Carter’s title-role character was an adaptation of a comic book heroine, savvy marketing firms tethered Wonder Woman’s mythic power to Carter’s physical characteristics: striking dark hair and crystal blue eyes. Barbie—whose Blonde locks had typified American beauty for more than a decade—began to pale in comparison to Carter. Soon after the debut of *Wonder Woman*, the Mattel Toy Company redesigned Barbie to resemble popular television actors.⁴⁰ Included among those made into Barbie and Ken dolls were Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, and Donny & Marie Osmond. This trend continued into the ‘80’s, 90’s, and 00’s as dolls replicating the rock-band KISS, the actors/singers Brandy and Britney Spears, and other Hollywood stars appeared on the market.⁴¹ When television threatened to put an end to Barbie, Mattel responded. Barbie could not beat the actors, so she joined them.

Whereas the “ideal woman” of advertising is tall, thin, and young, female representation on television is not dictated by a singular image of femaleness. This is clear in two regards. First, the roles that women portray on television today were once prescribed for men: cops, FBI agents, business executives, lawyers, and doctors. And the depiction of women within these roles has changed over time. The heavily made-up and ill-clad female investigators in *Charlie’s Angels* bear little resemblance to the stars of *Cagney and Lacey* or *L.A. Law*. But one should not be led by these facts to conclude that variety and change equal progress. Despite the increasing presence of women in the television industry, contemporary television series present women as “desirable” whenever they engender one of three traditional female archetypes: nurturer, vixen, or victim. These typologies offer serious challenges to feminist attempts to extricate female identity from physical appearance, challenges that must be met so that women can redefine themselves, refine their sense of self-worth and purpose, and reground their identity in non-visual ways.

Consider an example of the nurturer. The women of *Friends*—the most popular show among my college-aged female students—appear perpetually conflicted about their professional and personal identities. Monica, the dark-haired friend, was an over-weight and awkward child whose obsession with food led her to culinary school. Despite her skill and talent as a chef, her ambivalence about her career has limited her success in the restaurant world. After several seasons on the air, she chose to work out of her home rather than to compete at the highest culinary level. (And then and only then does she fall in love and get married.) Still, her identity revolves around her cooking. She feeds people—that is her life’s purpose—including her husband, her friends, her brother, her nephew, even residents in her apartment complex who show up on her doorstep at Halloween. The message here is that overweight women are good for one thing only: feeding others.

The victim archetype is exemplified by Agent Dana Scully of the *X-files*, the smart, serious medical

doctor who exchanged marriage for a career in the FBI. According to her character biography, her sacrifices did not prevent her from becoming a single mother:

Over the years, she has given up much of her own life to the cause of the files. Scully was abducted, and, when mysteriously returned, left infertile by the supposed tests. She then discovered that a chip had been placed in the base of her neck. Its removal caused the onset of cancer. The disease went into remission with the implant of another chip. An assassination attempt on Scully resulted in the death of her sister Melissa. She successfully found her abducted partner, and even figured out a way to revive Mulder's life-draining body after he was subjected to alien testing. The hard facts of medicine, however, still don't explain how Scully became pregnant after years of infertility.⁴²

Scully continues to be victimized in the show. Despite the joy of motherhood, she never achieves psychological wholeness. Her miracle child is not "normal." He appears to have superhuman abilities—perhaps even *alien* abilities. Her struggles with the X-files continue. In spite of her intelligence, ambition, and dedication, Scully leads a deeply problematic, unsatisfying life.

Then there are the vixens. The stars of *Sex and the City*—Carrie Bradshaw, Miranda Hobbes, Samantha Jones, and Charlotte York—are popular among a range of age groups, including middle-aged women. In this show, Carrie Bradshaw plays a New York City columnist who uses her own and her friends' relationships as a lens to illuminate the nuances of love relationships in the twenty-first century. Though her friends have their own unique belief systems, values, and careers, they represent women as deeply sexual creatures who are emotionally vacuous and who avoid rational reflection. For example, Samantha is a Public Relations executive whose uninhibited sexual practices attract a wide and varied host of lovers, including a woman. Despite her sexual prowess, she abandons every relationship that begins to blossom beyond the bedroom. Miranda, the smart and self-assured lawyer of the show, appears to be levelheaded and progressive. She is a partner in her law firm. And she owns an apartment on the Upper West Side. But the show's writers reveal that the appearance of stability and independence she projects is just that—an illusion. She feels empty without a man by her side. This past season, Miranda (smart, sophisticated, and successful like Scully) became an unwed mother (also like Scully). Charlotte, on the other hand, is a proponent of monogamy and marriage. She sought marriage and motherhood her entire life: "For years, Charlotte had a crystalline vision of the life she wanted to have. First and foremost, she wanted to get married. Dr. Trey Macdougall seemed her Prince Charming. But when Charlotte decided it was time to procreate, things began to unravel... their marriage quickly dissolved."⁴³ After Charlotte's marriage ends in divorce, she returns to her career, which had been set aside while she functioned as a wife. Behind their sexually uninhibited, explorative, "happy" faces of the women of *Sex and the City* lies female angst and frustration. The implication of this show is that women remain ambivalent about their desires and identities.

Before Monica and Scully, Carrie and Charlotte, there was Wonder Woman. She first appeared in comic book form in 1941. Emerging women rights' group embraced her as a symbol of equality. She "served as a role model for the leaders of these groups.... She represented a new breed of 'strong women' in that she came from an island where women were the dominant gender and was herself extremely capable, physically and mentally."⁴⁴ Interestingly, the creator of Wonder Woman, Dr. William Moulton Marston (pseudonym, Charles Moulton), conceived her after reading an article

by Dr. Ashley Montagu entitled, “The Natural Superiority of Women.” He gave Wonder Woman an impressive genealogy. First, she was an Amazon princess; later, she was an agent for Greek and Roman gods. Wonder Woman represented an empowering shift for women away from the role of caregiver and nurturer to the masculine but valued role of protector. She prevented crime from occurring, captured law-breakers in the act, and gained the respect of her male counterparts. She defied the image of woman as “romantic object” that had been exhibited so prominently in 60’s campaigns like the Maidenform ads. Whereas the Maidenform men had looked away from unclad women, men responded to Wonder Woman: they read the comic book and they watched the show. They liked what they saw. But what did they see? A “feminine” and sexy woman. As Jamie Coville notes, “...indeed I remember my old science teacher who virtually admitted that he had fantasies about Ms. Carter in her Wonder Woman costume!”⁴⁷ Though she embraced her feminist role, her “skimpy costume...consisted of much less than society was used to seeing on other feminist role models.”⁴⁶ Wonder Woman’s deep sensuality—her tight, revealing clothing, loose locks, and her coy smile—contributed to the changing ideal image for the female gender, an image that further entrenched women’s power in their physical attributes.

Just as Maidenform has exchanged its “liberated” woman for a “romantic” one, television has chosen to replace its once progressive images of strong women like Cagney and Lacey with sexualized women like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Despite the success, power, and intellectual prowess of television characters like Ally McBeal, men in these shows exercise continuous control over women through their bodies. They either ignore women’s nakedness, as in the Maidenform campaign, or they worship their nakedness, as in the skimpily clad Wonder Woman. They either “complete” women by impregnating them, as in Miranda’s case, or they thwart women by leaving them barren, as in the case of Ally McBeal.

Kilbourne asserts that “gender roles may be the most deeply affected cultural concept.”⁴⁷ The examples of female representations examined above supports her claim. Women have distinct gender roles in the family, in work, and in marriage that have been defined in part by the representation of women in popular culture. As Donna Davenport and John Yurich correctly argue, human beings are not left to evolve in a vacuum or at the mercy of family dynamics when we have models or paradigms for our behavior that are gender specific and public. This may provide feminists with some solace (but not much). By and large, the fictive world created by the advertising and television industries offers us unrepresentative (and harmful) models and faulty paradigms. Not only are the models unrepresentative of the majority of women in our culture, the paradigms are built upon largely hedonistic and materialistic views of happiness and self-worth that continue to change over time. A feminism that does not respond to the ambiguity of contemporary female representation is incomplete.

Because attitudes about women, as well as women’s own feelings of self-worth and purpose, are informed by fictitious female representations in advertising and on television, feminists must respond, as Judith Butler has responded, to the multi-faceted representations of women:

Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play. “Female Trouble” is also the title of the John Waters film that features Divine, the hero/heroine of Hairspray as well, whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes

the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates.⁴⁸

Advertised and televised representations of women generate the greatest challenges to female identity. Whereas Barbie acknowledges the unstable, unfixed, creative process of female self-identity construction, representations of women within advertising and television tether women's identity—her purpose, her sense of well-being, her meaning in life—to a self that is stable, fixed, and discovered. This occurs in several ways. Advertising companies play upon a prescribed image of femininity and beauty that appears to depict woman in her most fulfilled state (a state that can be achieved only with the help of their products). The appearance, however erroneous, that advertisements imitate real women and real life is achieved by using models that represent only a small portion of the female population and repeating (reprinting) these images throughout magazines, billboards, and on television. By doing so, these ads create a “model world” that is mimetic enough and convincing enough to induce women to engage in the act of imagining themselves *as* these women and to attempt to live up to these standards and believe they have failed if they do not. Besides being thin and fun, the models in advertising are young, often very young. Women over the age of forty are underrepresented in modeling because advertisers want to represent women as sexy (apparently forty and over is not sexy!) Hence, people between the ages of forty and one hundred are made invisible by advertising.⁴⁹ Barbie does not prompt such an ‘imaging *de se*.’

The erroneous appearance of mimesis created by female representation in advertising and television extends and exaggerates the adolescent phase of life, proclaiming one's youthful years to be *the* time of female happiness. (The irony here is that teenagers are riddled with angst about their bodies and their identities). By avoiding the use of middle-aged models or lifestyles as examples in ads—an age-group indicative of increased acceptance of responsibility and moderation, values which run contrary to a capitalist economy—the advertisement agency is able to create “solutions” to what they define as female “problems”: fat thighs, under-developed chests, and wrinkles. They also tether women's power and sense of purpose to her appearance. This is an assault upon the experiences of mature female consumers and a challenge to women's understanding of themselves and their role in American society.

Here's where feminists may have something to learn from Barbie. Though today's Barbie depicts stereotypical attributes of “feminine women”—tan, tall, and young—Barbie is not defined by her appearance. First, within the games of make-believe invoked by children, Barbie acquires new identities through the imaginative acts of each unique participant. What begins with a rudimentary philosophical awareness—“this is a game, this is not real”—becomes an active and identity-forming part of life. In the fictive world created by Barbie participants, imaginative, identity-informing possibilities emerge that can serve to empower the participant in unexpected ways. Second, despite the fears of parents, there is no evidence to suggest that children believe Barbie's success is dependant upon her appearance. Barbie can be morphed and changed from one person to another, sometimes in extraordinary ways.⁵⁰ Even when doll companies cue or “suggest” identities for their dolls by naming them—e.g., Dorothy of Oz and Malibu Skipper, children are free to ignore these cues (i.e., these cues are non-determining).

Children use Barbie to exaggerate and then collapse the appearance/reality distinction. They come

to terms with their own senses of self, their possible roles in adult life, and their interaction with human beings through play with toys like Barbie. Children are willing to initiate changes in Barbie's identity as well. They alter her appearance, rename her, and give her new roles in life. If feminists can begin to look at the female representations generated by advertising and television in the way that children look at Barbie—as a prop in a game of make-believe—then we can start understanding and responding to the inescapable world of popular culture in proactive ways. That is, if we can see female representation as a prop in the game of popular culture, we can exaggerate or even flout the rules of the game; we can change the nature of the game entirely.⁵¹

IV. The Challenges of Female Representation

I began this paper by analyzing the philosophical and cultural significance of Barbie as a representational tool for young children. I showed that the greatest challenge to female identity rests in advertising and televised representations *not* in toys like Barbie. Toys are unambiguous about their ontological status and their cultural and philosophical roles. Walton asks, “Is the barrier between [real and fictive] worlds a selective one...physically opaque but psychologically porous?” This is the case with children. Walton explains, “In many children's games there does not even appear to be such an asymmetry [between real and fictive worlds]. When Monica plays dolls, she is as capable of feeding her baby and rocking it to sleep as she is of loving it and being concerned about its welfare.”⁵² As girls and boys use dolls such as Barbie and Ken to represent themselves in fictive worlds, they simultaneously begin to grapple with their own roles and identities, present and future.⁵³

Next, I analyzed the representation of women in print advertising and television to understand the cultural roles these images play in shaping female identity. By describing the posturing of men and women in ads, e.g., women are often posed alone, seated, and slightly off-balance, I showed how advertising reinforces the view that women are passive and dim. Such images suggest that it is good for women to be small, diminutive, quiet, smiling, and silent. Because girls exhibit strong desires to cooperate with others at an early age, advertising creates distorted representations of women NOT by creating *false* or unreal images of the female form but by creating a mythic culture in which *flawed* images of women acquire acceptance and approval. Advertising is a “mythic white, middle-class world in which people are rarely ugly, overweight, poor, elderly, struggling, or disabled.”⁵⁴ The depiction of women as perpetually thin, young, and happy, trivializes serious challenges to women's experiences and their senses of themselves: menopause, breast and ovarian cancers. In addition it promotes the fear of aging and mortality by exaggerating and extending the adolescent phase of life into adulthood, thereby creating a façade of seemingly mimetic representations of health and happiness that imitate nothing but marginal, anxious, and unrepresentative people. And moreover, advertising encourages adults to see fictive representations as real. In particular, advertising attempts to *determine* women's identity by tying it inextricably to women's physical attributes.

Finally, I clarified the outcome of the increasing recognition of false representations of women within popular culture—an attempt to define women according to prescribed archetypes: nurturer, victim, or vixen. A myriad of appropriate feminist responses can be offered here. We can, as Moog argues, “...acknowledge and understand how it's (advertising) influencing us, why it's trying to influence us that way, and then attempt to separate ourselves from the images and act

objectively.”⁵⁵ But feminists are compelled to go one step further and create an inter-textual, interdisciplinary aesthetic—a way of seeing and reading—that is responsive to female representation, an aesthetic forged by philosophy, strengthened by psychology, and refined by women’s (and cultural) studies. I offer the beginnings of such an aesthetic here. It arises out of the notion of “play” found in Kenneth Walton’s *Mimesis and Make-Believe*. It recognizes that although we cannot escape popular culture, and though we are in part defined by female representation, by recovering our sense of play and injecting it into our examination of female representations in popular culture, we can see these images anew—as props in games of make-believe; games in which the participants determine the identities of the prop.

I have argued that Barbie’s reflexivity is both her strength and her weakness. She can represent and provoke a range of thoughts and ideas about oneself. Sometimes she raises negative thoughts about oneself, such as “why cannot I have as many friends as Barbie?”, but more often she raises positive possibilities for the imaginer, such as “I can be a doctor... I am free to dress however I wish ...I can speak for myself.” There is still a good deal of work to be done on the relationship between toys and self-representation, and this work is vital to understanding human representation. The pervasive elements of social discourse continue to shape children’s malleable minds. Though Walton’s notion of ‘play’ affords children greater agency for identity formation, it is doubtful that their sense of agency can allude such social influences altogether. Nonetheless, Barbie encourages children to view self-identity as a process of self-creation and not merely a process of self-discovery.

The philosophic truths elicited by female representation have abiding cultural significance. By developing an inter-textual feminist aesthetic that is responsive to female representation in popular culture, we create new ways of defining ‘woman’ in the time and space between childhood games and the advertising-imbued world of adults.⁵⁶ Contemporary artists like Janine Antoni are helping to carve out this new feminine space, space in which women can recast the representation of women in popular culture and redefine the notion of ‘female’ in society at large. In her latest installation, Antoni uses her body as an artistic medium, placing herself into a tub of lard (“Eureka”) and mopping the floor with her dyed hair (“Loving Care”), thereby forcing viewers “...to confront notions of femininity, social packaging, and our own relationship to her human themes.”⁵⁷ Antoni’s work is all the more timely, as Butler aptly notes, “precisely because ‘female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion, it’s meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘woman.’”⁵⁸ So long as American culture remains conflicted about the role and identity of women, we must think and talk in non-deterministic ways about women: women who age, mature, work, play and yes, even wonder.

Lenore Wright
Baylor University

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Notes

1. Though important ethical and ontological questions also arise out of the image-making endeavors of toy makers, advertisers, and television producers, I set aside these questions in this paper. I focus instead upon popular culture. To be sure, popular cultural icons have had a profound effect upon the American psyche, particularly in the shaping of our views of beauty and gender. Though philosophers may understandably disdain pop culture—a domain of experience that feeds upon transitory values and trends—none will deny the powerful effect pop culture and television have on the American mind. The philosophical and cultural analysis I offer here responds to this fact.

2. Begun in 1994, *In Style* magazine is dedicated to the lives and looks of today's celebrities.

3. In "Dressing Down, Dressing Up, The Philosophic Fear in Fashion," Karen Hanson relies upon Baudelaire for philosophical aid in rejecting the view that beauty is eternal. As Hanson quotes Baudelaire, "beauty is composed of not only 'an eternal, invariable element' but also a 'relative, circumstantial' one." See Karen Hanson, "Dressing Down, Dressing Up, The Philosophic Fear in Fashion," in *Aesthetic in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

4. Kathleen Grassel, "Barbie Around the World: Healthy Human Growth." In *New Renaissance* (Volume 8, no. 4, issue 27) [magazine on-line] (St. Petersburg, FL., 1999 [cited 1 June 2002]); available from <http://www.ru.org/barbie.htm>; INTERNET.

5. Kristin Riddick, "Barbie: The Image of Us All." Paper linked to the Florida Atlantic University homepage [website on-line] (Boca Raton, FL., 2001 [cited 1 June 2002]); available from <http://www.fau.edu/library/barblink.htm>; INTERNET.

6. Ibid.

7. See Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 11. Walton offers the following evidence for the imaginative play of children: "Children devote enormous quantities of time and effort to make-believe activities. And this preoccupation seems to be nearly universal, not peculiar to any particular cultures or social groups. The urge to engage in make-believe and the need for such activities address seem to be very fundamental ones."

8. Walton is borrowing here from the work of Alvin Plantinga, whom he credits on p. 19 of *Mimesis and Make-Believe*.

9. Ibid., 12. One paragraph above these lines, Walton emphasizes the importance of child's play. He writes, "Children's games serve purposes far more significant than that of keeping them happy and out of mischief. It is generally recognized, I believe that such games—and imaginative activities generally—do indeed, as their prevalence suggests, have a profound role in our efforts to cope with our environment. Children in the Auschwitz concentration camp played a game called 'going to the gas chamber' ...in playing it they were, I suspect, facing the reality of genocide with the utmost seriousness."

10. Amanda Kingsbury, "Social Structure on the Playground." In *ASU Magazine* [magazine on-line] (Tempe, AZ, 1998 [cited 1 June 2002]); available from

<http://researchmag.asu.edu/articles/social.html>; INTERNET.

11. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 51. Judith Butler articulates a similar argument in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990). On page 1 of this text she writes, “Representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of woman.”

12. Carol Moog, “Psychological Aspects of Ethnic Doll Play,” appears in *The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies*, an on-line journal publication located on the World Wide Web [cited 1 October 2002]; available from <http://www.balchinstitute.org/museum/toys/psych.html>; INTERNET. This quotation is taken from page one of her article.

13. For instance, Barbie may represent a doctor in a game of make-believe. This representation is possible because Barbie’s representational form generates human identities, not because Barbie is wealthy or beautiful or smart. Barbie’s identity and significance are not necessarily grounded in her looks, material possessions, or social connections. This fact situates Barbie in a uniquely empowering position as a toy.

14. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 117.

15. *Ibid.*, 61-62. Note: I do not intend to malign boys in this regard; in fact, girls have been known to use even animate objects as representatives of babies. I have seen more than one cat dressed in doll clothes and pushed along in a stroller. Though girls in this situation regard themselves as nurturers, I cannot say that the cats agree. This may make the improper use of Skipper a bit more palatable.

16. According to Riddick’s research, clothes are as much a part of Barbie as her blond hair and blue eyes. She writes, “When Ruth Handler (the creator of Barbie) first met with Charlotte Johnson, the designer who would create Barbie's ensembles for the next twenty years, she explicitly wanted... to create a stunning wardrobe from which each child could choose an outfit to create her own personality for Barbie; therefore she had to develop fashions to coordinate with society's expectations and aspirations.” See “Barbie: The Image of Us All.” <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~tsawyer/barbie/barb.html>

17. According to Riddick’s research, Ken was introduced as Barbie’s “handsome steady” in 1961 against Mattel's wishes. They had coordinating outfits for fraternity parties, lawn picnics, drive-ins, and the beach. Magazines began to run comic book like stories about the couple, a series of books were published by Random House, and Barbie sang about her new boyfriend Ken on a record. The couple was enjoying realistic adventures while children fantasized about adult life. See Riddick, “Barbie: The Image of Us All.”

18. As I argue in the following section, the modeling of women in these ads is wholly passive; they are seated with vapid looks on their faces, whereas men in ads are engaged in jobs, careers, sports, and *etcetera*. The “products” in the ads—purses, shoes, jewelry—reinforce the concept of feminine beauty appropriated by American culture: passive, accommodating, a pretty fixture. These accoutrements are wholly identity related. Barbie’s accoutrements, on the other hand, are *event* related and *career* related. Event-related Barbie dolls include Holiday Barbie and Fashion Barbie.

Like women in advertising, these Barbie dolls come with purses, shoes, and jewelry, objects that coordinate with Barbie's projected events—attending a ball or watching a fashion show (and these objects are, of course, removable). Sunglasses, umbrellas, and beach balls accompany sun-themed Barbie Dolls. “Doctor Barbie” comes with medical equipment, “Veterinarian Barbie” with vet equipment, “Space Barbie” with Space gear, and so on. Like the Maidenform Bra women of the fifties, Barbie is engaged in the world; Barbie is not passive (at least not implicitly so).

19. Some questions raised herein include the following: Does a doll like Barbie who is modeled upon a television personality refer to the television actor being modeled? Does this doll also represent the woman who plays the acting role? Might the doll also represent ‘woman’ as a general representational category? Likewise, do television actors represent real women? Idealized women? Both?

20. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 2.

21. Jean Kilbourne, “Killing us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising,” in *The University in Your Life*, ed. by Jeffrey Gordon (Boston: McGraw Hill Publishing, 1996), 100-108. See page 100.

22. The work of Stuart Ewan and Bernard McGrane appears in *The Ad and the Ego*, prod. Harold Boihem and Chris Emmanouilides and dir. Harold Boihem, 57 min., California Newsreel, 1996, videocassette.

23. “Killing us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising,” 101. Kilbourne writes, “advertisers...do not hesitate to take advantage of the insecurities and anxieties of young people, usually in the guise of offering solutions....”

24. *Ibid.*, 100.

25. Mary Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The ‘New’ Aesthetics,” in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 121-141. Devereaux defines the male gaze as “a way of seeing that takes women as its object. In this broad sense, the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects.” See p. 121. Though Devereaux does not discuss the role of advertising or the male gaze on homosexual women and men, her claim highlights the dominance of heterosexual lifestyles in popular culture. Most popular magazines and television ads are targeted at heterosexual people, though they sometimes speak to homosexuals in unintended ways (one may consider the male-dominated Calvin Klein ads). However, recent fashion ads in *The New York Times Magazine* suggest that the practice of cross-dressing among women—i.e., dressing according to overtly “male” standards—is becoming acceptable in mainstream America. In the 7-21-02 edition of the *NYTimes Magazine*, the fashion feature reads, “The Wardrobe Between the Sexes: Masculine? Feminine? You decide. This fall, designers on both coasts of the Atlantic took up the subject of gender studies—starkly defining his-and-her looks for the woman who can’t make up her mind” (pp. 42-48).

26. *Ibid.* It is also apt to say here that women judge each other according to these standards.

27. Though African-American and Asian-American models appear more and more frequently in

ads, their appearance often mimics Anglo beauty standards. African-American models are often brushed with gold powder or thick lotion so that their skin appears lighter and shinier than it naturally appears, and Asian-American models, unlike their Asian counterparts, appear with blushed skin instead of powdered skin, adding a glow to their skin tone.

28. Carol Moog, *“Are They Selling Her Lips?” Advertising and Identity* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 22.

29. “Killing us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising,” 103.

30. *Ibid.*, 101.

31. Kilbourne defines dismemberment in advertising as the act of separating women’s body into an aggregate, sometimes using one woman’s legs with another woman’s face. In film, dismemberment appears in the form of body doubles. See “Killing us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising,” p. 103.

32. Donna S. Davenport and John M. Yurich, “Multicultural Gender Issues,” in *Journal of Counseling and Development* 70 (September/October 1991): 64-71.

33. “Killing us Softly: Gender Roles in Advertising,” 102.

34. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 29.

35. *The Ad and the Ego*.

36. History of the Wonderbra as listed on the official Wonderbra USA website [website on-line] [cited 1 June 2002]; available from <http://www.wonderbrausa.com>; INTERNET.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Mary Thigpen, “Media’s Influence on One’s Image,” in *Society and Culture* [magazine on-line] (17 December 1999 [cited 1 June 2002]); available from <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/3677/30323>; INTERNET. According to the web page, Thigpen, the article’s author, is a teen student in Oklahoma who researched and wrote this piece for a media literacy class sponsored by Duke University’s Talent Identification Program.

39. On Nov. 7, 1975 at the age of 24, Lynda Carter debuted as Wonder Woman in the prime time television series; became regular series in 1976. Included in the Wonder Woman Theme Song are these lyrics, “All the world is waiting for you/and the power you possess/In your satin tights/fighting for your rights/And the old red white and blue.” Barbie debuted at the American Toy Fair in New York in February 1959 for a retail price of \$3.00. Her creators, Ruth and Elliott Handler, are the founders of Mattel Toys. See Riddick, “Barbie: The Image of Us All”; available from <http://www.fau.edu/library/barblink.htm>; INTERNET.

40. Mattel altered Barbie’s appearance in 1975 to include a “warm grin.” In 1976, Riddick writes, “Mattel’s look was strikingly similar to the trend-setting starts of the day. Ken looked strikingly similar to Robert Redford as Barbie resembled the new star of “Charlie’s Angels” Farrah Fawcett

with her wide smile and winged hair.” See “Barbie: The Image of Us All”; available from <http://www.fau.edu/library/barblink.htm>; INTERNET. By creating dolls that resemble human beings, Mattel plays upon children’s predilections to combine fact and fiction in seamless ways. By creating Barbie dolls that mimic (and therefore, reference) recognizable men and women, Mattel expands the imaginary space shared by dolls and people in the play life of youngsters. Regardless of the reasons and effects of Mattel’s decision to continually alter Barbie, their mimetic act further clouds an already unclear representational relationship among toys, advertisements, and women.

41. See the Barbie tips web-site [web-site on-line] [cited 1 June 2002]; available from <http://www.tipsofallsorts.com/barbie.html>; INTERNET. My brother owned the KISS dolls.

42. Information taken from the official X-files web-site [web-site on-line] [cited 1 June 2002]; available from http://www.thexfiles.com/infobase/bios/characters/char_d_scully.html; INTERNET.

43. Character information from HBO’s official “Sex and the City” website [website on-line] [cited 1 June 2002]; available from http://www.hbo.com/city/cmp/carrie_and_co/charlotte.shtml; INTERNET.

44. Jamie Coville, “Wonder Woman.” Paper located on the World Wide Web [web-page on-line] [(August 1996) cited 1 June 2002]; available from <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8580/wonderwo.html>; INTERNET.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid

47. “Killing us softly”, p. 101.

48. *Gender Trouble*. See preface, viii.

49. “Are they Selling Her Lips?”, 201-202.

50. Harold A. Alexander, a hair stylist, actor, and “Barbie Artist” in my town, has gone further than most in changing Barbie’s appearance. Three years ago, he created a line of astrological Barbie Dolls, wherein each Barbie creation represents one of the twelve astrological signs (Gemini is quite interesting). Harold also has a series of more theatrical Barbie Dolls, which includes “Bubble-Bath Barbie.” He sells his Barbie creations at local and regional doll shows.

51. It is necessary to point out here that some feminists may already recognize ‘Woman’ as a patriarchic ‘prop’ in the make-believe world of male fantasy. And in so doing, these feminists have already begun to tear down the myths about women promulgated by pop cultural representations of them. Nonetheless, feminists have been somewhat reluctant to turn these representations on their heads and offer artistic, musical, and literary responses to this form of patriarchy. Alternative images of femininity constructed by women—both heterosexual and homosexual—are needed to dismantle the hegemony of the male gaze.

52. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. This and the above question appear on p. 192.

53. In “Psychological Aspects of Ethnic Doll Play,” Carol Moog puts forward the following argument: “Children learn best by interactive play. And of the first and most immediate ways that children get to know themselves and others is by playing with dolls.... They [dolls] are representations of the human spirit, soul, self” (page 1). She continues this argument on page 2: “Children use their dolls as scapegoats, as mouthpieces, as props for role playing, as ways of assimilating what they hear from adults, and as little ‘selves’ to nurture or cure or scold.” And the kinds of dolls children play with have a direct role in their images of themselves. Moog continues: “When the [African-American] child grows up playing only with Caucasian dolls, the daunting effects of his immersion in the white-oriented United States culture are compounded.” She continues, “‘You’ll find Black children even today,’ Ms. Rubie observes [Yvonne Rubie, founder of Golden Ribbon Playthings, has mass-produced a Black character doll named ‘Huggy Bear’], ‘who haven’t been exposed to Black dolls, say in Montana, where they might be totally surrounded by whites who express negative feelings about the blackness of Huggy Bear.’ Psychologically these children are rejecting an image of themselves because they haven’t positively embraced a sense of themselves as Black” (page 2). Carol Moog, “Psychological Aspects of Ethnic Doll Play,” appears in *The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies*, an on-line journal publication located on the World Wide Web [cited 1 October 2002]; available from <http://www.balchinstitute.org/museum/toys/psych.html>; INTERNET.

54. “Killing us Softly”, 101.

55. “Are they Selling Her Lips?”, 223.

56. I work toward this goal—and encourage others to do so as well—by analyzing images of women in advertising with my undergraduate students. Recently in a senior level course that I am co-teaching with a male professor in the English Department, we discussed the work of Roberta Bondi, a feminist theologian and professor. Several students began arguing that feminism has created a great divide between the sexes, frightening men who question the etiquette given to them by their mothers and marginalizing women who seek responsibility and recognition while simultaneously filling traditional roles such as wife and mother. As the students discussed the potentially negative impact of feminism on behavior—people quibbling over how to refer to women, how women should dress, whether women should make themselves up, and so on—I listened. And I lied. I did not reveal that for years I had secretly believed that the women’s movement was a wash if it reduces human beings to debating the look and attitudes of women. Or whether women should shave their legs and wear make-up—such trivializations are insulting to the deep minds of women. I did not quarrel with their logic. At the same time, I felt that I was missing something important and timely. I feared that I too was responsible for the failure of feminism by following mainstream fashion, spending time and money on new hairstyles, even tanning my skin. As I sat there feeling burdened by my guilty acts, one bright male student interjected his thoughts: “Surely progress has been made,” he stated, “if we can argue about such things. There was a time when women were not even permitted into the college classroom!”

57. “Art: The New Set.” In *New Cultural Icons*, ed. Sean Murphy (July 2002), 22.

58. *Gender Trouble*, ix.

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