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# Power Girls Before Girl Power: 1980s Toy-Based Girl Cartoons

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## THE POWER GIRLS BEFORE GIRL POWER: 1980S TOY-BASED GIRL CARTOONS - KATIA PEREA

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**Abstract:** The socio/cultural history and partnership of toy advertisement and children’s television is rich and well documented (Schneider 1989, Kunkel 1988, Seiter 1993). In this article I discuss the influence of policy in girl’s cartoon programming as well as the relationship between commercialization and financial motivation in creating a girl cartoon media product. I then discuss the formulaic, gender normative parameters this new genre set in place to identify girl cartoons as well as girl media consumption and how within those parameters girl cartoon characters were able to represent an empowered girl popular culture product a decade before the nomenclature Girl Power. This research considers the socio-historical framework of programming in the 1980s toy-based cartoon era to assess how cartoons playfully promote a counter-hegemonic force on television’s socially compulsive gender coding. This research textually analyzed several episodes of *Rainbow Brite*, *My Little Pony*, *Care Bears*, *Strawberry Shortcake* and television girl cartoons from 1981-1988, to initiate a thematic coding scheme documenting what is occurring both verbally and visually regarding gender display and gender dynamics between characters. The coding was analyzed to identify systems of gender behavior that are both intentionally overt and naturally transgressive, traditional feminine traits and subtle, counter-normative characteristics. This includes, but is not limited to, clothing, behaviors, accessories, jokes, images, songs, background design, friendship dynamics and dialogue reproduced verbatim.



My Little Pony.

### Introduction

Riot Grrr!<sup>[2]</sup> subculture and third wave feminism<sup>[3]</sup> are accredited as the cultural predecessor of the 1990s Girl Power popular culture (Taft 2004), minus the political consciousness or DIY consumer sensibilities; however, its commercialized predecessor, the 1980s toy-based girl cartoons, is what established the discourse on girl media culture as well as establishing a popular culture genre that associated consumerism with girl empowerment. The age group of the intended viewers for these 1980s girl cartoons grew up to be the teenagers and young adult

women of the 1990s. The main distinction between these different types of Girl Power consumption is that the adventures of Rainbow Brite or the Little Ponies were inspiring young girl viewers to be empowered without sexualizing them.

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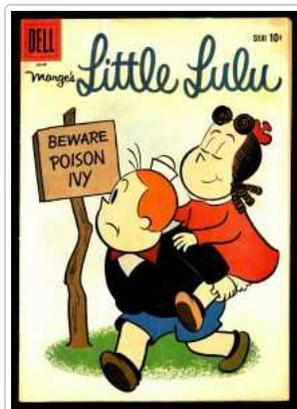
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Unlike the often overly sexualized portrayal of the adult female body in many cartoons, such as the buxom, corseted Wonder Woman, the curvaceous, mini-skirted She-Ra, or the boyfriend invested Daphne<sup>[4]</sup>, 1980s toy-based girl cartoons had pre-pubescent girl characters who were all under the age of twelve. These girl cartoon lead characters were not tween, pre-teen or teenagers, a distinction within the definition of “girl” that had been under-explored in feminist media literature until the nomenclature of “girls studies” in the 1990s. This research found twelve to be the magic age that media gives girl characters boobs and boyfriends.<sup>[5]</sup> The under-twelve cartoon girl bodies of the 1980s were portrayed without any overt sexualization such as breasts, curves, sexually suggestive clothing or heteronormative romantic interest; the girl and boy characters are friends<sup>[6]</sup>

The 1990s Girl Power popular culture was heavily defined by its marketability; the things you consumed defined your girl power. Its empowerment consumption was encased as depoliticized, individually expressed and purchasable (Taft 2004, Weeks 2004, Gonick 2006). Girl Power of the 1990s did not need girls to identify global sexism, it asked girls to be confident, pretty and sexy. Its media representations were mostly young women that acceptably span from teenagers into elder adulthood. It seemed not to matter how old you were, but it did seem to matter how young you were. The 1990s Girl Power’s representation was not for little girls, it was for post-pubescent girls and women; basically, girls with spending power and girls that can be sexualized, in other words, girls that were women.

The 1980s girl cartoons were also defined by the marketability of the things girls consumed; the toys. Girls played with toys based on communicative and adventurous cartoons where they were leaders; it had nothing to do with being pretty for the boys. The 1980s toy-based cartoons created a realization, albeit a commodified one, that girls were a valuable target audience. While confidence and pretty things did abound in cartoons like Rainbow Brite and My Little Pony, the portrayal of strength was attributed to the cooperation within the group; friendship was the strength and its empowerment was in the girl, there were no sexy things.

These are key to describing the creation of girl power discourse within the mass consumed media product. These cartoon characters’ leadership, confidence, determination and savvies were delivered back a decade later as 1990s Girl Power in what Stuart Hall identifies as cultural ventriloquism (Hall 1981), where a subculture’s empowerment is absorbed by the culture industry, its dissidence removed, and delivered back, often to the group that originally created it. The constructed boundaries on girl’s empowerment in the 1990s Girl Power popular culture discourse is presented in the form of sexualized bodies and heteronormative concerns, characteristics not present in the 1980s television girl cartoons or their toys.



*Little Lulu comic book.*

### Little Lulu – The First Girl Power Cartoon

Marjorie Henderson Buell, the first US woman cartoonist to achieve international fame, created Little Lulu as a single panel newspaper comic in 1935 for The Saturday Evening Post. With two previously successful syndicated strips under her belt, Marge, Buell’s pen name, was asked by the Post to create a successor to Henry, a Post cartoon strip about a little boy that had gone to national syndication. The Post was uncertain a girl character could be successful. When asked about creating Little Lulu, Buell explained to a reporter, “I wanted a girl because a girl could get away with more fresh stunts that in a small boy would seem boorish” (Jacob 2006). Little Lulu became an instant success and the comic was soon made into a cartoon by Paramount.

While there were many lead cartoon boy characters in the Golden Era of theatrical cartoons, the first and only girl cartoon was *Little Lulu*

1943-1948 (Lenburg 2009). The Little Lulu cartoons were created for cinematic showings by Paramount’s animation production house from 1943-1948, and began syndicated television broadcast in the early 1950s (Woolery 1983, Erickson 2005). A master of deadpan delivery, Lulu displayed a willful resilience in the face of adversity. She was undaunted and unafraid, mischievous yet well-intentioned, and she was wildly successful.



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*Little Lulu toys.*

Due to the character's overwhelming popularity, Buell found herself presiding over a Little Lulu merchandising empire, including product endorsements; proving that Lulu was not just for girls.

Lulu was a hit. In 1944, she began a fifteen-year run as the star of advertisements for Kleenex tissues. By 1950, [creator] Margaret Buell was presiding over a

merchandising empire that included Little Lulu dolls, lunch boxes, magic slates, coin purses, bubble bath, pajamas, and candy (Jacob 2006:1).

When her film contract license was up in 1948, Paramount studios tried to use the character's theatrical publicity as leverage to cut Buell's profits and claim part ownership of the character in exchange for the cartoon's continued production; Buell refused to sell out her creation (Evanier 2007). Due to this licensing disagreement, Paramount stopped producing Little Lulu and in the 1950s sold the existing cartoons as syndicated children's television programming (Erickson 2005). They aired sporadically in that decade and then left television.

### Misogynistic Boys

A theme that runs through Little Lulu is the boy vs. girl rivalry that occurs with the secondary character Tubby, a neighborhood friend who often puts the sign "No Girls Allowed" on his clubhouse door, locking Lulu out of the boys' activity inside. Tubby berates Lulu as a girl and revels in the superiority of his boyhood; that is of course, until Lulu repeatedly outsmarts him and makes him appear foolish, disproving his supposed gender superiority.

I found that this gender-based rivalry ran through girl cartoons in later eras as well, where a boy character reacts in disgust to representations of the feminine or uses diminutive gender-based comments against the lead girl, referring to the girl as weak or frivolous. I refer to these misogynistic boys as an anti-feminine foil. Perhaps this anti-feminine foil cartoon character corresponds to Adorno's similar reflections on Disney's popular cartoon character Donald Duck, whose slapstick violence and mishaps were viewed by Adorno as examples of mass man's willingness to accept the inequalities of capitalism. He writes, "Donald Duck, like the unfortunate in real life, gets a thrashing so that the viewer can get used to the same treatment" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997:138). In girl cartoons, the anti-feminine foil is a girl's reminder of the sexism that she faces in daily life, and also a reminder of how she can outsmart it.

Truly deserving the title of girl power, Lulu, in several cartoons, is tricked by scoundrel men who ply her with false promises, offers of lollipops from a golfer who hires her as his caddy in "Cad and Caddy" or the photographer offering to take her photograph once she pays twenty-five cents in "Snap Happy". She rectifies the matter with a fecund imagination full of cartoon scenarios worthy of any avant-garde expressionist as she proceeds to torment the men in simple pursuit of said promises. "Will you take my picture now mister?" she exclaims, posing in front of all his shots until he fulfills his promise. "Where's my lollipop?" precedes a series of cunning pranks preventing the golfer's ball from reaching the hole. Throughout these scenes, though she is intentionally upsetting these men, delivering her punishments with deadpan authority, her acts of mischief are depicted more as innovative creativity than rebellion.

Much like the consideration towards mass culture as a mass manipulator intended on indoctrinating the masses into subservience to the system of consumer capitalism (Adorno 1972, Clark 1990), girls are generally presented as fragile and innocent, willing usurpers of dominant cultural works (Walkerline 1997, Fritzsche 2004). Cartoon character Little Lulu is a direct challenge to these socially constructed gender norms. As stated in key audience studies, media consumption cannot be seen as an isolated process of encoding, but should be examined as a phenomenon embedded in daily life (Ang 1996, Morely 2000). The traditional feminist critique of girl cartoons is that girl characters are represented as dependent on boy characters or portrayed in hyper-

feminized settings (Albiniak 2001, Thompson and Zebrinos 1997, 1995, Signorielli 1993, 1990); because of her “fresh stunts” Little Lulu demonstrates a girl cartoon as a popular culture media product that indeed does subvert normative gender codes; a girl in power, sans sexualization.

However, Little Lulu’s empowered presentation was not an emphatic statement of girl power, in fact it wasn’t a statement at all. Buell’s son reported in an interview:

“

[My mother] didn’t think of Lulu as a part of politics. She drew a line between entertainment and didacticism.” Nor did Marge welcome the idea of introducing feminist themes into the cartoon. She preferred to let the character’s actions speak for themselves. “She created this feisty little girl character who held her own against the guys and frequently outwitted them, but she didn’t want to turn the cartoon into a message. She agreed with Samuel Goldwyn’s slogan, ‘If you want to send a message, try Western Union’ (Gewertz 2006:2).

Lulu’s mischief involves a sense of self-confidence and wit. This self-motivated mischief is generally associated as a boy characteristic, as in “boys will be boys.” However Lulu is not a boy, she is very much a girl, willful and confident, a good role model for girl cartoons and, Buell thought, for young girls (Gewertz 2006). The Little Lulu cartoon was playfully transgressing the normative codes created to define little girls. It would be almost thirty years before another girl was presented as a lead character in a television cartoon.

### Toys, Cartoons and the FCC

In 1969, under the FCC guidelines of network self-regulation, the ABC network broadcast Hot Wheels 1969-1971; a cartoon program named after a Mattel brand of toy cars (Owen 1988). This was the first example of product-based cartoon programming, a show developed around a line of preexisting children’s toy product. Public concerns were promptly raised to the FCC against Mattel’s “half-hour commercial” Hot Wheels and the overcommercialization in children’s television. The concerns fell on deaf ears.



*Mattel’s Hot Wheels cars.*

While activist groups like the parent-run Action for Children’s Television were trivialized, the FCC did respond, however, to a financial claim made by a rival toy manufacturer who asserted that Mattel’s Hot Wheels show be recognized as an advertisement, not programming, and be financially coded by the network as such. Motivated by the competitor’s claims, the FCC mandated the ABC network to code the Hot Wheels program as advertising time for Mattel, far more expensive airtime than regular programming. Rendering Hot Wheels airtime too costly, it was no longer profitable

for Mattel and the show was quickly cancelled (Owen 1988, Mittell 2003). Promoting industry self-regulation, the FCC issued a vague warning advising networks against further product-based cartoon programming (Schneider 1989)



*The Hot Wheels television show (1979-80).*

Feeling that the broadcasters lacked compliance in self-regulation, Action for Children’s Television continued to petitioned Congress and eventually got the FCC to issue a Report and Policy Statement in 1974 suggesting that broadcasters have a special obligation to serve children (Kunkel 1998). As a result, the amount of advertisement time allowed during children’s programming was limited, slashing their budgets and new cartoon programming with it (Lisosky 2001).

The 1970s were a transitional period for children’s television cartoons, and much more so for girl cartoon characters. Though the socio/cultural era was ripe for cartoon programming to move away from recycled theatrical cartoons and

produce new stylistic cartoons specifically for television, budget constraints restricted the development of original ideas or new animation techniques; there would be no girl cartoons during this era.

Girl cartoons would have been a risk for the networks, compounded by their fear that any new cartoons, particularly a girl cartoon, may not be commercially successful with the viewers. Cartoon producers and networks played it safe by imitating past successes, cartoons where the girl characters were secondary to the boy leads; the networks did not experiment with the new concept of a lead girl character. This aspect of self-censorship, in the form of playing it safe by using boy characters as the default setting, is used to support the claims that television is a hegemonic replicator because it is producing mediocre programming so as to please the majority (Bourdieu 1998, Friske 1987). The cartoon industry's practice of using boy characters as the default setting was their way of playing it safe.

Television animation producer, Herb Klynn (Alvin and the Chipmunks), lamented the networks' reluctance towards testing new concepts: "We can create so much through animation, but try to show the networks! Most people I brings ideas to have no creative insight at all" (Erickson 2005). Linda Symensky, director of children's programming and various animation media, commented on the nature of cartoon programming production, "risk taking, scary as it is, is crucial to the advancement of the animated medium on television. The more risks you take, the more often you will end up with unusable material. But there is also a greater chance for success" (Simensky 2004:101). Where Klynn and Simensky's laments were in reaction to the networks' resistance towards general animation innovation, a more direct blockade was set against the development of girl characters.

Producer Cy Schneider was considered an authority on children's television after his financial success with producing Mattel's *Hot Wheels* programming. His positions on gender and racial diversity in children's television were representative of the pervasive sentiment in the male dominated industry. In his book on children's television, he writes about programming selection with an argument that demonstrates both a racial and gender bias,

“

The temptation is always to show the latest in styles, music, and dancing. Inexperienced young creative people...often forget that rapping and break dancing might go over well in Los Angeles and New York, but in Iowa the freckle-faced kids are still down at the soda fountain getting a sundae or out playing Little League baseball (Schneider 1989:108).

More overtly in regards to gender, he asserts:

“

Don't show an eight year-old boy playing with an eight year-old girl. For boys, that's an unreal situation. Girls will emulate boys, but boys will not emulate girls. When in doubt, use boys (Schneider 1989:107).

In cartoon programming, and children's television in general, the industry's standard belief was that girls would watch boys' shows but boys would not watch girls' shows, therefore investing exclusively in the programming of boy-dominated cartoons (Seiter and Mayor 2004).

In the interest of obtaining advertising sponsors, the industry created the gender biased belief of children's viewing habits. Arguments that boys watched television programming more than girls were not taking into account that there were no programs for the girls to watch because boy characters were always ensured the lead role. Girls watched boys' cartoons because that was all that was available (Seiter 1993).

Media scholar Ien Ang has argued against the pre-constituted audience body that can be defined or measured, partly because it does not take into account how the viewer interprets programming. According to Ang the audience is "an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interest of the institutions" (Ang 2:1991). Boy cartoon programming was designated for children programming specifically because its airtime was believed to be profitable for advertising children's products resulting in the creation of

a market by and for the interests of the market itself. Advertisers concentrated their dollars onto boy-centered cartoon programming because that was what existed.

### 1980s Reagan Era FCC Deregulation

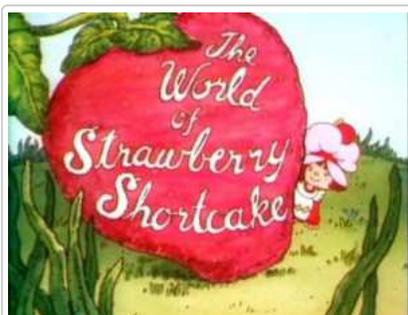
'If you can't self-regulate, then de-regulate' could have been the catch phrase of the pro-business Reagan-era FCC chairman Mark Fowler who ushered in a laissez-faire climate towards policy enforcement. He stated that television was a "toaster with pictures" (Engelhart 1986:76); an entertainment business with no obligation towards public service. Television broadcasters were deregulated and allowed to rely on the marketplace to decide which children's shows would be aired. Opponents argued that the deregulation that occurred in the 1980s violated key parts of the Communications Act of 1934, especially the requirement to operate in the public interest, and allowed broadcasters to seek profits with little public service programming required in return. The main deregulations critiqued were the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, the extension of television licenses, (the number of years the license is granted), and the expansion of the number of television stations any single entity could own (Hendershot 1998). The concentration of media ownership nationwide went from 50 owners in 1984 to 26 major owners in 1987<sup>[7]</sup> (Bagdikian 2004). Two specific deregulatory initiatives affecting children's television emerged: abolishing guidelines for minimal amounts of educational programming on networks, and dropping FCC license guidelines for how much advertising could be carried during children's programming (Hendershot 1998).

The lack of educational programming on commercial networks in the early 1980s was defended by the FCC on the basis that public television was sufficient to serve children's educational television needs. Public television had been a primary provider of children's educational programming since the late 1960s, and the FCC sought a way to codify public television broadcasting as a supplement to commercial television, thus relieving commercial broadcasters of their responsibility to serve the educational needs of their young audience through commercial educational programming (Lisosky 2001).

The Reagan-era FCC's emphasis on commercialization let networks determine the amount of advertisement presented during programming. This opened up the airwaves to the rebirth of the product-based cartoon, taken off the air after Mattel's *Hot Wheels* in the early 1970s. Deregulation ushered in a new era in children's programming, the toy-based genre and with it the introduction of girl cartoons.

### Toy-Based Cartoons, A New Era for Girls' Media

In 1977, Bernard Loomis, president of toy manufacturer Kenner, signed a licensing contract with Twentieth-Century Fox to produce the toy line for its upcoming movie *Star Wars* (Owen 1988, Hendershot 1998); Kenner had unknowingly landed the number one selling toys for 1978 and years to come. Hoping lightning would strike twice, Loomis began looking for a toy line Kenner could own from inception, not merely as licensing contractors. Loomis also wanted Kenner to focus on creating an entire line of toys rather than individual products. He soon found his next star; created by artist Muriel Fahrion, an illustrator in American Greeting Cards' juvenile department, a little girl character named Strawberry Shortcake would soon air in her own syndicated television special<sup>[8]</sup> *The World of Strawberry Shortcake 1980* (Woolery 1983, Lenburg 2009).



*The World of Strawberry Shortcake, cartoon.*

*The World of Strawberry Shortcake* produced by Kenner, aired once as a syndicated special in March-April of 1980 across different television stations. It told the adventure of six year-old girl, Strawberry Shortcake, and friends with similar fruit-based names like Apple Dumplin' and Raspberry Tart, who live in the very colorful Strawberry Land. "Who sleeps all night in a cake made of strawberries, lives and plays in a cake made of strawberries... It's Strawberry Shortcake, wouldn't you know" ("The World of Strawberry Shortcake"). The dialogue was as simple as the plot; the kids laugh and play in the garden until their fun is spoiled by the

villainous Purple Pie Man, an adult who wants to steal their fruit to make his pies. In the end, the kids of Strawberry Land win out over his conniving (Lenburg 2009).

The airing of the special was shortly followed by the release of a wide range of Kenner toy products. Within its first year the Strawberry Shortcake line had grossed over \$100 million in profits (Engelhart 1986), prompting subsequent yearly specials, airing one night a year from 1981-1985 (Woolery 1989). Strawberry Shortcake's financial success secured that there was profit in producing cartoons featuring a girl lead character. It was this drive for profit that created the opportunity for girl cartoons to exist.



*Rainbow Brite toys.*

Toy-based cartoons were about to make a new entrance into regular children's television programming. After the success of the Strawberry Shortcake television specials, NBC became the first network to directly violate the previous regulation against product-based programming with the appearance of a hit NBC Saturday morning cartoon by Hanna-Barbera, *The Smurfs* 1981-1990. Under the new FCC regulation these toy-based cartoons were acceptable because there was no direct product endorsement (Hendershot 1998). In essence a half-hour cartoon program based on a pre-existing toy, in this case *The Smurfs*, was permissible within the regulations provided that there were no Smurfs toy advertisements

during its broadcast airtime (Erickson 2005, Kunkel 1988). It was perfectly acceptable if the Smurfs toys were advertised at a different timeslot promoting their toys bearing the same name. What the toy manufacturers hoped for and soon discovered to be correct, was that there would be no need to spend on advertisement at all; the shows, essentially program-length commercials, were promotional on their own. When *The Smurfs* and deregulation went unchallenged, toy-based cartoons began proliferating nationwide not just as television specials but as regularly scheduled, daily cartoon programming.

A successful toy product meant exposure for the show, which in turn created desirable advertisement time slots; it was a win situation for the programmers. Because the amount of advertising time per show no longer had limitations in the deregulated environment of the 1980s, television stations reaped the advertising dollars of extended, multiple commercials. In addition to that financial gain, the television stations acquired the cartoons at little to no cost. Since most of these cartoons were aired in syndication, they were not produced in-house by the networks' own animation studio. Instead, they were produced by outside independent studios financed by the manufacturer of the toy that the cartoon was based on. The entire program series was sold as a complete set to individual stations for cash and/or advertising time. The station in turn received inexpensive or free programming and, due to the licensing success of the toy, sold its advertising timeslots at higher rates (Erickson 2005).

With the intention of promoting sales, rather than artistic production, entire program series were made quickly and cheaply with weak dialogue, poor animation quality and little or no character development (Lenburg 2009); quantity over quality was the new cartoon production value. Artist-driven cartoons, created by individual artists who concentrated on their animation, such as *Bugs Bunny* or *Pink Panther*, were viewed as expensive to produce. In the effort to continuously shave production costs, networks began broadcasting toy-based cartoon series that had been produced all at once. These cartoon productions were eagerly financed by toy manufacturers because they gave them something they wanted, the elusive year-round toy sales (Owen 1988). The manufacturers' goal of promoting toys through cartoons succeeded with millions of dollars in merchandise sales for all the individual shows (Engelhart 1986).

### Product Positioning Fantasy Play: The New Cartoon

While *The World of Strawberry Shortcake* was aimed at a girl audience, it was a television special, meaning it only aired once a year. Though Little Lulu cartoons were televised in the 1950s, they were created as theatrical cartoons which were then recycled into syndicated television. The very first made-for-television, regularly broadcasted girl cartoon program appeared in 1984, the toy-based *Rainbow Brite* – many would soon follow.



Since toy manufacturers marketed toys according to binary gender coding, the toy-based cartoons were then



*The Rainbow Brite tv series.*

also marketed according to the binary gender code as ‘girl cartoons’ and ‘boy cartoons’; Mattel’s *Rainbow Brite* 1984, Kenner’s *CareBears* 1985 and Hasbro’s *My Little Pony* 1986 were examples of girl cartoons, while Hasbro’s *GI Joe* 1985, Mattel’s *HeMan* and the *Masters of the Universe* 1983 and Hasbro’s *Transformers* 1984 were examples of boy cartoons (Lenburg 2009).



*HeMan and Skeletor toys.*

These toy-based cartoons were produced to create product positioning fantasy play. In essence, the cartoon program would create the fantasy world in which a toy lived. Boys’ action cartoons had warriors, soldiers or authority figures equipped with gadgetry and weapons to fight villains with the aid of strong allies, vehicles and occasional beasts. They were premised on good vs. evil, and while the evil never wins, they often escape to fight another day. Each boy cartoons hero had a cartoon villain: Mattel’s He-Man battled Skeletor, Hasbro’s G.I. Joe battled Cobra and Hasbro’s Transformer Autobots battled the Transformer Decepticons. Each villain had their own force of allies, adventure equipment and arsenals. The profit for the boys’ toy industry derived from these extensive armed forces of gadgets and weapons referenced in the cartoon’s world.

Following the successful model of *Strawberry Shortcake* and *The Smurfs*<sup>[9]</sup> friendship communities, the girl cartoons were centered around adventures laden with lessons of friendship and caring, self-doubt overcome with pep talks and challenges resolved with teamwork. These toy-based girl cartoons were created and written almost exclusively by men whose notions of gender were translated into the programming. They established the television industry parameters of what determined a girl cartoon and with it, the cultural indicators of the new girl media genre. These definitions relied on, as much as they created, gender normative coding, such as excessive use of rainbows, ponies and the color pink as well as didactic storylines laden with self-deprecating dialogue. Characters remarking that they are not strong enough or brave enough would receive encouragement like *My Little Pony*’s “You can do it if you try” (“Escape from Catrina”) or *Rainbow Brite*’s “I know you can, I believe in you” (“Invasion of Rainbowland”). All 1980s girl cartoons emphasized these self-conscious critiques countered by their peers’ emotional and motivational support.

### The World of Rainbow Unicorns and Motivational Leaders

The industry term for the pink worlds the girl cartoons were centered on was “cooperation villages” (Hendershot 2004); self-conscious characters living together and helping one another learn life lessons. The magical ponies of Hasbro’s *My Little Pony* lived in the colorful Paradise Estates located in Ponyland, Mattel’s *Rainbow Brite* and friends lived in Rainbow Land and Kenner’s *Care Bears* lived in the clouds in the Kingdom of Care-a-Lot; all lands were complete with smiling stars and cheerful rainbows. Cultural scholar Esther Leslie points out in her analysis of animation that “animals are children’s willing helpers in the cartoon world, just as they are in the fairy-tales” (Leslie 2002:24). These magical lands were often inhabited by little creature friends who performed basic labor jobs ranging from gathering color stars or harvesting the gardens; the little ponies played with the bushwoolies, the Color Kids teamed with the sprites. The little friends were as helpless as they were helpful. Quite often the critters fell into peril and needed to be rescued by one of the girl characters, providing the girl characters a set role of protective caretaking and guidance.





Heartthrob the *My Little Pony* cartoon character.



Hasbro's 'Heartthrob' the *My Little Pony* toy.

Lacking the arsenal of toys created by the use of weaponry and gadgetry accessible in the boy cartoon programs, the cooperation villages setting created a context that required the purchase of multiple dolls to interact and replicate the stories in the product-

placement fantasy of girl cartoon programming, and it did so quite successfully; 150 million little ponies and over 40 million Care Bears were sold between 1983 and 1987 (Erickson 2005). Each of the pastel-colored Care Bears was named to correspond to a feeling, such as Grumpy Bear, Tenderheart Bear or Wishing Bear. The pastel-colored ponies had rainbow-colored manes and icons on their hind quarters demonstrating if they were flying pegasus ponies like Heart Throb, Paradise and Lofty, horned unicorn ponies like Ribbons, Buttons and Fizzy, mermaid sea ponies like Sunshower and Water Lily or earth ponies like Posey, Magic Star and Lickety-Split, all with their own magical power. The dolls relied on communication and teamwork. Upon market introduction in 1983 Hasbro sold \$25 million worth of pony toys; with the media release of *My Little Pony* cartoons, that figure rose to over \$100 million in 1985 (Engelhart 1986). In terms of commercialism, exchanging feelings along with accessories and the occasional magical charms made for a very profitable girls' toy market.

When a villain confronted a character, the boy cartoons' plot often revolved around combative battle and violent conquest; G.I. Joe soldiers used advanced weaponry to fight Cobra agents, the Autobots would pound and slice metal on metal against the Decepticons while He-Man would often physically pick up his villains and throw them. The girl cartoons' villains were more often captured than attacked, and the characters used teamwork and encouragement instead of weapons or violence (Woolery 1983, Hendershot 1998). In a *My Little Pony* episode, a newly allied worker bee says to Meagan, "You can't talk to the queen, she's too mean to listen." Meagan replies, "I have to. We have to try to find the good in everyone" ("The End of Flutter Valley"). Girl toons were generally a violence-free rescue adventure with conflict-resolution scenarios involving kind words for a tearful character that had caused trouble. If a member of the cooperation village traveled outside the safe boundaries of their home there were usually unpleasant or dangerous circumstances that required rescuing and then an apology from the misguided member for wandering alone. Little Pony Shady says, "Maybe if I hadn't been so overly sensitive I could have helped the other ponies get away [from the kidnappers]. Now not only am I useless, I'm a deserter besides." This self-deprecation is followed by tears and crying that naturally leads to song, "I'm all wrong, all wrong, I'm a klutz and I don't belong." Five year-old Molly, the human friend of the ponies, is there to comfort Shady, in song of course, "No one in the world is perfect, you are not all wrong, you are all right" ("The Glass Princess"). By the end of the episode, Shady's mea culpa is resolved with Molly's emotional-support and the kidnapping conflicts are resolved with a moralistic lesson of friendship and sharing from lead pony Magic Star.

Whereas boy cartoons offered action battles and explorations, cooperation village girl cartoons centered on personal dynamics within the community and keeping the home safe and happy. Children's culture critic Cathleen Schine considered them to be an antithesis of adventure, "instead of being about journeys into the world, they are, by definition, conservative: they are about keeping the world at bay, about limits and defending those limits." (Schine 1988:6).

In *Sold Separately*, her book on children in consumer culture, Ellen Seiter writes about how her local video store stopped carrying Rainbow Brite because even though kids loved it, too many parents were complaining about it. She mused that perhaps middle-class parents were offended by the excessive use of pink and the kitschiness of the cartoon's design perhaps because of their own distaste for the leanings that mass-marketed media represents working-class aesthetics and gendered sensibilities (Seiter 1993). These toy-based girl cartoons were widely critiqued by pundits and parents alike (Owen 1988, Signorielli 1990), and with good reason since the plots were formulaic with equally bad animation and dialogue. No one seemed to like them

except the children viewers who responded enthusiastically with millions of dollars in product purchases (Engelhart 1986, Seiter 1993).

This direct relationship between toy and cartoon not only increased the toy's sales, it also increased the social coding of cartoons as children's programming. Perhaps because of the simplified dialogue and storylines or the unlikelihood of adults playing with children's toys, these cartoons were watched predominantly by children. Unlike cartoons in the past era, like Bugs Bunny or Mickey Mouse, which had been enjoyed and even targeted at adult audiences as well as children, the cheaply animated and poorly written toy-based cartoons were really just for kids- and some were really just for the girls.

### A Room of One's Own, On Television

As these girl cartoons were being criticized by adults for their hyper-feminine appearance, girl viewers were making their own interpretations (Walkerdine 1997). Within these standard gendered parameters the girl protagonists in these cartoons were strong, responsible and leaders. These toy-based girl cartoons created an empowered space for little girl viewers that previously had not existed, albeit a heavily commercialized and gendered one (Seiter 1993).

As stated in key audience studies, media consumption cannot be seen as an isolated process of encoding, but should be examined as a phenomenon embedded in daily life (Ang 1996 Morely 2000). Different studies show that the relationship girls have with the cultural products they consume is an active one (Inness 1998, Weeks 2004). Girls are just as capable as other fans to take from pop culture what relates to them and discard what appears to be irrelevant or derogatory (Walkerdine 1997). They can select material from the main discourse and find strength in it; they can find its 'girl power'. Exemplified physically through their play with the cartoon toys, the vast range of potential interpretation and application of the 'girl power' message in shows like *Rainbow Brite* or *My Little Pony* allowed girls to use the cartoons' media image as they saw fit in pursuing their own empowerment goals.

Though the creation of these cartoons was to increase toy consumption by little girls, it inadvertently and without intention created an empowering space for little girls to see themselves as heroes. This new space to television, girl cartoons, was a representation of the non-violent, communicative, pink world of what girl aesthetics should be, and what this world provided was a "room of one's own" for little girls on network television. In the spirit of Virginia Woolf's identification of a space for women to retain a sense of their own identity, "a room of one's own" was created with the girl cartoons of the 1980s.

These cartoon girl protagonists represented girl characters that displayed a strength that had not traditionally been attributed to girls. The traditional gender presentation, as well as the traditional feminist critique, was that girl characters were secondary and represented as dependent on a boy character (Albinak 2001, Thompson and Zebrinos 1997, 1995, Signorielli 1993, 1990). In contrast, the representation of feminine strength in the girl characters of the 1980s cartoons countered the traditional gendered traits associated with little girls. The protagonist were empowered girls with determination and leadership skills, something that had been missing in cartoon television since Little Lulu. The excessive use of pink stars and rainbow skies meant designated girl leaders.

Aged eleven and under, these cartoon girls were represented in ways that subvert traditional norms of who little girls are and what they do. Within the heavily gendered normative message, the feature of lead girl characters created a counter-hegemonic message of gender independence alongside its creation of a successful girls market. Shows like *Rainbow Brite* provided a space for girls to have as their own, with no boy prince to rescue them, no boy hero to be a sidekick for, and where the protagonist, and consequently the hero, was a girl. These girl cartoons did, however, have boy characters; *Huckleberry Pie* lived in Strawberry Land, *Red Butler* and *Buddy Blue* were part of the Color Kids who lived in Rainbow Land, and there were boy *Care Bears* in *Care-A-Lot* as well as boy ponies in *Ponyland*. Perhaps because of the industry party line that cartoons with girl leads could not be successful, boy characters were included in all the girl shows, though the same was not true in reverse. The boy cartoons at times had a woman character, but a girl in the boy cartoons was rarely seen. The exception to this was the cartoon *Inspector Gadget* 1983-1986 and the detective's precocious niece and lead character, Penny.

Created by DIC Entertainment, *Inspector Gadget* 1983-1986 was about a bumbling, simple-witted detective who fights crime using his cyborg-like gadgets. There were no genre demarcations of a girls' cartoon, no rainbows, no cute animals, no magic; stylistically, *Inspector Gadget* was a boy's cartoon. The plot line usually follows the same format; Gadget is given a top-secret assignment and proceeds to either mistake villains for allies or simply go on an unrelated trail. Since clever Penny is always skeptical of these so-called allies, suspecting them to be villainous agents, she sends Brain, her dog and crime-fighting partner, to follow and protect her Uncle Gadget while she formulates a way to prevent disaster and solve the crime. Years before the proliferation of laptops or cell phones, Penny uses her computer book to break codes, conduct surveillance and keep tabs on Gadget. She also uses her wristwatch as a communicator, laser beam and occasional remote control over menacing vehicles or destructive machines. These tech-savvy characteristics, paired with her resourceful detective skills are a playful transgression to normative gender coding since they are more commonly attributed to boy characters, or nerdy teenage girls, like Selma on *Scooby-Doo*, who often need to be rescued. On the *Inspector Gadget* cartoon, it was Penny who did the rescuing.



*Penny with Inspector Gadget.*

While the show is named after Gadget, he is the program's comic relief, while Penny is the serious character, always aware of peril and taking risks to solve the crimes and capture the culprits. In his absentminded adventures, Gadget fails to recognize the far superior intellectual abilities of his niece. In each episode Penny is the one who solves the crimes while Gadget is distracted and detained by the M.A.D. agents of the villainous Dr. Claw and his pet cat<sup>[10]</sup>. At the end of each episode, police chief Quimby gives Gadget the recognition for solving the case. One could muse that Penny is the classic representation of the cliché “behind

every great man is a great woman”, whereby the woman toils and does the work while the man gets the credit. In Penny's case, even Gadget himself is unaware that she is actually the great detective. She works tirelessly and puts herself at risk, all unknown to Gadget, while in the end Gadget clumsily stumbles upon a solved crime and is given credit for its resolve as Penny looks on in amusement. As a strong girl character, both in identity and plot importance, Penny, effectively demonstrated that boys would easily watch an empowered girl character.

*Inspector Gadget* was DIC Entertainment's first television cartoon and an artist-driven program, preceding DIC's eventual turn to cheap, mechanical cartoons. DIC soon followed *Inspector Gadget* with thirty-two different cartoon programs in the 1980s that had their entire series produced at once, some with over one hundred episodes made in a single year. One of these mass produced programs was girl cartoon *Rainbow Brite* 1984-1986.

The introduction of girl cartoons into children's television media culture spurred an unprecedented commercial movement of merchandise. *Rainbow Brite*, was originally a greeting card icon created by Hallmark. With the advantage of deregulated children's television, toy manufacturer Mattel contracted DIC Entertainment to animate the Hallmark character and create a cartoon series they could sell in syndication, what followed was an explosion of rainbow success. The *Rainbow Brite* franchise generated \$1 billion in retail sales of dolls, toys, cereal and other licensed products throughout the 1980s.<sup>[11]</sup> Much like her girl cartoon predecessor *Little Lulu*, *Rainbow Brite* spurred a merchandising empire that is still viable today.

*Rainbow Brite's* bias for heroic and direct action was a characteristic also attributed to *Little Lulu*, they both would act to ensure the safety of smaller children or animals in need of rescue. However, unlike *Little Lulu*, *Rainbow Brite* was neither cunning nor mischievous; the serendipitous *Rainbow Brite* was the new girl cartoon role model. *Rainbow Brite* looks like a cartoon version of a child beauty pageant contestant. Her rosy cheeks are accentuated by long blond hair in a high bouffant. She wears rainbow colored moon boots and a miniskirt with a fluffy white trim. Yet contrary to the expectations associated with this sweet, hyper-feminine appearance, she is a fearless little girl who is also a well-respected, resourceful leader, battling evil, unafraid and triumphant; she is the 1980s power girl.

The *Rainbow Brite* series begins with her arrival to a dark land, an unseen benevolent woman spirit brings her there by magic. We know magic is at work here because of the visual and audio cues of star sparkles and a harp glissando. Both of these cues had been used extensively by Looney Tunes yet they were demarcations of violence, such as being hit on the head with an anvil. *Rainbow Brite* effectively appropriated these audio and visual cues as the new girl cartoon signifiers of magic and happiness, a trend that continues today. In the pilot episode, a shooting blue star magically transforms into Rainbow Brite as she arrives to the dark, thunderous land. An omnipotent woman's voice asks, "Still want to save this world?" "Yes!" Rainbow Brite emphatically replies, "It's even worse close up." The woman she says, "Find the spear of light and the color of this land and set it free, and the darkness will disappear." ("Beginning of Rainbowland") In this introductory episode, not only is this feminine girl a heroic leader, the all-knowing guardian entity responsible for bringing her there is a woman. Strawberry Shortcake, Rainbow Brite and Meagan in the *My Little Pony* cartoons make no mention of their parents. They simply arrive in these magical lands to help the residents battle villains and reclaim their homes. "What [Rainbow's] mom and dad thought of her mysterious disappearance...weren't mentioned. But the story was aimed at very young children, who tend not to ascribe much weight to such consideration" (Markstein 2003:1). Walkerdine points out in her analysis of young girls in 1980s popular culture texts that "it was amazing just how many of the stories presented the heroines as either not having parents, or not living with them" (Walkerdine 1997:47). This lack of adults was more present in the girl cartoons than in the boy cartoons, and as a result meant that girls were the defacto leaders.

In the *Rainbow Brite* cartoon, the cooperation village of Rainbowland is full of multi-colored homes and sparkling paths. Equally vibrant are the inhabitants, little fuzzy multihued Sprite and the Color Kids, each represented in a corresponding color with the boys, Red Butler and Buddy Blue, taking the traditional primary boy colors. Together they harvest and produce color stars which power up the magic color belt Rainbow Brite uses to awaken the dismal, colorless areas overtaken by their grey nemesis named Murkel. Riding upon Starlight, her large white stallion with a rainbow mane, Rainbow Brite travels to bring color and rainbows to all lands of the universe. You will not find any guns or swords in these brigades. Under Rainbow Brite's motivational guidance the Color Kids and Sprites use teamwork to fight battles.

The color kids and the sprites look to Rainbow for help in resolving their conflicts. Rainbow Brite offers her friends emotional support while also engaging in the defense of Color Land. "I have to save them, you don't have to come if you don't want to." ("Rainbow Land"). She offers advice and is sought out for advice, she performs as leader and is recognized as leader, by others and self-actualized. She uses her magical powers and challenges her enemies with the same serenity she displays when rescuing her friends from danger ("Peril in the Pits"), or helping a stranger find his way home ("Invasion of Rainbowland"). She offers her friends emotional support while also engaging in combative battle. "We have to go to [to the dark castle] and look for the magic color belt. We have to try, this world is awful, don't you want it to be beautiful?" When attempting a rescue, Rainbow says to her fearful sprite companion, Twink, "You can make it if you believe you can. Try to believe" ("Beginning of Rainbowland").

### Mean Girls

Much like the teasing Lulu faced from misogynistic boy, feminine-foil Tubby, Rainbow also has to face challenges from boy characters who doubt her leadership capabilities based on her gender. In the *Rainbow Brite* episode "Star Stealers" Rainbow is beckoned by Onyx, the robot horse, to travel to the Crystal Diamond planet and help his owner Cris save it from the evil princess. After narrowly escaping the giant robots, Onyx informs Cris that he has returned with help, Rainbow Brite. In one sentence, Cris emasculates himself and puts down girls, "The [evil princess and her] glitterbots have everyone hypnotized but me, and that's only because I run faster than anybody; ...this is what you call help? A girl!" ("Star Stealers"). Cris later makes fun of Starlight, Rainbow's horse, because he can't fly like the mechanical Onyx, he says, "That dumb horse of yours can't help rescue us. He can't even fly without your color belt." Rainbow replies, "He can think, which is more than your horse can do" ("Star Stealers"), it is indicative of the struggle that girls and women face when devalued due to physical strength prowess, yet proving themselves through intellectual accomplishments. Cris' remarks, are intended as the expected routine, to play the sexist game, the "thrashing" Adorno referred to that is expected of boys against girls; yet in the girl cartoon it is the girl that always wins.

Along with the anti-feminine foil boy character that emasculates himself by devaluing feminine gender, this research also found another gender-normative rivalry persistently present in girl cartoons, the mean girl, which I refer to as the feminine-foil. The feminine foil girls are bossy, snobby, bratty and have rivalries with the lead girl character. The feminine foil girl character actively embodies the antithesis of the empowered protagonist. Both foils are used as a representation of gender normativity for which the lead girl character can be comparatively identified as other. In *Rainbow Brite* “Star Stealers” the evil princess is the feminine foil. The feminine foil was also repeatedly found in episodes of *My Little Ponys* such as the queen bee in “The End of Flutter Valley” and the queen cat in “Escape from Catrina”. As a challenge to normative gender coding, Rainbow represents a girl warrior, unafraid and ready to take heroic action. The gendered behavior of the feminine foil princess in “Star Stealers” as well as the feminine-foils in *My Little Pony*, are representational of the diminutive critiques delivered earlier by Cris against Rainbow Brite. These characters are rude, selfish and freely insult those around them. The feminine foil represents a constructed, normative aspect of femininity that can be used to challenge the feminine power of girl characters like Rainbow Brite, who, though incredibly feminine and in a feminized world, is a strong and heroic leader. The feminine foil is the proverbial thorn in the girl’s side; though Rainbow Brite is strong and defies stereotypes, the feminine foil reinforces that those stereotypes are correct. However, like her challenge against Cris’ sexist remarks, Rainbow Brite proves triumphant over the bratty princess, displaying where the feminine strength truly lies- in smiling animals, rainbow sparkles and friendship.

### Conclusion

Television cartoons are a uniquely interpretive form. They are a complex combination of social reproduction and conflict and, because as popular culture they are used as material resources in everyday life, may serve simultaneously dominant and marginal interests. They have been a widely misunderstood art form precisely because of their categorization as children’s entertainment; as cultural forms associated with children are commonly marginalized. Girl cartoons present an example of three-dimensional social marginalization: as children’s television, girl’s programming, and as animated cartoons, all under-valued categories of social placement and study. This positioning as a subordinate cultural form may grant girl cartoons the ability to express different viewpoints and ideas from that of the dominant framework. Gender normativity is part of this synthesis of social structure and personal agency.

The 1980s girl cartoon characters displayed leadership, confidence, determination and savvies, creating a new genre of girl empowerment. The adventures of Rainbow Brite or the Little Ponies were inspiring young girl viewers to be empowered, sans sexualization. This representation of strength in a girl character serves to counter the themes historically used to construct little girls’ identity, such as romance, peer rivalry, and gendered self-deprecation. Walter Benjamin attributes to animation “the creation of alternative oppositional cultures” (Durham and Kellner 2006:35); by presenting little girls as leaders, the unique medium of girl cartoons challenges gender normativity, not as an emphatic expression of non-conformity, but by playfully transgressing popular culture’s compulsory gender coding.

### Notes:

[1] Inspector Gadget is culturally coded as a boy cartoon but is included in this set because of the main character, Penny. Strawberry Shortcake, while being a girl cartoon, was a television special, not a regularly scheduled program, and therefore is not included.

[2] Originating in 1991 in the punk-rock music scene of the Pacific Northwest, the young women fan base of the Riot Grrrl movement quickly spread throughout the US and parts of Europe (France 1993) proliferating the underground feminist publications of zines addressing issues of sexuality, rape, body image and gender inequality within a larger anti-establishment identity (Malkin 1993, Garrison 2000, Fritzsche 2004). The reappropriation of the word girl as grrrl was part of their dismissal of how the mainstream media depicted what a girl should be like. Part of this reappropriation was the reclaiming of a sexual self without abusive objectification. They were reclaiming what it meant to be a girl, and they kicked ass.

[3] The Third Wave Feminist movement intended to deconstruct and question Second Wave Feminism's dearth of representation outside of white middle-class heterosexuality, focusing on gender oppression's intersections with the power regimes of race, sexuality and class.

[4] Wonder Woman was on the cartoon "Superfriends", She-Ra was He-Man's sister and had her own cartoon "She-Ra, Princess of Power" and Daphne was the girlfriend of Fred on the cartoon "Scooby-Doo".

[5] Author's term for the sexual objectification of girls' bodies.

[6] ...and friendship is magic.

[7] The 26 owners from 1987 went down to 10 in 1996 and down to 6 major owners in 2004. They were: Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann AG, Viacom and U.S. General Electric. (Bagdikian 2004)

[8] A television special airs once, making it different from a regularly scheduled television program. A syndicated program is purchased and aired individually by stations rather than televised nationally by a network.

[9] The Smurfs was a rare cartoon intended both for the boy and girl audience. While it had the formulaic girl cartoon plot, it had a token girl character in a gang of boys.

[10] Dr. Claw and his pet cat are a parody of the James Bond 007 films' evil genius character, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, also known as Number 1, whose SPECTRE agents are the basis for the M.A.D. agents. Inspector Gadget himself is a parody of live-action TV program Get Smart and voiced by the same actor.

[11] <http://unitedmedialicensing.typepad.com>, accessed May 19, 2008.

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