

Almost Missing Barbie: The Oh-So-Post-Feminist Carrie Bratzshaw by Courtney L. Novosat

Saying we're post-feminist is as meaningless as saying we're post-democracy!

-Gloria Steinem, Mosaic Annual Conference 2005

Is feminism really dead? Well, yes and no.

-Phyllis Chesler, The Death of Feminism

Take care, keep it real, and above all else be beautiful.

*-Bratz website
<<http://www.bratz.com/>>*

Between the hum of the television and the whirl of the PC, most child development experts agree that children see over 40,000 commercial advertisements in one year (Linn & Levine, par. 2), advertisements for products that direct desires and Shanghai self-definition. Recently, the American Psychological Association has dubbed one such product, MGA Entertainment's Bratz dolls, a best-seller for girls between ages four and eight, as "damaging to girls' self-image and mental health, [by] teaching them to objectify themselves" (Dahl, par. 4). These wide-eyed, pouty-lipped dolls, whose exaggerated features and barely-there clothing scream pedophilic sexuality, have recently outsold Barbie in several countries including the UK. It may be a stretch to grieve the upheaval of the Barbie dynasty whose most recent incarnations—"Fairytoria," "Mermaidia," and "Rapunzel's Wedding"—further relegate girl's creative play to the realm of fantastical (rather than real) power and heterosexual marriage. However, at least Barbie resembles a woman, rather than a 'tween or toddler; there is something much more unsettling about the effusive sexuality of the Bratz dolls and their more recent spawns Bratz Kidz and Bratz Babyz.

Although factions of parents have recently begun to express concerns about the dolls, thousands are still sold each day, which begs the question: who's buying them? While a six-year-old daughter's nagging may hasten purchase, a different daughter holds the purse. The daughters of second wave feminists who now have young daughters of their own are thoughtlessly purchasing dolls that undercut many of the very liberties for which their foremother's fought. Thus, in this essay, I will first offer a close reading of the dolls' problematic representations for impressionable girls and then suggest that their purchase is rooted in a much more endemic problem of adult women's ideology. I will argue that the Bratz dolls popularity reflects a type of "trickle-down" post-feminism that is more "post-" than feminist; as Ariel Levy suggests of post-feminist regression, "but just because we're post doesn't automatically mean we are feminists [...]. simply because my generation of women has the good fortune to live in a world touched by the feminist movement, that [does not] mean that everything we do is magically imbued with its agenda" (5). Indeed, much done by our late twenty-something/early thirty-something generation is not imbued with a feminist agenda, including, I would suggest, the purchasing of Bratz dolls for our impressionable five-year-olds. Further, my experience teaching first-year college students, suggests that the fast-fading feminist agenda will further decline, as many in the generation following loathe using the "f-word." In an attempt to offer some insight to the problems with the "post-" and the controversy over the "f-word," I will explore several connections between media, ideology, and sexuality that are shaping our daughters as we have chosen to reshape our oh-so-post-feminist selves.

Child development experts agree that children "internalize gender-role expectations" by age five through observation and mimicry, two aspects of what we commonly term the socialization process ("Gender and Child Development"). Part of that mimicry occurs through creative play; by age five, children's dramatic play may begin to recreate scenes from television and by age six children may begin to "create skits that express personal thoughts, ideas, and emotions" (PBS Parents). Thus, when the Bratz cartoon, Bratz magazine, and Bratz dolls become central to this play, young girls internalize sexualized, hetero-normative, gender roles. In a recently aired episode of the Bratz cartoon entitled "Survivor," the trendy, pastel-clad characters compete in wilderness-centered tests of daring that, at first glance, might seem empowering. However, the gesture of female empowerment is quickly undercut by high-heeled footwear

inadequate for the terrain, internal conflicts about fashion that undermine healthy representations of teamwork, and choruses of girly-squeals at all things crawling or slithering. Thus, a young viewer internalizes implicit ideas such as “fashion trumps function” and “trivial differences of opinion cause conflict and threaten friendships”; this latter assumption reflects an impulse similar to what Carol Gilligan calls the “tyranny of niceness” that governs girls’ encounters with other girls. According to Gilligan and her colleagues, this “tyranny” teaches girls passivity as a panacea and threatens their ability to be self-assertive (qtd. in Chessler 41). Perhaps of more concern than wholesale passivity is the episode’s illogical reliance on fashion. In the episode’s nonsensical *coup de grâce*, a large pink-framed mirror saves the day by distracting a grizzly from the Bratz, and I use the term loosely, heroines. When at a safe distance from the bear at the episode’s resolution, one of the girls quips that she “never leaves home without” her mirror. The closing comment reasserts the central importance of physical appearance to the young viewer even amid a fantastically implausible scenario.

In addition to reinforcing femininity and undercutting self-empowerment, the Bratz cartoons and longer animated films, such as *Bratz: Genie Magic*, highlight female objectification and hetero-normative coupling. The movie, which opens by juxtaposing a young genie’s escape from an over-bearing father with scenes of four Bratz dolls dancing center-stage at a night club, contains several explicitly objectifying sequences. Within the first five minutes of the movie, torso-centered scenes of the gyrating dolls, clad in leather pants and midriff-bearing tees, relegate the Bratz dolls to sexualized, object-bodies; the scene also bears a striking resemblance to contemporary music videos. The dolls’ wardrobe and hip-hop dance style reflects similarities to pre-teen icons Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. Controversial French feminist Elisabeth Badinter supports the singers’ iconic status and modeling of inappropriate behaviors for girls, as she suggests: “the idols of prepubescent girls are the stars of the videos that are constantly being shown on cable music channels. Performers like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera can be seen ‘exhibiting themselves, lasciviously rubbing up against well-endowed males, and playing with the symbols of S&M’” (65). She insightfully remarks that “even if they are the fantasies of the men who produce these videos and not the dreams of the young female viewers, girls are still confronted from very early on with the image of a mechanized and brutal sexuality,” a sexuality alluded to in the Bratz movie. For the Bratz, leather pants and jackets along with their studded collars and leather hats also “play with the symbols” of a “brutal sexuality.” Symbolically representing the potential for brutality, the scenes decapitate the dolls by showing them from neck to knees and figuratively reinforcing the importance of a girl’s body and the relative non-importance of her mind. Further, the torso-centered scenes are interspersed with scenes of a *boy-cum-voyeur*. The filmic disruption re-centers the female body-object, for her gyrations become the focus of a male subject’s gaze, which again implies that a girl’s body, not her mind, captures the attention of the observing male. This exchange also introduces the idea of heterosexual pairing as correct and male-initiated, for moments later the observing male-subject asks the female-object to dinner. Several scenes later hetero-normative coupling is further reinforced, but with a slightly sinister tone. A second young man physically grabs the wrist of the young genie, whose escape has led her to seek refuge in the night club; he asks her in a lothario’s drawl: “Hey, gorgeous. New in town? No girl gets by the Dill-man.” Reinforcing male subject-autonomy and female object-passivity as a discourse of power, the scene suggests that a young boy may initiate touching a young girl at his will, and then remove his hand at his leisure. His closed-grip on her wrist reasserts her object-ness and his subjecthood; he arrests her movement and forces her to loose herself from his possession. Thus, the moment further gestures toward symbolic representations of “brutal sexuality” often observed in abusive relationships. Further the scene doubly asserts his linguistic possession of her, as he terms her both “gorgeous” and “girl” while ascribing himself both a proper name and the more potent signifier “man.”

In addition to the movie’s disturbing display of (hetero)sexual coupling, its attempts to represent multiculturalism are largely misguided. Foremost, the film participates in typical discourses of good and evil; here the villains are a megalomaniac, manipulative, dark-haired, dark-eyed man and woman. Continuing the male-subject/female-object discourse of power, the male is the female’s superior and frequently gives her orders. More unsettling is the ease with which the Bratz dolls appropriate cultural

dress. For after meeting the young genie, who Sasha (see Figure 1) dubs “bo-ho sheik” the Bratz later adopt a similar style that mimics traditional Indian dress. Thoughtlessly, the girls also appear to wear bindi on their foreheads; thusly, a mark of marriage worn by traditional Hindu women is here transformed into a fashion accessory. However, Sasha’s characterization is arguably the most pervasive and most disturbing cultural misrepresentation. Sasha, the series’ representative African-American doll, is nicknamed “Bunny-Boo.” “Boo” commonly considered an affectionate slang in African-American Vernacular English, simultaneously marks Sasha as the slang speaker. Her representation condenses and homogenizes African-American experience to the vernacular, by insisting on a more heavily slang-laden vocabulary that includes dropping “g” and “r” endings alongside frequent uses of the words “wicked,” “sista,” “girl,” and “yo.” Tacitly, the movie endorses implicit racial stereotypes that African-Americans speak in slang or vernacular, a stereotype that disallows the possibility of linguistic self-definition.

Without controlling narratives and fast-paced animation, the Bratz dolls embody little more than silenced sexuality. In advertisements, the dolls are typically posed provocatively to display the curves of a mature female body. Their heads, tilted to varied degrees, affect a coyness that is underscored by their too-pouty, too-wet lips and wide, over-drawn eyes; one might even argue that “Chloe” resembles Pamela Anderson or, more incriminatingly, Jenna Jameson. Further, the character’s legs are parted suggestively wider than a normal stance, and all wear high heels, as if no other type of shoe exists for the fashionable girl. All five wear clothing more aptly termed “second skin;” several sport micro-minis that, on a real young woman, might elicit charges of indecent exposure, or, at the very least, gesture toward the possibility of lingerie beneath. Indeed, their positions nearly mimic those associated with Victoria Secret ad campaigns. Beyond similarities of pose, the Bratz dolls long luxurious locks, overly-plump lips, and overly-accentuated eyes bare a striking resemblance to Victoria Secret models. This overt verisimilitude between a child’s toy and iconic lingerie models leaves little room for doubt: these dolls are meant to exude a heterosexual, adult sexuality.

In the preceding examples, girls explicitly and implicitly internalize stereotypically scripted versions of adult women’s behavior. The target audience, girls ages four to eight, encounter performances of female passivity and stereotypical gender-roles alongside the even more inappropriate sexual objectification, hetero-normative coupling, threatening male aggression, and cultural stereotyping. Still, Bratz remain a top seller; but, why are we buying? Women, the top consumers in Westernized societies, control the purse strings, particularly when shopping for children. While the increase in MGA Entertainment’s sale of Bratz dolls and associated items suggests that women consumers are purchasing uncritically, a recent Advertising Educational Foundation Poll suggests that women remain critical consumers. Indeed, when “respondents were asked to vote on the question: Has the portrayal of women in advertising improved in the last 10 years? [...] an overwhelming 70 per cent said ‘no, the majority of ads portray women in stereotypical roles’” (van der Gaag 55). The disconnect between women recognizing images of themselves as “stereotypical” and the endorsement of stereotypical representations of girls via the purchase of Bratz dolls is perplexing.

Some will argue that Barbie has contributed to stereotyping women since her inception. Certainly Barbie’s presents an unattainable notion of womanhood, but not only was Barbie redesigned in 1997 to be a bit more realistic, she is still recognizably a *woman*. Moreover, in her nearly fifty year history, Barbie has had various professional incarnations, including: astronaut, doctor, teacher, and Olympic athlete. In contrast, the Bratz “passion 4 fashion” credo becomes the dolls central motivation, one that the cartoons and movies reiterate by positioning physical appearance, frequently in the form of a make-over, as the key to conflict resolution. However, my purpose is not an *apologia* for Barbie; she is also fraught with complications. And certainly we must not forget that she was “modeled after blond German sex dolls called Bild Lilli” (Levy 187). Further, her hetero-normative coupling, ascribing to girls “appropriate” gender-roles, suspending women’s power in the realm of the fantastic, and presenting unattainable ideals of beauty warrant her deserving of critiques similar to those I’ve made of the Bratz dolls, but, at the fore, she is still a representation of a woman. The Bratz, obviously teenagers, Kidz, and Babyz are nearer to

the age of their target audience which makes the potential for their emulation in representational play much more detrimental.

The popularity of Bratz dolls, which are little more than exaggerated, hyper-sexualized, and younger Barbie dolls, reflects a cultural transition in Western women's ideology that questions their ability to recognize "stereotypical" advertisements without criticizing, a transition that is reflected in *her* television viewing as well as her purchasing. Carrie Bradshaw, fictional protagonist of HBO's hit creation *Sex and the City* that wrapped original production in 2004 and is currently in syndication seemingly *everywhere*, reflects attitudes similar to those represented in Bratz animation. Beyond the repeated focus on physical appearance, material culture, and fashion that pervade the Bratz movie and the *Sex and the City* series, the adult-themed final episodes, "An American in Paris (Parts *Une & Deux*)," bear striking thematic similarities to the *Bratz: Genie Magic* movie. The movie's voyeurism is echoed in the series' Part *Une*, when a young man on a passing boat films Carrie as she sits on a bench near the river, while in Part *Deux*, Carrie's love interest slaps her, reminiscent of the boy's threatening grasp on the genie's wrist in the Bratz movie. Doubtless the similarity is unintentional, but it does underscore a troubling verisimilitude: the thematic content in an animated movie for girls resembles themes in a sex-centered show for and about adult women.

Sex and the City, first aired in 1998, celebrated the life of the single, professional working woman who could succeed in the office and in the bedroom. While notching their bedposts, in previously male-only fashion, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte "became household names...and a Sunday night ritual for 10.6 million Americans" (Levy 171). Thus, *Sex and the City* revolutionized representations of women, now women could be as promiscuous as they wanted, which, as the show's first promotions suggested, meant having "sex like men" (171). But a show premised only on women having "sex like men" does not a fan-base make. Soon, Carrie becomes the single, independent, writer clad in designer fashions on the prowl for a long-term relationship with a heterosexual man that would eventually lead to marriage. Certainly the show aspired to and successfully negotiated some subplots with more depth (breast cancer, divorce, aging parents), but, as Levy suggests, "the ethos of the show was all about women getting themselves the best and the most, sexually and materially. They were unapologetically selfish, and civic-mindedness was scoffed at," an unapologetic ethos echoed in the Bratz "passion for fashion" credo (173).

It does not seem an imaginative leap to suggest that among *Sex and the City*'s 10.6 million American viewers might have been a new or soon-to-be mom, a mom who would soon become a purchaser of Bratz dolls and their accompanying accoutrements. And, it seems quite plausible that some of these oh-so-post feminist viewers of the show continue to purchase dolls that exude the attitudes of their favorite adult characters. Some might see the Bratz "darling" bright colors and keen sense of "fashion" as perfect playmates for their daughter; they may not see the doll's striking similarities to a *Playboy* playmate. What I'm suggesting is a "trickle-down" effect, an effect whose catchphrase might very well be: "just because we're post doesn't automatically mean we are feminists" (Levy 5). For, it seems that so many of us have spent so much time celebrating the "post" that we have lost the "feminist" altogether. I'm certainly not lobbying for a sexually cloistered society, but I am lobbying for a more thoughtful engagement with what it means to be "post" and "feminist." "Post" seems to signify that while that seventy per cent of respondent recognize that advertisements stereotype women, few, if any, care enough to change it. As van der Gaag reminds us "in the 1980s women defaced advertising posters that were considered to be sexist" (55); however, although most advertisements' appeals to pathos are unapologetically sexual, the trend does not continue today—but why not? Does the popularity of a television show like *Sex and the City* (or *Desperate Housewives*, or *Playboy's The Girls Next Door*), which champions the materialist, self-indulgent, single woman's plight to have "sex like men," signify that we've accomplished the feminist agenda? Or, might it suggest that, like our daughters, we have internalized very specific gender-role expectations built on the foundations of a feminist-less concept of what it means to be "post"? For it seems that all of the political in-roads that second-wave feminists made into business, government, medicine, academia, and law are now over-shadowed by media's effusive celebration of women's manifold sexuality, a sexuality that has seeped into girl culture ten-fold where an equally sexually-steeped

mom has barely batted an eye. The post-feminist worldview has pronounced a new *raison d'être* for womanhood: "women as consumers and women as thing to be consumed" (Levy 186). This reduction which comes packaged with all the bells and whistles of sexual liberation has reaffirmed a "common trait" of women's personhood: "sex and money are concomitant" (186). And most problematic are the results for girl culture. For those in our generation who have chosen to take up the "post" and leave the "feminist" at our mother's door, have tacitly made another choice, a choice that has allowed the Bratz dolls to reify the fashionable relation of sex and money for girls, a choice that our silence suggests we've embraced for ourselves.

But there is a modicum of hope, and it seems quite second-wave to end with a gesture toward it: In October, 2005, 'tween-age members of the Allegheny County Girls initiated a "girl-cot" of teen clothing mega-corporation Abercrombie & Fitch to persuade the store chain to stop selling "attitude tees" degrading to women; among the shirts cited as most offensive: "With these who needs brains..." (<http://www.ms.foundation.org/wmspage.cfm?parm1=314>). And still more hope: In May 2006, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood in partnership with Dads and Daughters' initiated a grassroots letter-writing campaign to urge toy-giant Hasbro to halt production of Pussycat Dolls replicas intended for children as young as six. On May 26, 2006, Hasbro announced the line's cancellation (<http://www.commercialexploitation.org/>).

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