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Sparkle: luminosity and post-girl power media

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This article aims to broaden critical discussions of postfeminist culture and mediated girlhoods through attention to the visual stylistics operating at their convergence – ‘post-girl power’ film and television. Complicating Angela McRobbie’s theory of postfeminism, this project analyzes the phenomenon of ‘sparkle’ in contemporary US girls’ media. As well it updates Rachel Moseley’s pioneering work on luminous aesthetics in teen-girl film and television, while enlarging the scope of her analysis beyond texts featuring witches. Expanding our understanding of sparkle’s relationship to post-girl power media, this study also deploys queer theories of camp and femininity to offer an alternate perspective on sparkle’s significance to female youth and feminism. It problematizes the binary of constraint/agency often raised in scholarship on (post)feminism by considering girls’ negotiations of post-girl power discourse via their own forms of sparkly media.

For much of history, luminous phenomena, such as fireflies and shooting stars, have mesmerized humans through their sublime beauty. Such shimmering sights have done more than entertain, however. Before scientists could explain their composition, sparkly objects were revered as the materialization of ancestral spirits or heavenly energies (Bille and Sørensen 2007). Key to their ability to awe was the limited temporality of their appearance. These luminous phenomena were extraordinary in a world where darkness had not yet been controlled by manufactured illumination. Hence, they worked well to signify power and contributed to a Western epistemology of light that privileged knowledge (Dyer 1997).

Although natural forms of sparkle continue to elicit wonder and communicate agency, human beings have developed numerous ways of manufacturing similar effects in art, clothing, makeup, and artificial lighting. In fact, the amount of sparkle in US culture has multiplied exponentially since the start of the new millennium, making our world twinkle and shine as if it is bedazzled with pixie dust. As the *New York Times Magazine* notes, ‘Mankind [sic] has been using light-reflecting particles for special occasions since the dawn of civilization. Today, it’s everywhere’ (Mangum 2007).

The sparkleification of late modern life in the United States is excessive not only in amount. It is overwhelmingly raced, classed, gendered and aged, with white middle-class female youth its primary targets and proponents. Indeed, sparkle is so ubiquitous in mainstream girls’ culture – and so absent in boys’ – it vies with pink as the primary signifier of youthful femininity. Thus, girlhood’s visual landscape, presented in far more subdued ways just 10 years ago, is now dominated by sparkly brilliance.

This phenomenon is most apparent via girls’ bodies, which are commonly adorned with glittery makeup, clothing and accessories. While much of this trend is marketed to and supported by white tweens, younger and older girls of all races and classes are encouraged to sparkle up to affirm their youthful femininity. Despite its popularity, the

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origins of this new trend are difficult to trace. A Canadian journalist noted its presence as early as 2000: '[G]irls as young as five are craving the latest in shimmery eyeshadows, colourful lip glosses and an array of glitter powders, creams and gels' (McMahon 2000). Meanwhile, teen magazines have encouraged girls to make their bodies more dazzling via tips in articles, such as 'Michelle Williams Sparkles in Sequins' (*Teen Vogue* 2010) and 'DIY Idea: Glitter Heels' (*Seventeen* 2012). Along with fashion blogs, like *thegitterguide.com*, the international editions of these magazines have ensured dispersion of the sparkle trend well beyond North America.

No doubt the heightened sparklefication of girls' fashions and cosmetics is an effect of improved techniques for the more efficient and inexpensive manufacture of such goods (Whitney et al. 2002). Another factor is the increased international popularity of Hindi films, which have promoted a fashion style resplendent with beads, sequins and small mirrors that has been most mobilized by youth, especially girls (Maira 2002). Girls' fashions worldwide would likely not be as luminous today, however, if not for the even greater popularity of hip-hop culture and, more specifically, bling. A word long used to indicate the sound of light hitting precious jewels or metals, 'bling' was reconfigured in the 1980s to signify the material wealth embodied by members of the US hip-hop community. The broad transmission of this opulent style via visual media and concert tours has contributed to bling's impact on youth fashions globally (Purinton 2009).

Yet the primary factor in the sparklefication of US girls' fashions is celebrity culture, which has grown rapidly via the Internet since the early 2000s and is impossible to disentangle from the above transnational fashion trends. The visibility, glamour and wealth associated with celebrities have particular implications for female youth, who have found pleasures in yet also been exploited by those producing this culture since the early twentieth century (Stamp 2000). Indeed, the culture industries have consistently encouraged girls to understand female attractiveness as best communicated via the spectacular bodily displays modelled by celebrities (Dyhouse 2010). The excessive amount of sparkle in today's culture demonstrates an increase in this discourse as well as glamour's potential democratization and shift in meaning. White American celebrities still dominate the promotion of this style internationally. Nevertheless, female youth of all sorts and in all places are hailed by sparkle's assurance to signify a late modern femininity associated with empowerment, visibility and independent wealth. Moreover, such glamorization, if not its promises, is easier for girls to access now that sparkle has proliferated beyond clothing and makeup, bedazzling everything from dolls to historically ungendered products, such as crayons and bandages.

The most significant site for the sparkly glamour associated with celebrities and influencing girls' fashions are the media industries, which, via a racist epistemology of light, have long idealized and promoted white women's 'glow' (Dyer 1997). Since the late 1990s, these industries have produced numerous film, television, and musical texts featuring glamorous, light-skinned women who dazzle onscreen, from *Sex and the City*'s 'fab four' to Beyoncé. Given the widespread popularity of such media among female youth, it is not surprising that sparkle has increasingly saturated girl-centred media, including animated movies, like *Frozen*, tweenpics, like *High School Musical*, TV dramas, like *Gossip Girl*, and even independent films featuring marginalized female youth, like *Pariah*. In turn, virtually every female-centred product distributed by The Walt Disney Company in the last decade is resplendent with sparkle.

As a result, a visual trope has been established in contemporary US girls' media, much of which is distributed internationally and thus has considerable global impact: *Either embodying or surrounded by light, young female characters are stylistically highlighted*

today in ways that make them visually superior to virtually all else in the frame. It is surprising, therefore, that so few scholars of girls' media have analyzed this phenomenon.

Postfeminism and post-girl power culture

When interpreting the heightened sparkle of girls' media today, much more could be said about the democratization of glamour and celebrity culture's global impact. Yet another useful way of understanding the significance of the sparklefication of today's girl-centred media can be found in theories of postfeminism. As McRobbie (2009) defines it, postfeminism is a contradictory perspective on contemporary gender relations that takes feminist achievements for granted while repudiating feminism as a critical lens and social movement. Directed primarily at white younger females, postfeminist discourse alleges gender equality now exists and thus suggests feminism is no longer needed. Neoliberalism is key here, in that structural problems are denied, and young women are encouraged to understand themselves as 'capable' individuals whose problems are of their own making and resolvable via marketplace choices. In keeping with the neoliberal spirit, the successful postfeminist subject accrues and displays independent wealth as a primary measure of her worth.

For McRobbie, postfeminism is produced in part by a 'distinct modality of prescriptive feminine agency' (58) she labels the 'postfeminist masquerade', a technology of self and form of spectacular display that encourages young women to 'prioritise consumption for the sake of sexual intelligibility and in the name of heterosexual desire' (90). The postfeminist woman 'of capacity' is one whose body is visibly self-disciplined and glamorously adorned according to white, heteronormative, neoliberal ideals. Thus, she performs in a way that serves to lessen the potential threat to patriarchy arising from her success in the labour force.

Gill (2007) similarly avers that postfeminism privileges femininity as a corporeal, rather than a social or psychological, property and one problematically connected to women's alleged social and economic agency. Encouraging women to see their bodies as their main sites of empowerment, the postfeminist sensibility requires not only regular self-surveillance, but also self-regulation through the consumption of products that promise to correct whatever flaws might be present, whether physical or socioeconomic. Thus, like McRobbie, Gill links this particularly feminized performance of neoliberal capability with the fashion-beauty complex. Although this may sound like the effects of straight-up patriarchy, the twist here is, within postfeminist logic, women are doing it for themselves rather than men. That is, we are agentically 'choosing' to participate and find pleasure for ourselves in the same consumer-driven, hyperfeminine, glamorized body projects long used to construct us as passive spectacles for the male gaze.

Pushing beyond the fashion-beauty complex, several scholars have demonstrated that media play a key role in how girls come to understand the postfeminist sensibility and to perform its hypervisible masquerade. For instance, Banet-Weiser (2011) has looked to YouTube as a site where girls experiment with the 'self-branding' practices promoted by both postfeminism and celebrity culture. Meanwhile, Blue (2013) argues that media conglomerates like Disney 'have reproduced postfeminist girlhood as an aspirational fantasy, open to anyone, in denial of systemic inequalities' (75). Indeed, as Hopkins (2002) notes, 'In the postmodern world, fame has replaced marriage as the imagined means to realizing feminine dreams ... [F]ame is the ultimate girl fantasy' (4). Discussing a youthful form of postfeminist subjectivity she labels 'can-do girlhood,' Harris (2004) takes Hopkins' point further, connecting girls' visual display with the visibility promoted

by celebrity culture and the postfeminist sensibility: “‘Glossiness’ is now a potential element of ‘ordinariness,’ such that the regular young person is able to work on ... herself as a celebrity project and gain some kind of public profile in the process” (127). While Harris cites ‘the celebrity life [as] the exemplar of the can-do experience’ (130), she argues this form of girlhood is demanded also of those categorized as at risk of failing in the neoliberal regime, which suggests that poor, non-white girls are not outside postfeminism’s pull.

Bringing the work of Harris, Gill and McRobbie into conversation, Gonick et al. (2009) argue we are now in a ‘post-girl power’ moment:

While girl power emerged within the economic, socio-political context of the 1990s where girls *could* be active, in the 2000s they are now *expected/demanded* to be fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects. However, the constraints of heteronormative white femininity are also firmly entrenched, though not necessarily in exactly the same old versions. (2)

Meanwhile, Projansky (2014) has provocatively argued that this post-girl power moment is evident in the ubiquitous spectacularization of girlhood in media, as scandalous and/or fabulous. It is my contention that sparkle is the primary visual signifier of this new paradigm. Nonetheless, we must remain open to its polysemy if we are to take seriously Gonick et al.’s challenge to rethink agency and resistance in this post-girl power era.

Precious

One of the few films to draw critical attention to the glamorous public display of female capability demanded by postfeminism – and some girls’ excessive distance from it – is *Precious*. Adapted from Sapphire’s novel, *Push*, the film focuses on an impoverished, overweight, 16-year-old black girl in New York City in the mid 1980s, a period of neoliberalism’s re-emergence and thus one that must be considered in relation to the rise of postfeminism, if not yet post-girl power. Repeatedly raped by her father and physically and psychologically abused by her mother, Precious faces torment also from other adult authority figures as well as the young people in her community. Worse than being objectified, she is abject.

But this is not the only reality Precious occupies. Beginning with a fantasy scene referencing the ruby slipper sequence in *The Wizard of Oz*, the film regularly gives viewers access to the dreamworld Precious creates to escape the material and affective poverty of her daily life. In one scene, for example, she ‘escapes’ neighborhood boys’ ridicule by imagining herself as a star on stage. Dancing in a silky gown and feather boa, Precious is surrounded by bright lights, cheered by an invisible audience and caressed by a make-believe boyfriend. Her other fantasies include being the subject of a fashion photo shoot and greeting reporters after a movie premiere. Such scenes’ brilliant luminosity is compelling given the history of light symbolizing Europeans’ knowledge, power and goodness which in turn constructed Africans and other non-whites as ignorant, submissive and evil (Dyer 1997).

Keenly attending to the many structures limiting Precious’s opportunities and achievements, the film reveals popular music as the resource from which she constructs her liberatory dreams. The beats and lyrics of female hip-hop artists, such as Queen Latifah and Mary J. Blige, dominate the soundtracks accompanying Precious’s fantasies, thus suggesting her identification with agential black women before any materialize in her life. Nonetheless, images of white pop stars, like Madonna, adorn her walls, intimating the key role such celebrities play in Precious’s visual construction of an inner world where she is not just famous, glamorous and wealthy, but also happy and desired.

Refusing the racist epistemology of light that has constructed whiteness as superior (Dyer 1997), Rachel Alicia Griffin argues Precious's fantasy sequences 'idolize light/White beauty' and encourage the audience to 'bask with her in the glory of White femininity' (2013, 4–5). Yet the film's representations of its protagonist's internalized oppressions do not equate with its affirmation of the regressive ideologies supporting them. Rather such fantasy sequences offer a critical lens by which viewers witness postfeminism's privileging of whiteness, thinness and spectacular glamour as well as feel its multivalent impact on *all* girls, even those like Precious who are not the primary target of such discourses. Moreover, these sequences suggest an alternative to interpellation in postfeminism's disciplinary regime. For instance, in one fantasy, Precious stands in front of her mirror getting dressed while a thin white girl mimics her movements in the reflection. Quickly surmising she cannot be the fairest of them all, Precious sighs and walks away.

Drawing attention to the virtual impossibility of Precious (and other dispossessed, non-normative girls) embodying the postfeminist position of white glamour, such sequences require viewers to experience the collision of Precious's desires and her material circumstances, as well as the liminal moments where she negotiates how to survive. Hence, as the film makes clear, the postfeminist sensibility may structure many girls' aspirations and push them to desire glamorous visibility, just as neoliberalism encourages them to yearn for independent wealth. But not all girls have such interests, many cannot embody them, and some, like Precious, eventually leave them behind by developing other goals.

Postfeminist luminosities

I would like to return to McRobbie's theory of postfeminism, for while Harris's attention to the 'glossiness' of postfeminist visibility works well to help us understand Precious's early fantasies and the sparklefication of girls' media today, McRobbie connects this larger phenomenon to macro systems of power regulating young female lives. In *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie borrows from Deleuze's theory of luminosity to explore postfeminism's relationship to neoliberalism and the public presence of young women in society today. Whereas Foucault used the term 'visibilities' to describe structures of power in modern society, Deleuze avers:

Visibilities are not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects ... Visibilities are ... forms of luminosity, which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer. (1986, 52)

For McRobbie, postfeminism functions like a luminosity – 'a moving spotlight, [which] softens and disguises the regulative dynamics' of neoliberal society (2009, 54). Further describing postfeminist luminosities as 'clouds of light [that] give young women a shimmering presence,' she argues they nevertheless contain female agency since 'it becomes increasingly difficult to function as a female subject without subjecting oneself to those technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine' (60).

McRobbie moves on from here to discuss the postfeminist masquerade as one of young women's self-chosen and self-pleasing adoption of hyperfemininity, which itself is useful for a discussion of the sparklefication of girls' bodies today. Yet I am struck by the visual metaphors in her language and want to consider luminosity as it appears materially within contemporary US girls' media. For such texts comprise not just a *site* of postfeminist luminosity – that is, an abstract system of girls' self-regulation within the larger context of neoliberalism. Early twenty-first-century American girls' media are *literally* luminous in their bedazzling, spectacular displays of girlhood.

A taxonomy of sparkle

In advocating an 'anthropology of luminosity', Bille and Sørensen (2007) note,

[Q]uestions concerning how light is used in relation to social identity are also questions of what role different *modes* of light ... have, what *types* of light ... are used to do what, why, and how this is socially manifested and experienced. (269)

To understand better sparkle's sociocultural significance in contemporary US girl-centred films and television series, I have discerned three different forms, each of which communicates a discourse associated with girlhood. I am specifically interested in how such forms relate to post-girl power culture. Yet it is useful to consider the history of girls' media while engaging this taxonomy in order to comprehend the development of sparkle's semiotic and discursive power. Moreover, many older texts containing this visual element are still in circulation globally and thus continue to have a considerable impact.

The first form of sparkle in girls' media involves depictions of magic and is produced through animated special effects. Typically associated with fairies and 'good' witches, these effects are used to express the channelling of supernatural power. Glittering animations of otherworldly female power first appeared in 1940 in Disney's *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*. Yet the first specifically related to girlhood, and the most famous, is in *Cinderella* when the Fairy Godmother turns the servant girl into a regal beauty via a shimmering gown and gleaming glass slippers. Since *Cinderella*'s release, Disney has repeatedly used sparkly special effects in girl-centred animations to depict the supernatural yet normative physical transformations supposedly necessary for heterosexual coupling.

By the mid 1990s, sparkly magical effects appeared in live-action girl-centred films and TV shows as well, including *The Craft*, *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, and *W.I.T.C.H.* Much like the Disney princesses introduced since the late 1980s, the girls in these texts wield supernatural power rather than having it inflicted on them, thus suggesting the influence of liberal feminist ideology on their characterizations. Nevertheless, because these girl-power characters are often figured as glamorous, they may be more easily associated with the postfeminist sensibility (Moseley 2002).

The second form of sparkle is environmental. Produced via twinkling stars, flickering candles and shimmering lights, this form is used to signify a girl's first romance. Although *Fantasia*'s fairies animated their dark forest with sparkling dew and frost, *Cinderella* featured the first environmental sparkle related to a girl's story. Disney animations continue to utilize this effect to communicate young love, as have other animated texts, such as *Avatar*, whose 3D technology immerses characters and viewers alike in a dazzling array of bioluminescence.

Along with *Brave*, Disney's *Frozen* signals a possible new trend in girl-centred animations by employing environmental sparkle to signify something other than heterosexual romance. Nonetheless, within live-action girls' media, romance continues to be suggested by this form of sparkle, especially via bokeh, a photographic effect wherein an image's foreground appears in focus while the background – often composed of multiple small bits of light – is blurred. Prior to the early 2000s, tween rom-coms, such as *She's All That* and *The Princess Diaries*, regularly featured first kisses at shimmering public events, like formal dances. More recent texts, like *Twilight* and *Pariah*, reveal a new trend as environmental sparkle adorns young lovers' private spaces, thus suggesting the sexual agency commonly expected of post-girl power subjects.

Several recent live-action films and television dramas, most notably *Gossip Girl*, have complicated this form of sparkle by placing teen-girl bodies in glittering cityscapes meant

to signify their wealth, independence and sexual agency, much as *Sex and the City* did with adult women. Hollywood filmmakers first exploited the cultural associations of glamorous femininity, shimmering cities and modernity in the 1930s (Gundell & Castelli 2006). Yet the politics suggested by this practice have shifted since that time. Indeed, the 'city girl in lights' trope is one we might readily understand now via the lenses of neoliberalism and post-girl power.

The third form of sparkle involves the adornment of girls' bodies via glittery makeup, sequined clothing and bejeweled accessories. *The Wizard of Oz*'s ruby-slipped Dorothy was perhaps the first live-action girl character attired in this way. But by the early 1940s, Disney dominated this trend via the twinkling fairies that populated its animated films. More significant is *Cinderella*, whose dazzling ornamentation of a girl has, for multiple generations and in numerous places, catalyzed girls' desires to be normatively beautiful while cementing their understanding of female power as spectacular bodily display. This film helped to launch a glamour style in the 1950s that worked well to promote the post-war era's regressive gender norms (Dyhouse 2010). *Frozen* continues Disney's legacy of animating sparkly young princesses. Yet this time postfeminist, rather than prefeminist, gender politics seem to be in play. Indeed, since no other characters witness Elsa's shimmering transformation, the film suggests it is for her pleasure alone (and that of the film's audience, of course).

Costuming girl actors in glittery attire was not a common practice in live-action media until the early 2000s when advertisers began marketing sparkly clothing and makeup to girls *en masse*. Now this trend is so ubiquitous even some young action heroines, like *The Hunger Games'* Katniss Evergreen, are made over into shimmering spectacles that rival Cinderella. No contemporary live-action text has used sparkle in girl's costuming as much as Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana*. This seems appropriate since Hannah is a pop star character performed by a wealthy singer. Yet, as Blue (2013) demonstrates, key to sparkle's function in that series (along with *Shake It Up*, also on Disney) is its highlighting of performance and celebrity as chief modes of empowerment for *all* girls. Thus, recent shows about talented girl performers update older series, such as *Charmed* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, which similarly factored sparkle into characters' outfits, yet configured girls' agency as supernatural. Moreover, such characters' superficial luminosity complicates Dyer's (1997) theory of white women's cinematic idealization via makeup and lighting strategies suggestive of an internalized or heaven-sent 'glow'.

Although Moseley (2002) explores feminism's influence on media featuring girls' magic, she ultimately links such texts to postfeminism, commenting on the 'paradox of glamour' inherent to them:

While the sparkle is powerfully spectacular and grabs the viewer's attention, it is also highly ephemeral, drawing the eye to the surface of the text ... [T]hrough glamour, feminine power ... is located in and articulated through appearance. (408–409)

Thus, although the world of heteronormative romance may be somewhat marginal in texts highlighting girls' agency, for Moseley, it matters not, since the sparkly postfeminist masquerade such characters embody serves as an equally disciplinary regime.

Feeling sparkle

As this taxonomy of sparkle reveals, contemporary US girls' media make literal the 'shimmering presence' McRobbie associates metaphorically with the postfeminist masquerade. But whether young females' participation in the sparklefication of girls'

culture – through bodily adornment or consumption of the texts I have discussed here – contributes to their entrapment by postfeminism is a question that still troubles me.

On the one hand, I am concerned whenever female agency gets linked to the body and marketplace given the history of women's and girls' construction as merely objects available for male pleasure and thus our epic exploitation as consumers of fashion–beauty products. Additionally, there is the power of spectacle, a concept well theorized by Marxist theorists fearing capitalism and visual media's enchanting properties. Hence, in addition to raising concerns about sparkle's relation to postfeminism, neoliberalism and globalism, we do well to question its relations to commodity fetishism and the fashion–beauty complex, not to mention whiteness and heteronormativity. For, as *Precious* communicates so incisively, despite the powerful lure of girls' sparkly media, most female youth cannot achieve the spectacularity of can-do girlhood given their non-normative bodies and lack of disposable income.

On the other hand, I think Moseley and McRobbie do not dig deeply enough into a compelling part of their arguments, which is the pronounced superficiality, theatricality and ironic knowingness of postfeminist glamour. Moreover, neither explores how girls are negotiating the contradictory messages of postfeminist culture or entertains critical reclamations of femininity.

Offering a different perspective, queer folks have been using self-consciously spectacular performances as weapons against normativity for decades. For example, think of the recent spate of glitter bombings. While not always progressive, such campy theatrical practices can help to facilitate critical reflections on the sparkleification of girls' culture precisely because femininity is central to them also. Many camp artists and queer theorists have challenged the effeminophobia of the mainstream gay, lesbian and feminist communities by championing femininity for the various pleasures it elicits and the subversive potential it offers within patriarchal heteronormative societies. Such work is ignored, however, when female agency and resistance are envisioned through only the masculinist perspective of liberal feminism. Femmes especially have commented on feminists' abjection of femininity, even when it appears outside a heterosexual matrix (Harris and Crocker 1997).

Like Shoemaker, I want 'to question facile rejections of femininity as wholly oppressive' (2004, 6). Moreover, I want to rethink its place within girls' culture. For, as Gonick et al. aver in relation to the post-girl power moment, '[t]hough aspects of femininity are taken on as practices of the self, they are still mutable, dynamic, immanent and open to transformation' (2009, 6). Additionally, like Robertson (1996), I want to claim femininity (and thus sparkle) as a potentially resistant force by insisting on its significance to both queer culture and feminist culture, particularly in camp.

So, what if we resisted the moral panic discourse often asserted in the face of girls' spectacular bodily displays and instead understood today's sparkly female youth as junior versions not of pageant queens and porn stars – too often and problematically positioned in such discourse as dupes of patriarchy and postfeminism – but of femmes and feminist camp performers – those feminized agents of anti-normative gender politics who operate within and between queer and straight cultures? By adopting a queer lens (Doty 1993), how might we broaden our perspective to entertain girls' possible contributions to the subversion of patriarchy and postfeminism via their sparkleification?

The dress-up games of children are rich sites for encouraging young girls' investments in a critical, camp perspective on self-presentation, since it is within such collective cultural practices that they begin navigating their socialization as both gendered and performative beings. By early adolescence, many girls' creative explorations of gender lessen as by then

most have learned to regularly measure themselves against normative femininity. Nevertheless, such reflexive evaluation has the potential for more than just internalization of the male gaze. Such 'double vision' can produce a critical consciousness of gender (De Lauretis 1987) and encourage girls' explorations of anti-normative bodily performances. Although not a dominant trend, contemporary US girls' culture has numerous instances of this critical, campy, embodied gender play. Consider the 'granny chic' style Tavi Gevinson popularized via TheStyleRookie.com, or other girl-authored texts, like Tricia Grashaw's film, *The Ultimate Guide to Flirting*, and Jamie Keiles' blog, *The Seventeen Project*, which utilize satiric performances of femininity to negotiate girls' fashion/beauty culture. As these creative projects suggest, adults need to resist dismissing girls' pleasures in femininity, while also trusting their ability to establish new practices of gender critique that may be invisible to adults, even when they are sparkling right in front of us.

In arguing for the potential progressivism of sparkle in girls' media, I want to also encourage attention to theories of affect. Swindle provocatively challenges us to understand that the objects of girls' culture 'do more than just signify; they often affect at the corporeal level ...' Thus, '[t]o approach objects like ... glitter solely in terms of their significations doesn't tell us much about how they move girls' (2011, ¶4). So, how might we make sense of girls' emotions about sparkly media? Is it possible for female youth to be progressively affected by their interactions with such texts?

Using *Precious* as an example, we might interpret the lead character's sparkling fantasy life as evidence not of a dupe's complicity with the racist, postfeminist, neoliberal regime, but of a survivor's creative negotiation of it via her envisioning of a better world based on the limited resources her mediated experiences have to offer. In other words, Precious's playful enactments of glittery celebrity function affectively as hopeful moments of what the good life might feel like. (As Dyer argues, 'Entertainment does not ... present models of utopian worlds ... Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies' [1992, 18].) Moreover, it is important to recall that Precious's fantasies develop as her world expands through education, mentoring and friendship, shifting from her mimicry of pop culture's glossy celebrity to her absorption in momentous events in African-American political history.

Thinking further about how Precious's limited mediascape impacts her creation of glittering, utopic dreamscapes, I suggest a similar experience might be permeating contemporary girls' culture. For numerous female youth have taken the pleasures they find in sparkly media to fashion their own shimmering texts from them. Consider, for example, the vast number of girl-made fan videos that poach from sparkly films and TV series to construct beautiful, luminous visual accompaniments to favourite songs. Yes, plenty of girls create texts that reaffirm heteronormativity, postfeminism and patriarchy. Yet many others produce media that complicate or refuse such interpretations. For instance, several girl vidders have constructed spectacular videos for Owl City's 'Fireflies' by editing together sparkly scenes from numerous animated films and TV shows (e.g., kbSrep88 2009; Neriede 2010; Rivens 2009). The effect of these vids is breathtakingly beautiful, as their lengthy, non-narrative streams of richly luminous shots bathe viewers in shimmering light. Meanwhile, other female youth have created a different production trend by adding digital glitter and other 'bling' to visually dull images. Such embellishment has long been practiced within girls' scrapbooking and collage-making. But it is an activity now made less expensive and cumbersome by free software offered by user-friendly websites, like Blingee.com and Glitterfy.com.

Surely there is more to these sparkly girl-made media than their creators' passive absorption of postfeminist rhetoric. Indeed, in these materializations of girls' affective

responses to adult-made media we can see reactions that do not easily align with normative paradigms. Also intriguing, these texts bear witness to a creative process that allows girls to spend considerable time in the wondrous beauty of sparkle. Will such practices make the shimmering postfeminist masquerade all the more alluring to these girls? Perhaps. But might not basking in sparkle be one of their chief pleasures in vidding, and might not that encourage their future engagement in other creative practices? After many years of advocating girls' greater involvement in media-making yet witnessing only infinitesimal progress for women directors and cinematographers, I am all for sparkle, if that is what gets girls invested in creating media.

Thus, although theories of postfeminism might help us to understand sparkle's semiotic and discursive power, attending to how girls *feel* about this visual phenomenon and what they *do* as a result of those feelings requires us to be open to exploring affective experiences that are not easily parsed via popular theoretical concepts. Indeed, it was while consuming hours of luminous girls' media for this project that I was able to reconnect with the awe I felt as a young girl watching some of these texts. And that moment of recollection led me to a better understanding of my experiences as an adult media consumer (and scholar): The affect I associate with sparkle is one of the reasons I love movies – sitting in a dark space, offering myself up to the beautiful, bedazzling lights which flicker on the silver screen. Instead of providing me with temporary escape into false consciousness via spectacular attractions, or sending me to the store to stock up on glittery everything, my passion for media sparkle led me *here* – to a critical conversation about gender and luminosity, spectacle and performance, power and affect, fantasy and utopia.

For Gracie, Dara, and all the other sparkle-loving girls and boys.

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