

(re)Mixing Girlhood

Olga Ivashkevich

University of South Carolina

Courtne Wolfgang¹

Virginia Commonwealth University

ABSTRACT

This article positions remix as an agentive site for girls and women in their consumption and production of popular media, one that disrupts dominant gender norms and representations and the pervasiveness of male gaze. Noting girlhood as connected to but also unique from womanhood (Kearney, 2009), the authors offer feminist interpretations of collage and video mash ups created by adolescent girls in a program of juvenile arbitration as a series of messy, non-linear readings of visual and textural fragments of girls' work, interlaced with authors' reactions to girls' productions as female facilitators/audience. The authors pose that this double-folded, dialogic, intergenerational remix generates a flow of female gaze—as a continuous repetition and collaborative disruption of dominant gender codes—which is produced, reproduced, and passed on to other girls and women to elicit reactions of difference.

Introduction

In this article, we employ a feminist framework to theorize girls' acts of popular media remixing as spaces for productive disruption of the dominant images and discourses about girls and girlhood, and examine our *(re)Mixed Media* project conducted with a group of adolescent girls in a juvenile arbitration program as a critical, collaborative, and agentive site of *female gaze*. Popular media such as advertisings, TV shows, films, and Internet are a pervasive cultural outlet through which girls derive pleasure, feel belonging, make meanings, and experiment with identities. As social languages and media converge unpredictably, they regulate and encourage questioning; they are at once controlling and permissive; they reproduce conformity yet also disrupt normative codes (Driver, 2007). Therefore, we posit that girls'

1 Authors' name order does not follow the 1st/2nd author rule. Both authors equally contributed to planning and conducting the project and writing the manuscript. Olga Ivashkevich can be contacted at olga@sc.edu; Courtne Wolfgang can be reached at cnw Wolfgang@vcu.edu

acts of appropriating and remixing existing images and narratives about girlhood and womanhood is an important space of negotiation, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization of their gender identities. Moreover, they also hold a potential for collaborative and dialogic feminist interventions that disrupt patriarchal gender norms and representations of girls and women.

Theoretical Background

Remix as a Genre

The concept of remix is employed by a number of new media scholars and educators (Buckingham, 2004; Buckingham & Willett, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Sonvilla-Weiss, 2010) and is often defined as an act of appropriating and reusing images, videos, narratives, and other visual and audio discourses of online digital culture. Although appropriation of images and text was an integral part of modern art forms like collage and mixed media before the digital age (Gude, 2004), the process of “taking existing culture apart and putting it back together” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 32) became a widely used creative tool due to proliferation of new technologies in the 21st century. According to a 2005 study by the Pew Internet and American Life project, 19 percent of contemporary American youth who have access to digital technologies remix online content (Jenkins, 2009). While some new media scholars view the act of remixing as inherently innovative and productive and call for a new pedagogy based on “the principle of learning through remixing” (Jenkins, 2010), others emphasize the need to distinguish between activity and agency in youth mashup productions (Buckingham, 2009). As Buckingham notes, exercising agency requires more than simply playful appropriation of existing digital texts, but also demands critical awareness of ideologies and messages behind them, skillful and thoughtful use of creative techniques, and access to technology tools. Some populations of youth, particularly young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, are still lacking access to and skills in basic new technologies including Internet, editing software, and digital cameras. Another aspect

of Buckingham’s argument is that young people who participate in remixing online culture do not critically engage with existing cultural biases, messages, and stereotypes. While we agree with Buckingham’s definition of remix as agency, we also believe that the act of remixing digital media is profoundly gendered. Not only do girls’ new media productions have less presence on such mainstream sites as Youtube when compared to work by their male counterparts (Molyneaux, O’Donnell, Gibson, & Singer, 2008), but female producers who engage in remixing online content are confronted with a patriarchal matrix of overly sexualized and voyeuristic representations of girls and young women.

Towards a Feminist Remix

After John Berger (1972) and Laura Mulvey (1975) crafted the notion of the “male gaze,” which implies that female images on screen are objects of a heterosexual male fantasy and desire, inquiries into the nature and potentiality of the female gaze were set into motion. However, this subject remains largely uncertain and contested in today’s feminism. Although recognizing the progressive changes in girls’ and women’s screen images and their increased participation as producers/makers of popular media, many contemporary feminist scholars argue for an impossibility of the female gaze to exist outside of the patriarchal matrix, and that despite being depicted as strong, independent, and self-reliant, girls and women in contemporary films are also pictured as lacking, incomplete, and longing for men (Jacobsen, 1999; McRobbie, 2004; 2009). The female gaze is also argued to work similarly to the male gaze where women and girls objectify and scrutinize each other to compete for men’s attention (McRobbie, 2004). Seeing women and girls as either objects of desire or as passive viewers and onlookers is largely grounded in the reality of a male-dominated media enterprise. Women filmmakers are still grossly outnumbered by men and those who work in the commercial film industry usually have to conform to its masculine culture (Kearney, 2006), one that reifies women as objects, and beings who are subservient, weak, secondary, or valued less in terms of their contributions to the media

establishment. As the Bechdel Test² reveals, a vast majority of commercial films are still lacking presence of at least two lead female characters communicating with one another on any other topic but men (D'Amore, 2014). As a result, more girls and young women today turn to grass roots, independent media making in order to tell their own stories that are largely invisible in mainstream popular culture.

Girls' Media Making

Girlhood Studies scholar Mary Kearney (2006), who studied teenage girls' independent media production, invites us to look as the girl's gaze as an innovative domain where girl producers generate intimate and varied images of girls and girlhood through their own subjective experiences that speak directly to female audiences, thereby avoiding the objectifying practices of the male-dominated media industry. Many girls' zines, blogs, and films build on, reference, and recycle commercial popular culture in order to illuminate and speak about girls' subjective struggles for identity and voice. Kearney (2009) also notes the significance in acknowledging girlhood as unique, rather than as the state of becoming future women. Much of the research in Girls' Studies is focused on contemporary media (film, television, and magazines) that "privilege girl protagonists, girls' reception practices, and, most recently, girls' involvement in media production" (p. 19).

As indicated above, contemporary girls live in a culture dominated by images of females as commodities to be desired and looked at, that is, to be consumed by the male gaze. This culture is an already remixed and constantly reinvented bricolage of fashion trends, hair styles, PhotoShopped models, low-cut lingerie, shaving creams, celebrity gossip, and other creations of "designer capitalism" (Duncum, 2007; jagodzinski, 2010) that breeds in women and girls lasting yet unattainable desires to look and feel a certain way. And yet popular culture is a space through which girls might also derive pleasure and feel belonging. As social languages and popular cultures converge

2 First appearing in Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 1985), the Bechdel Test is now widely used as a metric for gender bias in fictional filmmaking.

unpredictably, they regulate and encourage questioning; they are at once controlling and permissive; they reproduce conformity yet also disrupt normative codes (Driver, 2007). For these reasons, we posit the girls' cultural remixes as potent in their negotiation of the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of their gender identities. It is also important to acknowledge and look into *how* girls produce and consume media. Girls' participation in historically male-dominated media culture is too often trivialized, at best by the pinkwashing phenomenon, or the tendency to market otherwise un-gendered products toward girls and women by making them pink (Kearney, 2010). At worst, girls' attempts to enter into the proverbial man cave of media production are met with threats of violence or death, like in the case of Gamergate³.

Before embarking on the *(re)Mixed Media* project with a group of adolescent girls, we posed a number of questions to ourselves that served as a guide for our curriculum. These questions were: Is it possible for girl media makers, in their own creative productions, to break through the established range of familiar images and to further remix and reappropriate existing visual images and narratives that complicate and challenge existing gender codes? Is there a female gaze that is not necessarily dependent on, or framed by, the normative male desire? Are there particular approaches to remixing dominant cultural images and narratives that work to create slippages and interruptions that reclaim a girl's gaze as different and more independent of male-dominated prescription?

3 The hashtag #gamergate first appeared in the fall of 2014 in response to online attacks (including death threats) of female game developer Zoe Quinn. The Tweets included debates on the ethics of video game reviews and the inherent gendered biases of the video gaming industry.

(re)Mixed Media: WWBI Juvenile Arbitration Summer Workshops 2013⁴

The project unfolding in the following pages is one in a series of arts-based workshops held each summer as a part of a larger series of sanctions for middle and high school girls in a juvenile arbitration program in a small Southeastern town. During this workshop series, we had a total of eleven participant girls ranging in age from thirteen to seventeen. These girls are classified as “first time, non-violent” offenders, whose offenses range from possession of controlled substances, to shoplifting, to possession of weapons or minor assault (fighting). The successful completion of the sanctions results in the criminal offense being expunged from the girl’s juvenile record. Other sanctions often include a trip to the city jail, community service, and apology letters written to the person or persons affected by the offense. In our arts-based workshops, we elect to focus on issues, or “roadblocks,” in our participants’ lives as opposed to the offenses that result in the need for arbitration. Over the course of one month, we see the girls four times, three hours each week, at a local church that generously provides us with a meeting space.

The *(re)Mixed Media* project was designed to open up the spaces already territorialized by many adolescent girls—television, film, print, and digital media—and provide the teenage female participants with tactical ways to respond to, critique, agree, and disagree with the visual and performative cultures of girlhood. Although we acknowledge the participants’ use of popular techniques of remixing—such as

appropriation, juxtaposition, and recontextualization⁵—exist in mainstream media (Gude, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; 2009; Sonvilla-Weis, 2010), we did not formally teach those techniques. We introduced images of artists and media makers who employ those tactics themselves, including Jenny Holzer’s *Projections* (1996-2011), Barbara Kruger’s *Untitled (We Don’t Need Another Hero)* (1987), and three video compilations by the collaborative EveryNONE: *Words* (2010), *Symmetry* (2011), and *Losers* (2012). We selected artwork that we hoped would generate a discussion on tough subjects relevant to girlhood, and that would also stimulate questioning of institutionalized norms that are consumed and (re)produced by many girls. Examples of those norms that were unpacked during topic brainstorming with the participants included pressure to conform to traditional standards of beauty; double standards for men and women; physical and emotional violence against women; expectations to, as the girls claim, “talk a certain way” (not too smart, not too “stupid”); and the contested space of adolescence, or growing up too fast or not fast enough. In working with the girls, we maintained that discussion would be a starting point, and that the significant revelations would be made and communicated through their art making emerging out of that discussion.

In an effort to reflect on our participants’ artwork produced during the *(re)Mixed Media* workshops in a way that acknowledges our classroom pedagogy as a feminist collaboration with our participants, our approach to the interpretation of the girls’ work in the following sections is rather experimental. We hope to illustrate the inherent remixed cultural practices demonstrated by our adolescent girl participants’ work with magazine images and video, as well as our own

4 Our previous publications (Ivashkevich, 2013; Wolfgang & Ivashkevich, 2014) discuss video-based workshops with a similar population of girls. In these earlier studies, we provide a detailed description of our involvement with Women’s Well Being Initiative (WWBI) at the University of South Carolina and its mission. The initiative uses an arts-based approach to engage adjudicated girls and young women from local communities in creating poetry, multi-media art, digital photography, and video to address issues of gender and justice, and speak about roadblocks in their lives.

5 Techniques of using and remixing existing visual material have been extensively described in art education and new media scholarship. According to Gude (2004) and Jenkins (2006, 2009), appropriation is an intentional borrowing of existing cultural images and text to create new content. Juxtaposition is a technique of remixing existing cultural content that involves placing and overlaying different images and text to make new connections and reveal hidden meanings (Gude, 2004). Recontextualization is an intentional positioning of a familiar image in “relationship to pictures, symbols, or texts with which is it not usually associated” (p. 9).

cultural experiences and memories as grown women, by interweaving the fragments of girls' visual and textural mashups and our own immediate reactions and responses to their work. Our readings and reactions to the girls' work are non-linear, open-ended, and affective. They generate yet another layer of remix as a dialogic exchange about the traps, obstacles, and potentialities of girlhood and womanhood.

Methodologically, we employ a hermeneutic interpretive approach to our participants' work as a mutually "co-constructed knowledge" produced in collaboration with female peers and us as classroom facilitators (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). However, while these co-constructed remixes of representations and voices showcased in the following section inevitably draw upon our classroom conversations with the girls during media production, they do not mimic these conversations or represent direct interventions happening in the classroom. Rather, they are our post-project reflections on girls' artwork presented in a messy and non-linear dialogic format where images and narratives produced by our participants trigger our own reactions as female teachers/audience creating a continuous fabric of feminist remix.

Feminist (re)Mixes

In this section, we showcase three different examples of our participants' media remixes and our own reactions to their work that exemplify three different strategies to remixing and mashing popular cultural representations of girls, women, and gender: appropriation, juxtaposition, and recontextualization (Gude, 2004; Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Sonvilla-Weis, 2010). We see these approaches as distinct yet also highly interdependent and interwoven, and use them as both conceptual tools and metaphors to interpret and respond to a diverse body of girls' work such as magazine collages and video compilations.

Appropriation: Magazine (re)Mix

Before introducing our participants to a concept of video remix, we conducted a hands-on collage exercise in which we asked them to appropriate images and text from popular magazines to explore issues related to girls/women and girlhood/womanhood. The girls seemed to be acutely aware of the multitude of images and messages in the popular magazines that reproduce a hypersexual body image and how these representations scrutinize and police female appearance. Each of them created a powerful and complex visual image. Below, we showcase two images accompanied by our immediate interpretive reactions to the images as adult women and classroom facilitators. Our reactions include both readings of visual and textural fragments of girls' work as well as our own subjective responses to these readings that are bracketed in our transcription. As noted above, these readings and reactions do not mimic our classroom interactions with the girls, but are the post-workshop interpretations of their art. We pose that this format of responding to girls' work creates a flow of feminist remix in which our participants' complex, multilayered work of disrupting dominant images and messages about girlhood and womanhood generates affective reactions and critiques by other women (in this case, the two of us as classroom facilitators). We see the feminist remix as a collaborative, dialogic, and intergenerational exchange operates as a site of *female gaze* that creates slippages and interruptions within the dominant patriarchal matrix.



love is endless
 Impulse
 You are entirely up to you.
 [carefree in designer clothing]⁶
 Make your body.
 [look like this]
 Make your life. Make yourself.
 [in this image]
 This is you. This is now.
 Where do you stand?
 [blind, talked at not talked to]
 Do you miss me?
 [detached, ignorant]
 154 shades of woman
 [of a white woman]
 love is limitless
 [everything bracketed by endless, limitless love]

Fig. 1 Collage.
 Image used with
 artist's permission.



America's style
 [split woman, black and white]
 Skinny
 [a woman is pieced together]
 Little Black Dress
 [little white wedding dress]
 Flaws.
 [drawn on]
 Just make-up.
 [painted on]
 Human skin.
 [looking back]
 [white dress, white dress, white dress]
 Put yourself in this picture often enough and it just might happen.
 [question mark?]

Fig. 2 Collage.
 Image used with
 artist's permission.

⁶ Our immediate reactions to fragments of girls's work are bracketed throughout the transcriptions.

Juxtaposition: Video (re)Mix

After the exercise of appropriating popular images and text through collage, we invited our participants to work in small groups to create a video remix by using video footage and still images found online, as well as their own short video clips filmed on site. One of the groups chose to focus on the topic of body image and pressures of womanhood. In their video remix, they interlaced and juxtaposed multiple and seemingly unrelated images and video clips found on Youtube and Google Image depository (carefree female children, anorexic teenagers, the deteriorating face of a drug-addict, leg shaving, and weight lifting) with a few short scenes that they filmed by themselves (a young woman putting on make-up, eating popcorn, and flipping through a magazine). They also added a few phrases and advocacy quotes that created a crucial layer of juxtaposition (Gude, 2004), piecing these multiple images and clips together to flesh out many women's continuous, life-long struggle with appearance and body image. Below, we showcase a screen shot montage of selected video scenes from this video remix, along with our readings of various segments of girls' work and our (bracketed) immediate reactions to them as an example of feminist remix in which our participants' affective critique of girlhood/ womanhood is further complicated, extended, and questioned.

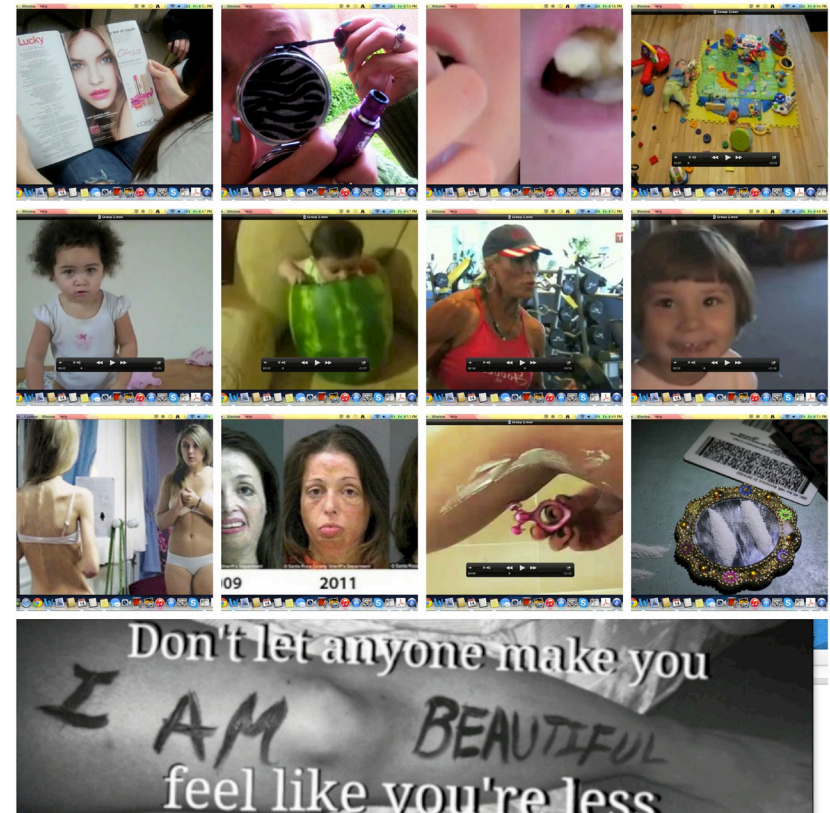


Fig. 3 Screen captures from video collage. Images used with artists' permission.

"All things truly wicked come from innocence."⁷

A hyperlapsed infant; a baby in a watermelon;

a toddler girl throwing clothes on the floor;

a young girl using profanity, parents laugh.

[lost innocence, joy]

"The business of womanhood is a heavy burden."

7 The phrases in quotations in this transcription appear in the frames of the video and were searched for and selected by the participants to include as part of their video collages. The phrases operate as transitions between different video segments.

Pink razor, bare legs, bathroom tile;
compact, zebra print, mascara, rings, blue nail polish;
magazine models, weightlifting enthusiast.
[I have to do this every day. And I hate it;
I don't do any of this every day. And I hate it.]
"Coming under peer pressure you might do
something you don't want to do."
Drugs, timeline of a physical deterioration (face).
[Sadness, disgust, fear]
"Once you become self-conscious there is no end to it;
Once you start to doubt there is no room for anything else."
Body in the mirror, split screen images of mouth eating popcorn,
emaciated body, timeline of physical deterioration (body).
[Obsession, fear, envy, disgust, disgusted by my envy]
"Don't let anyone make you feel like you're less
Then [sic] what you are."
Bare legs with the words, "I am beautiful no matter what."
[Exposed, uncertain]

Recontextualization: Remixing (re)Mixed

One of the groups working on a video remix project approached the process differently. They were interested in a theme of female aggression and bullying and the popular *Mean Girls* movie in particular. While they included only one scene from an actual film in their video remix, they reenacted and filmed a number of other scenes inspired

by the movie's plot. These include a girl verbally abused and knocked off her feet in a school hallway, girls scrutinizing their friend's appearance, and girls rumoring about a female peer. In doing their own filming, directing, and acting, the girls reinterpreted and recontextualized these film episodes by interjecting their own personal experiences and instances of being bullied and bullying others based on appearance. They interlaced these scenes with diverse images of females found online (e.g., overweight girl, punk girl, pierced girl) and further extended their video mashup by adding a clip from a popular natural beauty campaign, followed by what they called *So What is Beautiful?*—a remix of yet another range of still images depicting acts of human caring/helping, laughter, and love. Another critical layer of this complex digital fabric was the girls' use of Pink's popular song *Perfect* that runs throughout the film, the lyrics serving as a (missing) female gaze that restores girls'/women's trust, bond, and affection for each other and exposes the culture of aggression as a byproduct of the male gaze. Below is a montage of selected screen shots and a transcript of our readings and responses to this group of girls' work.⁸

⁸ We notably inserted less of our own reactions in brackets in the following transcript. We acknowledge a discursive richness and overflow of material already produced by the girls in these video compilations. As producers and consumers of media at this phase of the workshop series, the girls were already actively engaged in talking back to the appropriated videos and images they selected by creating their own versions of popular stories about girlhood or overlaying music that challenges female representations found online.

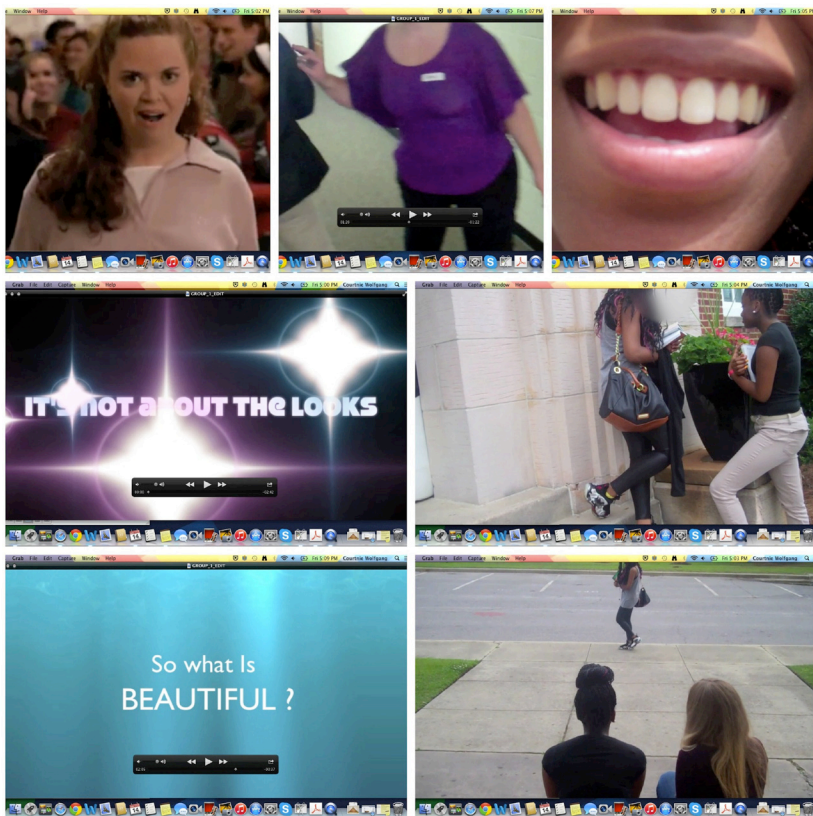


Fig. 4 Screen captures from video collage. Images used with artists' permission.

"Made a wrong turn, once or twice..."⁹

Face of a model. Is this what you see as pretty?

"Dug my way out."

Face of an overweight teenager. Is this what you see as ugly?

Mean Girls character speaking into the camera.

"I saw Kady Heron wearing army pants and flip flops so I bought army pants and flip flops..."¹⁰

"Welcome to my silly life..."

Two girls watching another girl walk by.

(speaking) Look at her. What is she wearing?

Why is she walking like that?

I don't know, but she really needs to stop walking like that.
(laughs)

Punk girl in black with piercings.

Girl's mouth speaking into the camera.

(speaking) She's so ugly.

What does she have on?

Like, who would wear that?

She shouldn't come to school like that.

Two girls chatting.

(speaking) Did you see that lame girl Sally's outfit today?

Yeah, she's so lame.

I hate her.

[I feel scrutinized every minute I'm in public. I am suffocated, I am jealous]

"Pretty, pretty, please don't you ever, ever feel that you're ever less than perfect."

(speaking) All the boy's like her, and I don't know why.

Yeah, because she's really ugly. Not even cute.

Blond woman with perfect skin.

She's so pretty.

I wish I could be just like her.

She has all the boys.

A girl gets pushed to the wall by another girl.

9 A number of quotations in this remix are lines from the song Perfect by Pink, which girls selected as a background music for this video.

10 This is an excerpt from the Mean Girls film.

(speaking) Get out of my way, ugly.

What are you wearing?

What do you have on?

You're so ugly.

[Distorted perceptions of myself, of intimacy]

Middle aged woman; two portrait sketches side by side.

"This is the sketch that you helped me create,
and that's the sketch that somebody described to be you.

See, that's... my natural beauty.

It impacts choices of friends that we make,
the jobs we apply for, how we treat our children.

It impacts everything.

It couldn't be more critical to your happiness."¹¹

Hugging couple; faces of models before and after make-up.

It's not about the looks, you're more beautiful than you think.

What is beautiful?

Smiling mouths of old and young, with teeth and without.
Laughter.

A man giving blanket to a homeless. Helping others.

Couples kissing, hugging. Love.

Aging. Life is beautiful.

[Joy, difference, caring, (heterosexual) love, happiness]

"Pretty, pretty, please if you ever, ever feel like you are nothing,
you are perfect to me."

Girl's Gaze (re)Mixed

Based on our participants' media remixes and our reactions and comments to their work, we posit that a possibility for a female gaze to exist independently from the patriarchal matrix is rooted in girls' subjective remixing of commercialized images to communicate their pain, insecurities, humor, and outrage. This female gaze further springs from the affective responses and reactions to this work by other girls and women that creates a continuous flow of feminist remix. The girls' acts of intentional borrowing of popular images and texts, normally controlled by a male gaze and societal expectations, in order to insert their own embodied juxtapositions, experiences, and commentary displaces the masculine logic of objectification and makes imaginable new interpretations of those images. In our participants' artwork, images of girls and women do not exist simply as objects but rather as subjects of what some feminist scholars have called a "joyful reappropriation" (Griggers, 1990, p. 82). These acts of reappropriation flesh out the differences within girlhood itself and allow for both female producers and spectators to "reinvent [them]selves" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 82) without being objectified. We pose that feminist remixing, or rather *(re)mixing*, of girlhood and the girl's gaze is enabled by the presence of *(re)*—as a continuous repetition and remaking and a collaborative act of female agency—which is produced, reproduced, and passed on to other girls and women to elicit reactions of difference

As grown women and classroom facilitators, we were compelled to engage and participate in these subversive acts by revisiting, reinterpreting, and responding to our participants' cultural mashups. While our girl participants used a number of effective techniques such as appropriation, juxtaposition, and recontextualization (Gude, 2004; Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Sonvilla-Weis, 2010) that contributed to production of new meanings, it is the potential, diverse responses, and readings evoked in female viewers that ultimately generate a female gaze and remake the commercialized landscape of girlhood. The responses are not necessarily logical and coherent but are often emotional, messy, and disjointed. They are grounded in the female subjectivity of affect

11 This is the line from a Dove Beauty Campaign commercial.

which is often dismissed as irrational and senseless within masculine logic, yet which acts as an agentive and productive force that undermines patriarchal order (Walkerdine, 2007). It is precisely the messiness and unpredictability of feminist remix that creates ruptures and slippages that escape the male gaze. By making “visible the unseen and audible the unheard” (Kearney, 2006, p. 327), the act of remixing girlhood and womanhood sets a female gaze in motion and claims its own territory within the male-dominated media culture.

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