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Editorial

Fashioning girlhood across the media, in the mid twentieth century

Katie Milestone and Joan Ormrod

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Introduction

This issue examines both the lived and imagined experiences of girls in the mid twentieth century (from the mid-1950s through to the mid-1970s). In particular, the issue explores the dialogue between girls and young women and media representations of this demographic. It is a period in which modern girlhood, and the teenage culture that developed in the 1950s, began to produce their own fashions, music and media. It was an era of rapid change, great uncertainty, and experimentation around what it meant to be a young woman and a questioning of cultural expectations of women. In this era mobility, whether moving from one place to another, from the domestic to the public sphere, or the active female

body, were key factors in the representation and expectations placed on girls and mobility was also a key factor in notions of modernity (Tinkler 2021; Lockett 2000; Landy 2010; Church Gibson 2006). Films, television and printed ephemera told tales of girls moving from domestic to public spaces for education, employment and career prospects and becoming independent of parental culture by the end of the 1960s.

These notions of the mobile active female body did not emerge 'fully formed' but developed from the growing independence of women and, perhaps, women themselves questioning their traditional roles within the domestic sphere. The contribution of women to the war effort forced patriarchal society to recognise the capabilities of women and their positive impact on all aspects of public life. The 1950s saw a boom in new consumer goods, a technology driven expansion of the media and the beginnings of youth culture and youth subcultures. Women were making gains in education and the workplace and new career possibilities, specifically aimed at women, became increasingly available. This relentless change led to great fluidity in the types of representations and discourses about what it meant to be a girl or a young woman.

The articles in this issue seek to interrogate various media forms aimed at, and about, girlhood during this period when ideas around femininity were being contested and reshaped. The contributors explore the connections often made between film, comics, women's magazines and television by promotional culture. Our cut off point is the mid-1970s. Cultural historians such as Marwick (1998) talk about 'The long sixties'. This timeframe is defined as being a period of economic growth from the mid-1950s and which continued until the economic crisis of 1974. We wanted to concentrate on girlhood in a period of prosperity and optimism because of the sheer volume of popular culture aimed at young women, and to consider the response of women to this onslaught of representational culture and the multiplicity of ideas and identities on offer. This period is one which saw the 'baby boom' and the greatest ever numbers of young people (in Britain). It is no surprise that youth became such a dominant theme of the zeitgeist.

The groundbreaking work of the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the early 1970s highlighted the significance of youth culture and subcultures in their analyses of fashion, lifestyle, behaviour, class and language (Hall and Jefferson 1993). In *Resistance Through Rituals: youth subcultures in post-war Britain* CCCS

work, often grounded in Marxist theory, tended to concentrate on male subcultures which were more spectacular and seemed to speak to resistance and class struggle. Many of the studies in this edited collection did not recognise the importance of girlhood in this struggle and regarded girls as more interested in mass rather than niche media. One essay in this early foray into youth culture, however, did raise some important issues about girlhood and that was Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's hugely influential, "Girls and Subcultures".

In this and her subsequent research on the teenage girl comic, *Jackie*, Angela McRobbie (1991) discussed the concept of bedroom culture where the bedroom was a space for creativity and to articulate identity. McRobbie criticised subcultural research of the CCCS that dismissed female experiences as either limited by parental control or else the perception that girls were more interested in engaging with, rather than resisting, mass media culture (pop music, fashion) and consumerism. McRobbie used *Jackie* as the basis for her analysis and many contemporary researchers, and researchers in this issue, also base their work on the analysis of printed ephemera produced for girls.

Whilst comics and magazines, for example, are often consumed within the domestic realm they primarily deal with how to prepare young women for encounters in the public sphere. A notable example here is found in the focus in these publications on realms such as fashion, beauty and relationships with friends and lovers. The time period covered by this special issue is one that saw the emergence of nightclubs aimed at young people. Going out with friends to dance in discotheques offers new opportunities for girls to get out of the domestic realm. Whilst girls were less dominant than boys in terms of 'street culture', spaces such as nightclubs, cafes and fashion boutiques offered spaces where girls could hang out without causing too much of a stir.

Much of the research in this area is through analysing the representations of stars in films but also magazines and comics. One can see the importance of magazine and comics culture on teenage girls in the 'swinging sixties' film *The Knack and How to Get it* (Lester 1965) in which Nancy (Rita Tushingham) is lured to London with the promises of glamour and a romantic lifestyle promised by things she has read about in the girls magazine, *Honey*, despite the prophecies of debauchery and ruin from the older generation. Articles and stories in *Honey* and other teengirl-targeted media offered the promise of romance, glamour and escape and it is the links between representation and real life that this special

issue seeks to review. How much agency did young women in the era have to resist the stream of instructional messages about 'appropriate femininity'?

This special issue may be regarded as a sequel to our collection from 2018 which focussed on girls, girlhood and the mass media in the 1950s and 1960s. The articles in that issue tended to focus on girlhood in western culture at that time but we felt there was still a lot to be said, particularly in the ways girls and girlhood were located in the mass media. In addition, we wanted to include contributions from outside of Europe and the western mass media in order to explore girlhood in a more global context, one inferred by Marcia Landy when she noted the global mobility of girls in films of the late 1960s (Landy 2010). Did this global mobility extend to girls from other places outside of the western bubble? As suggested in the brief overview above, much of the literature concentrates on British, European and American research. Some of the articles in this issue show how girlhood was influenced by global flows, Hollywood stardom and Indian national identity. The 1960s and early 1970s was a period in which the proliferation of global media flows lead to modifications in local cultural practices and examples of cross fertilisation, what Arjun Appadurai (1990) would describe as global flows, which are not just from the west or more dominant cultures to the rest of the world, but can be multidirectional. We see a clear example of this in one of the articles from India where hippy culture was taken up in Bollywood films of the early 1970s. Cultural ideas that emerged in India were taken up by figures in Western pop and youth culture (notably by The Beatles), and then made their way back to the point of origin (albeit modified along the way).

The time frame we use for this special issue is also one which saw a great number of former colonies (of the various European empires) gain independence. In forging new national identities the media played a key role in nation building, which is a significant feature of the two articles we have which use India as their case study. Looking to the present, contemporary issues of gender are explored in an article that reports on an experimental approach to how contemporary girls construct magazine covers based on their analysis of *Vogue Italia* covers from the 1960s-1970s.

There are many studies of contemporary creative female responses to contemporary media in virtual public spheres such as the internet and social media. However, this issue highlights how stars, fashion and consumerism impacted on girls' lives in the age of analogue media.

Introducing the articles:

It is straightforward to time travel to the 1960s and '70s; one merely has to watch the swinging London films, pop musicals, music videos, documentaries and television shows of those decades to get a feel for the era. The fashions of the era were also innovative and continue to fascinate people to the present for instance, in retro dressing and recycling fashion trends (Thomas 2021b; Jenss 2018). On top of those contemporaneous narratives and reinventions, nowadays there is a renewed interest in the 1960s and 1970s with film franchises such as *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Roach 1997) and the popularity of biopics like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer 2018) and *Rocketman* (Fletcher 2019). There are also glamorous reconstructions of the '60s and '70s in television series like *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* (Sherman-Palladino and Palladino 2017), *Mrs America* (Boden and Fleck 2020), *Modern Miss Fisher Mysteries* (Banks 2019), *Daisy Jones and the Six* (Ponsoldt 2023), which pastiche that era and are testimony to the continuing fascination with the fashions and the stories of the beginnings of feminist activism. However, in addition to films and television, several of the articles in the issue show how one can re-discover the ideas and concepts of the era through analysis of the comics and magazines targeting girls at the time. It was an era in which women began to articulate their dissatisfaction with the roles of housewife and mother and look to careers and education as filling the gaps these roles could not fulfil. The feminist movement of the era began to address such issues. The hard-won freedoms for women are always in flux and under scrutiny. Progress is far from a linear trajectory and some progress made in the '60s has already been undone. Therefore, it is useful to remind ourselves of the struggles of that era which one can identify in some of these articles.

The first article in this collection, “‘...sure to delight every ballet fan.’ Consuming ballet culture through girls’ periodical *Girl*, 1952 to 1960” comes from Mel Gibson who focuses on ballet in 1950s British comics and their referencing of films. Gibson argues that ballet offered girls career and lifestyle opportunities. This article highlights that ballet was a relatively new phenomenon in Britain, having only become part of the cultural landscape in

the early 20th century and having a reputation of being 'unrespectable'. It is hard to imagine that something that is now so firmly established as a highly respectable part of high culture was once viewed with great suspicion, but this example reminds us of the fluidity and volatility of cultural constructions. In a comic such as *Girl*, ballet is promoted through articles, picture stories and film promotions. In each of these narrative forms, ballet is presented as spectacle and leisure activity through to a career option. Ballet becomes established as an exciting form, that from dance lessons through to becoming a professional dancer and offers girls and young women a route to the public realm. The phenomenon of the ballet star also flourished in this era. The ballet comic strip stories, discussed by Mel Gibson, represent girls' having adventures, engaging in camaraderie with their peers, being creative and standing up to injustice and thus very much connected with the public realm.

Set in the 1960s, Satarupa Bhattacharya's article, "1960s Bombay Stars and Fashion Cultures: The Queens in our Hearts" provides the first of two insights in to Indian cinema from a perspective which explores girlhood. Her research explores the role that 1960s Indian cinema played in helping to build a sense of national identity for this newly independent country. Bhattacharya explores how new types of female role models were presented via films but that there were great tensions about what an 'ideal' Indian woman should be. In exploring new global media flows the article identifies the influence of Hollywood on Bollywood, particularly in the film star Audrey Hepburn who was regarded as an important role model having the 'right' balance as a modern, but respectable, young woman. Cinema is shown as an important medium in modernising India. Through the fashions of the key young, female film stars Western fashion influences are combined with traditional Indian dress. The article shows how cinema was an important conduit for inspiring new consumption practices and promoting consumer culture in India, where services and goods connected with travel and tourism, make up and fashion, were actively promoted by the young women in the films discussed. The mobile global female body, suggested by Marcia Landy (2010), in this instance, was tempered by Indian national discourses.

We return to print media for the third article in our collection. Joanne Knowles' article "Fashion, you're incomprehensible! Teenage girls, Jackie magazine and fashion as a negotiated social statement in the early 1970s" offers a fresh perspective on *Jackie* magazine of the mid-1970s. Knowles makes the important point that McRobbie's seminal

analysis of the magazine, incisive as it was, has come to stand as the definitive word on what *Jackie* meant to its readership. McRobbie's 'ideology of romance' thesis remains highly influential and convincing. However, Knowles offers a contrasting perspective to that of McRobbie where she highlights that the magazine did not only focus on romance and the domestic sphere. The volume of space dedicated to fashion suggests an interaction between girls and the public space, via social activities, work, travel is another, and is an as yet under discussed, narrative of *Jackie*. Furthermore, Knowles makes the point that far from being an advertorial for various consumer goods, that the tone of writing in *Jackie* often reveals an ambivalent relationship to the fashion industry. The features are not just about buying clothes but often encourage readers into a DIY culture, modifying existing clothes, thus showing an awareness of the financial constraints that many of the readership experienced (and particularly as the economic downturn of the early 1970s started to bite). Knowles was able to carry out her research due to the presence of the Femorabilia collection held at John Moores University in Liverpool (England). Knowles makes the point that often women's popular culture was not valued and material such as girl's comics and women's magazines was not typically deemed important enough to save. The presence of this archive is a vital resource for allowing researchers to research recent cultural and social history.

Continuing a focus on the 1970s, Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh's article "Bollywood self-fashioning: Indian popular culture and representation of girlhood in 1970s Indian cinema" looks at girlhood in early 1970s Indian Cinema. The authors use two films to explore the concept of 'self-fashioning' and girlhood. This detailed discussion highlights how female stars introduced a range of new fashion styles and attitudes to Indian culture. Some of these new styles were influenced by changes taking place in Western cultures. They focus on revealing that girls in '70s Indian cinema signalled a break from traditional stereotypes of Indian women as contained in the private sphere to new, more spirited and public facing icons. The popularity and impact of these new, modern forms of representation led to the emergence of new style leaders and popular icons in Indian popular cinema. The analysis of fashion, similar to Battacharya's article, points to the connections between ideal womanhood, the ways female stars are fashioned and Indian national identity.

The final article, "Narratives and Legacies of 1960s *Vogue Italia* Covers on Contemporary Italian Young Women" comes from Italian scholars, Eleonora Noia, Silvia Mazzucotelli Salice

and Antonella Capalbi. Like Joanne Knowles, these researchers have been able to make use of a print media archive and to enhance our understanding not only of the past, but the present too. The article begins with an analysis of 1960s and '70s *Vogue Italia* magazine covers. The magazine cover, as they argue, is a space loaded with meaning about gender, the female face and body. The second part of the article deals with projects in which contemporary students engage with the magazine covers of the past and use them as the basis to produce their own magazine covers using images and topics that appeal to them. The students' output revealed that the issues of the '60s and '70s have now given way to questions about gendered identities and ecology. It continues a tradition suggested in Knowles article, in which young women are very much involved with creativity and responding to fashion and the world around them which is enabled by digital technology. Thus, young women in the 21st century are now empowered with access to the means of production via social media, Photoshop etc. But, as we know, the digital is also double-edged sword which also brings new forms of surveillance, scrutiny and judgement of women. The push and pull between progress and regression, in terms of the rights of girls and women is endlessly contested and the hopeful trajectory suggested by the increasing freedoms for woman in the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies has been far from linear and upward when viewed from a perspective of the third decade of the 21st century.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Film Fashion and Consumption*.

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