



“Summary of article by Susan Willis: Gender as Commodity” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 92-95

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### **“Summary of article by Susan Willis: Gender as Commodity”**

In late twentieth-century capitalism, gendering has invariably to do with commodity consumption. We buy into a gender in the same way we buy into a style. ... To free gender from the commodity form requires seeing it as an ongoing expression of how we live our sexuality, something that emerges out of social relationships and in relation to larger social forces. Such a conceptualization of gender would be analogous to conceiving and creating objects in terms of use value alone ... To strive for gender as process as opposed to gender as commodity is to seek a basis for human variety and wholeness in a society where commodification equates wholeness with surfeit and variety with perversion. (23-24)

As the influence of feminism on American society waned in the 1980s, rigid gender roles reappeared in many parts of the culture. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the world of children's toys, where consumers learn at a tender age which ones are for boys and which ones are for girls. This essay examines the portrayal and perpetuation of gender roles through toys, arguing that gender-stereotyped toys offer children a caricatured interpretation of the meaning of adolescence, and that the popularity of superheroes among boys is a commercialized reflection of an ambiguity in the contemporary definition of masculinity.

### **GENDER IN THE TOY STORE**

In an affluent capitalist society, gender roles are conveyed and delimited by the commodities we consume. This process begins at an early age: in any toy store the arrangement of the aisles recapitulates the strict distinction and separation of the sexes. Young children do not question the toy store's universe, nor do they understand how it is produced. Their apprehension of gender in the toy store is no different from the way in which adult consumers see commodities as autonomous. Just as banks, in the child's view, are windows that inexplicably dispense cash to those in need, toy stores dispense gendered information about how to play.

Among the most popular toys for 4-7 year-olds are Barbie dolls for girls and a succession of muscular, mythic heroes such as He-Man and GI Joe for boys.

Clearly, Barbie and He-Man do not offer the child the possibility of prolonging polymorphous sexuality or developing an open notion about gendering ... Both toys play on the child's conscious and unconscious notions about adolescence. They focus the child's consumption of the transformations associated with adolescence in a singular fashion, and they suggest that change is somehow bound up in commodity consumption. (27)

In a society that has marginalized traditional rituals of coming of age (such as communion or bar mitzvah), the birthday party has become central to children's lives. It represents a magical moment of change; young children are often tense and apprehensive as the day draws near. Many ask to have their height measured on their birthdays, to see if they have grown overnight -- demonstrating a conceptualization of and desire for bodily change. In adolescence, growth really does mean rapid change, a stage that younger children anticipate with a complex and confusing mixture of emotions. Toys such as Barbie and He-Man offer children a means to articulate notions about the transition to adolescence, albeit offering only a one-dimensional caricature of the external physical aspects of the transition.

No matter how deeply consumption is enmeshed in capitalism, it also includes utopian dimensions of social relationship, particularly for children.

When a young girl buys Barbie or receives Barbie as a Christmas or birthday present, she experiences consumption in relation to a collectivity of young girls who have or want Barbies. The same group social practice that informs children's thoughts about their birthdays also conditions their acts of consumption. By comparison, most adults do not experience consumption as a form of reciprocal social practice. (32)

When children want the same toys as their friends, they may not be displaying greed or rivalry; rather, it may reflect their desire to share in each other's lives, as occurs when they play together or "sleep over" at friends' houses. Children at this stage have not yet learned the lesson that capitalism teaches adults: that alienation and commodities can be substituted for human relationships.

In a world in which all personal attributes and expressions are bound up with commodity consumption, how can we define gender in truly human terms? "The goal is to recognize in all our commodified practices and situations the fragmented and buried manifestations of utopian social relationships." (34)

## **GROWTH VS. CHANGE**

In terms of the messages about personal change that toys provide to children, it is particularly interesting to consider the "Transformers" and similar toys that became popular in the 1980s. These robots can be manipulated to become something quite different in appearance, such as vehicles or animals. While the notion of transformation suggests spontaneous change, the reality of the toy teaches pre-programmed outcomes and technological domination. Follow the instructions carefully, and one specific, remarkable transformation will occur; there is no possibility of conceptualizing change in any other way. Along similar lines, popular culture often conveys the desire for change combined with simultaneous fear of and need to control change, as in the tale of the sorcerer's apprentice (depicted in the movie *Fantasia*).

The desire for change characterizes twentieth-century mass culture. In contrast, nineteenth-century folk heroes such as Paul Bunyan or John Henry conveyed a solid, centered construction of masculinity, growing but never changing. Twentieth century superheroes are just the

opposite, changing but never growing, always articulating the moment of transformation. As Clark Kent becomes Superman or Peter Parker becomes Spiderman, they demonstrate a construction of masculinity as a duality, with the weak, bumbling, or even nurturing aspects somehow necessary to the emergence of the omnipotent form. Clark Kent always retains his boyish ineptitude, and Peter Parker never advances beyond an angst-ridden school career.

The He-Man toy and its story line, in which the hero, Prince Adam, suddenly gains a sword and equally suddenly relaxes afterward, invites a "vulgar Freudian" interpretation -- but the notion of gender as a duality is deeper than that. Little boys are fascinated by both aspects of this story, demonstrating an appreciation of the boyish and nurturing side of the character as well as the sword and muscles.

Uncovering the utopian aspects of the young boy's fascination with Prince Adam begs another, and with it a more radical, consideration: what about young girls? And what about girls and boys together? In a society dominated by mass culture and the commodity form, as ours is, is it possible to imagine a gendering process that boys and girls might experience reciprocally; or are there only Barbies and He-Men? (39)