

Spice world:  
constructing  
femininity the popular  
way essay



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Through their image in music, print and visual texts, the Spice Girls construct a particular feminine space, representing models for adoration, inspiring young girls' fantasies, providing legalization for various modes of rites of passage into the world of femininity. What then defines being a young female today, à la Spice Girls? What are the characteristics and signs of femininity they choose to portray? What range of gender relationships do they provide for young girls growing up in today's confusing world of "feminism"?

It is to these questions that the following analysis is devoted. Female pop stars Previous analyses of female pop stars are infrequent but revealing. The advent of MET introduced a different variety of female images from familiar representational forms of the plastic arts or of Hollywood movies. In reviewing the development of female expression in MET, Lewis ("Gender Politics and MET") suggests that the 'ass exposed young audiences to women performers through "female-addressed videos designed to speak to and resonate with female cultural experiences of adolescence and gender" (109).

Madonna (with "Like a Virgin"), Cindy Lapper (with "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"), and Tina Turner (with "What's Love Got to Do With It? ") are the more pronounced among them. As Taper and Black suggest, female musicians have been producing video-clips that differ on a number of dimensions from those of male reformers, such as: musical genre, sexual appeal, objectification of women, presence of violence, opposition to authority.

Peterson, for example, argues that Cindy Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" marks girls' unique space as being related to bedroom culture, magazine consumption, clothing styles and the like, through resisting dominant culture. The interpretive themes offered by Peterson- which include the "tenability" of the song, its fun nature, the sense of freedom it offers, and its rebellious counterrevolutionaries previous attempts to fuse liberal- feminist notions within young girls' popular music.

Madonna, a pre-teen idol, has received much academic attention, as a performer who bases her career on challenging conventional perceptions of femininity, combining seductiveness with independence, and articulating a desire to be desired (Fiske, Kaplan, Longhorns, Chitterlings). Fiske (Understanding Popular Culture) claims that Madonna provides an image of independence and resistance to the ideological binary opposition of virgin-where which is an empowering force: "Madonna's popularity is a complexity of power and resistance, of meaning and counter meaning, of pleasure and struggle for control" (113).

Her image serves as "a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young" (97). However, as Kaplan suggests, Madonna's challenge to patriarchy still remains inherently constrained through her focus on the female appearance as being crucial to identity. In a recent analysis, Dibbed attempts to understand "how gendered subjectivity is constructed through the particular representational system of music" (332).

Applying both semiotics and Adorns critical theory, she examines the ways in which music encourages the nonuser to embrace a particular subject position towards the ideologies of femininity in three pop songs. The first, “Ooh, Aha Just a Little Bit” by Gina G. , encourages a patriarchal construction of femininity, while the second, “ Dress” by P. J. Harvey, encourages a critical view of such a construction.

The third analysis focuses on “ Say You’ll Be There” by the Spice Girls, and suggests that the video does not privilege one perspective over the other and can therefore be interpreted as either reinforcing or challenging traditional representations of femininity. Her detailed analysis of the lyrics, music, and images in that video suggests that while the Spice Girls are posing for the male gaze, offering traditional images for masculine fantasy, they are at the same time also portrayed as autonomous and expressive proud young women.

Choice of musical material, including rap for example, appropriates male meanings and signifies power and group identity. In conclusion, Dibbed argues that the Spice Girls, in common with other popular texts, offer the power of evasion of discipline and control through exaggeration and fun, as well as the power of assistance by using the patriarchal constructions of femininity in oppositional meanings. Both, however, as she rightly states, are problematic in that they do not deny the dominant ideology but work within it and therefore reinforce and sustain it.

While the discussion so far has centered on mainstream popular music, it is worthwhile to note the possible contributions of analyses of female rockers

and alternative music performers to the debate (Whitely). In her analysis of the Riot Girl movement's version of "girl power", for example, Leonard suggests that it opened debate concerning girls' position as music creators and performers. Their music style, forms of performance and body display, as well as celebration of shirttail and female friendship and networking, creates a special space for a rebellious female voice.

Such an alternative, although marginal to popular genres, helps set the stage for some changes in the feminine musical discourse of mainstream pop as well. Popular music at the end of the millennium thus featured a great diversity of complex and mixed messages about women and femininity in society (Cooper). Therefore the Spice Girls can be analyzed as a progression of female stardom in popular music from the famous persona of the 'ass and 'ass, inhabiting the Minnie space already cultivated before them.

The texts The discussion of the Spice Girls as a particular case of interest is based on an extensive study of popular texts, clearly provided or stimulated by well-oiled marketing strategies. These texts include: the songs of the group's two discs and their video-clips, MET specials, the "official" Spice Girls videotape and book, the movie Spice World, various posters, memorabilia and Internet sites. In addition, all issues of the three major popular pre-teen and teen weekly magazines in Israel (about 150 issues) were investigated and all Spice Girls-related material was studied.

What follows is a thematic semiotic analysis of "the feminine" as it emerges from these Spice Girls' texts. It is painted in rather broad strokes, highlighting clear motives rather than providing a finely detailed examination

of specific texts (such as *Dibbed*). A second study, reported elsewhere (Limits), preceded this one and focused on pre-teen age girls' reception of the Spice Girls in Israel. Insights from the focus-group reception study assisted me in delineating certain themes and, at the same time, in highlighting the similarities and differences between the preferred scholar-readings of the texts and those of the intended audience.

**Femininity** The five "Spices" suggest five different personality-types, and five different definitions of femininity. 1 Childish and cute, Emma is "baby spice." She wears her blond hair in pigtails, favors light cotton, pastel-colored short dresses with straps and sports a gold necklace with the word "Baby" on it. She often sucks a lollipop and presents a blue-eyed, smiling baby face to the camera. 2 Geri is the spicy ginger; she is the sexy exhibitionist.

Her reddish hair and selection of tight bright clothes, such as corsets, raters and stockings, clearly portray a "slut"-like image, to which her provocative stares toward the camera provide the added touch of a come-on. 3 Melanie B., the only woman of color in the group, is the "wild" spontaneous one. "Scary Spice," as she is called, has the most untamed long curly dark hair which she wears as a mane to suit her tiger-skin-type clothes of tight slacks, bras which expose more than they obscure and large overcoats.

Her pierced tongue adds to the image of the independent outspoken "rule breaker" who is capable of doing whatever is on her mind. 4 Melanie C. Is "Sporty Spice." In her workout suits of slacks and exercise bras, her straight hair tied back in a modest ponytail and her plain cheerful face she is "the

girl next door," who happens to have a thin muscled body and a genuine interest in sports, specifically soccer, and fitness. 5 Finally, Victoria, "Posh Spice," is the elegant sophisticated "snob. In her short, tight black dresses and high heels, her shoulder-length straight dark hair and her serious, unsmiling posture, she conveys remote coldness, heightened by stories of her aristocratic background. All these varieties of femininity are offered as possible and legitimate modes, each with its own identifying characteristics of behavior, facial expressions, clothing, hairstyle and accessories.

Appearances are closely related to presumptions about "essence." The contextual connection between a construct of the woman and a presentation of the woman remains the core question at issue.

As Token suggested in her historical analysis of fashion and clothing, appearance code "is a dynamic site of struggle for control of the power to define selves and situations" (122). Throughout history clothes were a means of defining peoples' roles, status, and gender. They were used to preferential between the respectable woman and the non-respectable one, between the married and the single female, between the highchairs lady and lower-class person, and other social distinctions.

The five unique choices of symbolic appearances by the Spices clearly mark individual diversity and variability of styles pertaining to the more general conception of femininity. They offer a freedom to choose from a series of appearance identities, which together constitute a fragmented definition of womanhood: A girl can be childish and cute like Emma, but she could also be wild and crazy like Melanie B. She can be provocative and sexy like Geri, but

she could also be snobbish and elegant like Victoria. She can even be an athletic tomboy like Melanie C.

Part of the textual discourse is the girls' exploitation of their own stereotypes and their oppositional manipulation. Such, for example, is Enema's "naive" and melting smile at a policeman in an attempt to win him over and prevent the group from being punished for misconduct; Melanie B.'s purposeful attempt to break the rules of a chess game; or Victorians over-serious facial expression as she talks to an imaginary audience member about her stylish dress scenes from the movie). Be what you are, and take advantage of it, they suggest.

Moreover, change is not really possible, once you have settled in your own mold. When the girls try humorously to take each other's roles through appearances they discover how uncomfortable they are and revert back to their exaggerated non-dimensional "selves." People don't change, seems to be the message and it is reinforced by their own declarations: "We haven't changed as people-we've kept our original personalities" (Spice Girls 48). "Girl Power" One can choose to be any of the "girls" as long as one is conventionally attractive, as are all five Spices.

However, their attractiveness seems to feed on their boundless energy (at times to the point of chaos), dear self-confidence and self-awareness, and their sense of control over their own behavior and appearance. "None of us are conventional beauties," declares sexy Geri (Spice Girls 67) "That's inspiring for girls because it shows you don't have to be gorgeous to be up there doing it!" These are not Barbie dolls, the exploited images of the "



beauty myth" (Wolf). Rather, these are strong-willed independent personalities, as manifested by their slogan " Girl Power. "

In the opening pages of their official book (Spice Girls 7), pink and black letters explain: Girl power is when... You help a guy with his bag You and your mates reply to wolf whistles by shouting get your ears out! ' You wear high heels and think on your feet You know you can do it and nothings going to stop you You don't wait around for him to call You stick with your mates and they stick with you You're loud and proud even when you've broken out in spots You believe in yourself and control your own life " Girl Power," so it seems, refers to both physical and mental strength.

Girls can help a ay with his bag, have painful tattoos as Geri, or do sit-ups like Melanie C. But it is also standing up for your rights and dignity and having control over your life. " Girl Power" is also about freedom of expression and inner peace, about standing up for one's opinions and beliefs. " I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want," say the words of their first record-breaking hit, " Wannabe. " Control and independence seem to be crucial to the " Spice" construction. " It's looking at yourself in the mirror and saying, " This is me...

I'm not going to be dominated by anyone, especially not men'" (Spice Girls 37). A free spirit, self-acceptance and self-fulfillment are crucial characteristics of " Girl Power. " The fear of being out of control, argues Wolf, is characteristic of contemporary women, since loss of control is understood to be inappropriate and severely punished if discovered. Being overweight (loss of control in regard to food) or promiscuous (loss of control in regard to

sex), are illustrations of gender-related phenomena against which society typically imposes negative sanctions.

But “ Girl Power” seems to go beyond the personal and private. In an MET performance, the Spice Girls attributed to the late Princess Diana-to whom the song as dedicated-the notion of “ Girl Power”: the capacity to inspire and to help others. “ My talent is giving every person I come into contact with that little bit of zest for life again,” says Melanie B. (Spice Girls 45). While these are clearly well-rehearsed facades put up by the singers, with little additional depth behind the click@s, they are still intriguing as an overall message choice.

A group of five “ hot,” energetic, and extremely successful young women, declare their independence, take control of their lives, and invite you, a nine- or ten-year-old girl growing up in a confusing world of indeterminate gender boundaries, to Join in! Indeed, “ Girl Power” is actively interpreted by many of the girls as an expression of independence, strength, success, and sense of self-worth. “ It meaner,” explained one twelve-year-old in the reception study, “ equality that girls are strong, each one in her own way. ” One fourteen-year- old suggested: “ In the content of the Spice Girls, they are much more feminist.

That’s the way they are. They do a lot... To declare that they don’t belong to men in all their songs they say ‘ Girl Power,’ which is what they are. Really! ” (Limits 153-54). This inclusion of feminist discourse, albeit at the superficial click@ level-in an extremely successful image-is in and of itself an interesting phenomenon. Such incorporation of the “ women’s lib” referent

systems, has been featured in various popular texts such as in television series and advertising campaigns (among them, the famous “ You’ve come a long way, baby” for Virginia Slim cigarettes).

These texts have been charged with turning the feminist spear against itself by reinforcing women’s dependency on capitalistic patriarchal systems (Williamson). The inclusion of audience tastes in cultural products is a well-recognized economic strategy, as Fiske (“ Cultural Economy of Fantod”) argues. What is striking in the Spice Girls’ example, is the inherent conflict between the message and the reality. As the movie cynically indicates, the Spice Girls are handled, programmed, and marketed by male agents who are in control of their industry as well as of the images it presents.

In the movie, the man in control is a high-class, rich, and mature “ father figure” who denies them any time off from work. This is very much an imitation of the successful American series of the ‘ ass, Charlie’s Angels, presenting three young beauties as talented policewomen, who blindly follow the unquestioned authority of a male period, whom they have never even met. The Spices, as mischievous girls, disobey the male authority figure, spontaneously running away to do “ what’s in their heads. However, they are back just in time to fulfill their obligations as performers, teetering along the thin line between obedience and resistance. The “ Spice Girls” might as well be like the figures in Plat’s cave for the young musical audience: Young fans who are oblivious to the reality outside, and to the hands that manipulate the puppets. There is no reality of control outside of the performers’ existence; there is no awareness of those who wield power behind the scenes. The Spice Girls are out there “ doing it! ” (Limits).

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Sisterhood Female bonding and a sense of sisterhood is a major thread in all Spice Girls public appearances. The over-emphasis of this theme seems to go beyond a reassuring publicity strategy, suggesting that the group is well and thriving. The theme seems to draw from the political notion of "sisterhood," which constituted a major component in the ethos of the women's liberation movement of the '80s. A strong emphasis is placed on the importance of friendship, unity, togetherness and cooperation from which members of the group draw personal strength.

"We're about unity and solidarity between female friends," declares Geri (Spice Girls 34); "We really care about each other and want the best out of each other, so we all look after each other," says Melanie C. (Spice Girls 48). Moreover, men too have to accept this womanly trait: "If you want be my lover you gotta get with my friends, make it last forever, friendship never ends," say the lyrics of "Wannabe." "My friends are with me when you into been around," they sing in "Love Thing. The Spice Girls' notion of sisterhood thus challenges patriarchy in three complementary ways: first, as an alternative to the prevalent stereotype of intriguing competitive "bitchy" females, jealous of each other's success, particularly in relations with men; second, as a counter model to the dominant masculine "Loner" (the "Lone Ranger," James Bond, the "Marlboro Man," Easy Rider, and so many other Western cultural heroes); and, finally, in opposition to feminist "Sisterhood," the notion of "Brotherhood" is often associated with war ("Brothers in Arms"), or with criminal "gangs" (including those of sexual violence).

Thus, togetherness, for women, creates a positive, constructive force. This theme was clearly evident in the fans' discussion of the group: "Each [Spice  
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Girl] feels that it strengthens her a lot that she has such a group around her, that they are together and not alone," suggests a fourteen-year-old fan. "They are good friends. They support each other," argues a twelve-year-old. "That's what makes them special. Friendship and cooperation. It has nothing to do with singing. The singing came out of their cooperation," contributes another twelve-year-old (Limits 160-62).

The Spice Girls' friendship is clearly framed as being that of an adolescent nature. Ample examples exist in the movie, newspapers and book photos, presenting the "Spices" in typical girls' bedroom scenes. They are sprawled on bed covers or stretched out on rugs, lightly caressing each other, having pillow fights, sharing secrets, trying on each other's clothes, gossiping about boys, examining their appearances, teasing each other, engaging in "compare and contrast" rituals, grooming one another.

In one such scene in the movie, they are in their bathrobes as if at a sleepover, and in another scene they are out together in the dark menacing woods, searching for a good place to Pee, as girls might do when camping out. This all-girl subculture is described by Wolf from an adult, heterosexual perspective, as a lost Eden of "a love at once so intimate and so charged.... In a way, there will be nothing as exciting as this love between girls ever again" (55).

The Spice Girls' appeal thus incorporates central themes of young pre-teen girls' culture, legitimizing it, bestowing upon it their popularity and fame, claiming it as theirs and that of their fans. At the same time, however, many of the Spice Girls videodiscs, present them roaming the streets, taking

chivies rides (e. G. Running away in a boat, stealing a bus) and exploring urban spaces in the dark. Such provocative behaviors, often associated with adolescent boys, pose clear challenges to the traditional private-public space division associated with gender in general, and with adolescence in particular (Microbes).

**Promiscuity** The Spice Girls' conscious exhibition of sexuality continues to challenge the traditional slut-virgin binary division of femininity, and thus provides young girls with alternative images. While being sexy is often perceived as being watched and stared t, in the Spice Girls' case, it is also doing the watching and extravagantly manipulating the stares. Rather than being a source of shame, as is often the case for young developing teens, the Spice Girls' sexuality is a source of pride. " Come on and do it," they urge in " Do It": " Who cares what they say-Because the rules are for breaking. Their hints at nakedness-widely exposed cleavages, stomachs and legs, are offered in this context not as signifier of availability, but rather of self-confidence and choice. While being out of line sexually is commonly associated with becoming sluts" in society's eyes, in the Spice Girls' case, it is portrayed as blunt opposition. Rather than controlling their sexuality and desire as a key to maintaining a desired " virgin" image in tact, they choose to expose their sexual energies overtly, with pride. Control becomes a matter of displaying sexuality rather than hiding it.

In a world where girls are internalizing conflicting messages-you need to look sexy to be noticed, to be worthwhile and appreciated, yet you must not act upon that sexiness lest you become the disrespected " slut"-this is a challenging alternative. However, exaggeration of the codes of feminine  
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appearance up to actual sexual display can be understood as forms of self-presentation (Lewis "Consumer"). As in the case of Madonna, sexual provocation could possibly also be read as a mockery of patriarchal constructions of the slut-virgin dichotomy, as well as a challenge to dominant definitions of femininity.

Whether pre-adolescent girls are really aware of these supposed mockeries and challenges, or whether they are buying into a consumer ideology that defines female worth as tied closely to their sexual attractiveness and availability, is yet another question. Analysis of fans' discourse suggests the existence of an active struggle of interpretation. Some of the younger girls had a strong need to frame the Spice Girls as where's yet idols, as one nine-year-old confessed: "I care that she [Geri] is a where. She is pretty, but I won't want to be a where, but I would want to be Geri.

But not a where" (Limits 158). The older girls, also torn between these dichotomous concepts of femininity, used two lines of arguments to resolve the tension. First, they separated the Spice Girls' personalities from their roles as performers, and second, they cast the appearance in marketing terms, as a way to attract audiences. Analysis of their talk suggests that the Spice Girls provide a site of struggle with the conflicting forces of conformation and resistance to traditional norms of gendered appearances.

Douglass historical reconstruction of "growing up female with the mass media" recalls similar experiences with girls' groups in the early '80s: Girl group music acknowledged-even celebrated-our confusion and ambivalence. Some of us wanted to be good girls, and some of us wanted to be bad. But

most of us wanted to get away with being both, and girl group music let us try on ND act out a host of identities, from traditional, obedient girlfriend to brassy, independent rebel, and lots in between. 88) The Spice Girls, apparently, provide it all in one group. Curiously enough, there is an effort made in interviews and official publications, to emphasize that sexual appearances do not contradict the existence of mind and soul, as the popular stigma would tell us. " I've always been a deep thinker. But then again, I'm loud and spontaneous and a bit of a twat sometimes. " confesses Melanie B. (Spice Girls 20), and later on adds: " The strong will survive and the wise excel" (23). Wolf (215) recalls the common " Feminist or slut? Dichotomy in popular debate, whereas famous women-from anarchist Emma Goldman, to popular writer Eric Gong, to pop singer Madonna-have struggled to integrate both. For the Spice Girls, so it seems, passion and sexuality are not at war with rationality and dignity. In their relationships with men, they are clearly demanding respect and refusing to be taken for granted. " Stop right now, thank you very much, I need somebody with the human touch," they tell a lover in " Stop"; " I left you behind, boy you were a fool, to treat me that way," in " Saturday Night Divas," or " Who do you think you are? N a song of the same title. They seem to offer what Wolf (220) apparently craves: role models of women with both living minds and living bodies, and furthermore, women who are making room for that possibility in the lives of other girls! Motherhood A common construction of femininity suggests that there are sexy girls and there are mothers, but one can't be both.

Motherhood is asexual and unattractive. While this is not a central theme in the Spice Girls' image, it comes through very clearly in a scene in the movie, when the Spices fantasize about themselves in the future as mothers.

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They are all bloated, wearing unattractive clothes, their faces and hair in a state of neglect, their expressions portray tiredness and unhappiness, and they are surrounded by the clutter of baby products. Motherhood is not a cheerful prospect. Moreover, having babies is in opposition to sexual pleasure; it even constitutes punishment for it at times (Wolf 164). Such is the case of their movie friend of Asian origin, who was deserted by her boyfriend while heavily pregnant. Men can't be trusted, so it seems. Women who get pregnant are not sexual anymore and are thus deserted by their men.

A complementary relationship with motherhood is expressed through their song "Mama," devoted to their own mothers, and the video-clip that followed. While the lyrics talk about the realization that Mama "would become the friend I never had," the visuals present childhood pictures of the Spices, and camera cuts to their mothers placed within the audience. Sitting in an elevated circle amidst the young audience, the Spices relate their revelation as girl scouts counselors passing down a secret: "Back then I didn't know why, why you were misunderstood.

So now I see through your eyes. All that you did was love. Motherhood is a state of unappreciated devotion and education. Here too it is also an asexual state, as expressed by Geri: "Personally I found it a bit weird to bring my mum to work with me.... But it was nice for them to get made up, have their hair done and feel glamorous..." (Spice Girls 43). Contradictory struggles It is acknowledged that sexuality for adolescent girls (at least in the U. S. A. , and, as is reasonable to assume, in other parts of the world as well) is highly problematic and fraught with conflict.

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Girls are socialized to look like sex objects, but not to act upon it, to provoke, but not to feel desire. As a result, sexuality is rationalized and normalized by girls by linking it to love and to a desire to satisfy the wishes of the loved one, rather than as a natural part of their femininity (Durham; Wolf).

Prevailing messages in teen magazines, a highly popular medium for pre-teenage girls, promote restrictive ideologies of femininity, glorify heterosexual romance as a central goal girls, encourage male domination in relationships, and stress the importance of beautification through consumption (Price; Microbes; Mozzarella).

Further, as Durham suggests, the discourse missing from teen magazines is that which cozens the validity of girls' sexual feelings and desires apart from masculine desire. In contrast to these prevailing messages, the Spice Girls suggest an for alternative model that challenges dominant definitions of femininity and masculinity. Much in line with Fiske analysis of Madonna, the Spice Girls seem to be in control of their own image and the process of making it. They manipulate the traditional concept of the female " look" in three senses: in what they look like; how they look at the camera and others; and how others look at them.

In contrast to Madonna, forever, the Spice Girls are celebrating their femininity in a playful childish fun-filled way. The context of sexual exhibitions-their boundless energy, girl-like mannerisms, playful defiance of authority, outspokenness-all suggest sexuality as part of an independent self at peace with itself. What emerged, however, as the most striking element in the analysis of the Spice Girls' images, was the constant presence of

contradictions within the messages conveyed. Each of the themes  
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highlighted above offer oppositional polymeric readings (Dibbed; Fiske), each echoing major cultural struggles and confusions.

First is the notion of independence and “ power” so strongly voiced by the group. They declare their independence from men, yet most of their songs center on heterosexual love, on longing for satisfying relationships with men. They defy masculine authority just enough to remind the audience that they bow to such authority in the first place. They have the power to make their own choices and be anything they want-just as long as they adhere to dominant notions of prettiness and sexiness.

In this sense, as Dibbed argues, “ ‘ Girl Power’ is a myth which supports the subordination of females within patriarchal society: it offers the IEEE that ‘ Girl Power’ constitutes liberating empowerment and thereby diverts any possibility of real resistance” (348). Furthermore, the Spice Girls use compelling language to encourage girls to get out “ there” and do “ it”-yet, they never offer any suggestion of what kind of social space it is that is “ there” and what “ it” constitutes. The promise of freedom exists-but no purpose for that freedom: A freedom to be where?

To do what? No particular future is offered, no portrayals of professional or personal alternatives except for the obvious choice the Spices have selected for homeless: the glamorous sphere of female stardom, a world nourished by the female “ look. ” In many ways this ambiguous discourse represents a sense of real confusion to young admiring girls. A second, yet related dominating theme is the one glorifying female bonding. In contrast to

Madonna, the Spice Girls work together, as a united group. This can work in oppositional ways.

On one hand, it deepens the inner contradictions: Girls can be independent, but in order to be successful they need to join forces; girls can be anything, but only the combination of all five forms of indemnity together creates the “whole,” the “feminine,” the impossible burden of the “superwoman.” When their friend in the movie is debating which one of the Spice Girls to choose as a “godpare