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**THE PERFECT FEMINIST MOVIE DOES NOT EXIST:
SCREENING THE BARBIE BUZZ**

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Abstract: *Given the remarkable financial success of Greta Gerwig's film, its perceived merits and shortcomings need to be examined in order to determine what caused the significant social media attention, which included both substantial praise and sharp criticism. Starting from an overview of the Barbie-doll's evolution over the years and relying on the mixed reception enjoyed by the film Barbie (2023), this article provides an analysis of how its director incorporates the feminist ideology, evaluates its effectiveness in harnessing the empowering aspects of the feminist discourse, and attempts to pinpoint the specific type of feminism it embraces. The aim is to scrutinise the claim that this production is nothing more than the epitome of insidious faux feminism, shamelessly brandished by the media industry to disguise its commercial objectives whilst posing as harbingers of progressive social change.*

Keywords: *feminist rhetoric, global capitalism, intersectionality, neoliberalism, Barbenheimer*

1. Introduction

This paper examines the extent to which the film *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, engages with feminist ideology, its degree of success in mobilising the subversive and liberating potential of feminist rhetoric, and the kind of feminism it capitalises on. Does the movie merely portray, in a simplistic and reductive manner, current neoliberal feminist ideas, employing feminist concepts to actually conceal the profit-driven actions of the Mattel corporation, thus turning feminist ideology into a commodity within the framework of global capitalism? Or does it meaningfully

challenge the dominant patriarchal mechanisms of mainstream cinema to create more inclusive and liberating portrayals of feminine experience as required by the postmodern framework which theorises feminism as a multifaceted, polyphonic, heterogeneous movement? In light of the film's tremendous box-office success, its perceived strengths and weaknesses must be scrutinised, in order to ascertain what generated the impressive social media buzz which funnelled both considerable appreciation and trenchant criticism.

2. The *Barbie* buzz

2.1. Historical background

In the 1960s, feminist critics began to focus their attention on the portrayal of women in classical Hollywood films, specifically addressing the use of sexist imagery. Sparked by the rise of women's film festivals, the feminist cinema-studies movement developed throughout the 1970s and aimed to explore filmmaking as a cultural practice that portrays and perpetuates misconceptions regarding femininity and women. Initially, it adopted a three-fold approach. First, it scrutinised the involvement of women in various capacities within the film industry, as performers, directors, or producers. Second, it examined the stereotyped representation of women in film whilst attempting to prompt the creation of a cinema dedicated to women, one that would enable the portrayal of female perspectives and desires. Third, it provided an exploration of issues related to cinematic spectatorship, by emphasising that it would only become possible to depict "an active female desire" in Hollywood films once difference was no longer limited to a sexual one but "understood as a difference among women" (Smelik, 1998, p. 21).

Psychoanalysis reigned as the prevailing framework in feminist film theory in the late 1980s but, in the 1990s, the transition from a simplistic view of sexual difference as a binary concept to a more nuanced understanding – which included diverse views, hybrid identities, and various potential ways of engaging with the film as a spectator – fostered a growing preoccupation with matters pertaining to femininity and masculinity, ethnicity and race, as well as queer sexualities. As Smelik (1998) pertinently pointed out, feminism "did crack the mirror ... in order to open up the powerful camera eye to new fields of vision: to different angles, points of view, positions, images and representations" (p. 6). Throughout the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st,

there has, indeed, been a significant and constant amount of pressure for change in the realm of cultural representation, stemming from a variety of angles: not only from political movements such as feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTIQA+ rights movements (Smelik, 1998, p. 3), but also from fields such as history, anthropology, ethnography, and cultural studies, as well as from the advent of increasingly more advanced technologies (Smelik, 1998, p. 26).

It was also in the 1980s and 1990s that media scholarship first started to examine the manner in which corporate-owned media “created markets and shaped its products” thereby influencing consumers’ perceptions of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, whereas the contemporary neoliberal trend has increasingly been regarding media consumption patterns as “indicative of the consumer’s intrinsic interests” (Murray, 2019, p. 7). The ethical standards and moral principles of a culture are reflected in the media products which are created, marketed and sold. Conversely, media products, in turn, shape that culture by either validating and supporting its norms and values, or by questioning and challenging them. Among media products, films seem to have a remarkable capacity to captivate the viewing public’s imagination, to ignite, evoke or manipulate emotions, and to inspire novel perspectives on the world (Murray, 2019, p. 8).

2.2. Setting the stage

American actress, screenwriter, playwright, and director Greta Gerwig first gained international recognition after the release of *Frances Ha*, a film she co-wrote with Noah Baumbach in 2012. Filmed in black and white, as a deliberate homage to the French New Wave movement, this dramedy challenged preconceived assumptions of what constitutes “serious” cinema, and demonstrated that the marginalisation of women’s voices in the film industry leads to significant aspects of the human experience being overlooked. Compared to Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, a series renowned for its feminist critique and rigorous analysis of female sexual subjecthood and body politics, *Frances Ha* is a romantic comedy that does not focus on the quest for Mr or Ms Right, but rather on how one can maintain one’s youthful optimism through friendships, without necessarily relying on a significant other. Since the “challenging ideas about gender are so embedded” that they become hard to notice, and given that women are presented in all their complexity, as “messy, graceful, sad, funny, artistic, ambitious and caring all at once” – in other words: human – this film

makes “an important feminist statement precisely because it isn’t overtly about feminism” (Siddiquee, 2013).

Another comedy-drama, *Lady Bird*, which marked Gerwig’s solo directorial debut in 2017, showcases events so undeniably authentic as to raise the question of the extent to which the film may be autobiographical. Both Greta Gerwig and *Lady Bird* moved to New York in order to enrol in a liberal arts institution, after graduating from a single-sex Catholic school in Sacramento. Berardinelli (2017) explains that the movie “was filmed on location and is as much a love letter to the city as any of Woody Allen’s pictures are of New York”. It offers a remarkably authentic examination of the mother-daughter relationship, and its subtle feminism makes it an ideal film for anyone seeking solace from the burden of misogynistic preconceptions. As Schmich (2017) clarifies, the film “genuinely reflects a woman’s experience and viewpoint” being “notable in part for what it lacks. No car chases. No explosions. No shootings. No monsters. No prurient sex.” The critic concludes that *Lady Bird* is simply a film “propelled by words, relationships, subtle acting, humor and honesty” (Schmich, 2017).

Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Little Women* demonstrates how genuinely feminist the book is by bringing to life events depicted in two parallel timelines, at the expense of a merely chronological narrative, while maintaining character integrity. Every one of the March girls is unique, possessing individual ambitions, distinct yearnings and unique particular personality quirks. Jo March is, according to Wilkinson (2019), “Gerwig’s proxy in the film”, as “her sentiments throughout the movie come off as echoes of Gerwig’s own”. Gerwig demonstrated a keen understanding of how the characters adhere to or deviate from the gendered conventions of the 19th century, most notably evident in the portrayal of the women’s societal obligations, and of their struggle for financial independence (Wilkinson, 2019). Gerwig’s screenplay holds the novel’s text in high regard, explores its profound meaning, yet skilfully brings to light and reinterprets elements which had previously been overlooked, thus creating something that is both “true to its roots” and “bracingly current” (Ide, 2019).

Gerwig’s 2023 *Barbie* movie shattered box office forecasts, having made, by April 5, 2024, \$636 million in North America and a staggering \$1.45billion worldwide (Carollo, 2024). Following a series of animated films and specials, this first live-action adaptation of the Mattel fashion dolls known as Barbie offers a reflection on feminism and patriarchy. It features Margot Robbie in the

lead role as the title character and Ryan Gosling as Ken, depicting their exploration of self-awareness as they navigate both Barbieland and the real world in the aftermath of an existential crisis. America Ferrera, Ariana Greenblatt, Rhea Perlman, Kate McKinnon, Issa Rae, Simu Liu, Hari Nef, Alexandra Shipp, Emerald Fennell, Emma Mackey, Michael Cera, Rob Brydon, Tom Stourton, and Will Ferrell round out the supporting cast. The film's musical sequences feature elements from the 1950s musical soundstage, such as Vincente Minnelli's "An American in Paris" and "Gigi", whilst Stanley Donen's "Singing in the Rain" served as inspiration for the dream ballet set, which elevates the surrealism of the scene. And, as Josh Goldstine, Warner Bros. president of global marketing, told Rebecca Rubin (2023) in an interview, the trailer – as well as the beginning of the film – represents a tribute to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968. This "bold statement" was meant as something provocative, that would unsettle expectations, rattle misconceptions and shake prejudices, thus generating a great deal of curiosity and interest in the production.

Although Margot Robbie had insisted that "the film is "for everyone," whether it's little girls who play with dolls or their middle-aged dads laughing at references to *2001 Space Odyssey*, the Indigo Girls and Robert Palmer" (Tong et al., 2023), Warner Bros. and Universal chose a head-to-head showdown during the peak-summer-movie-going season, scheduling for July 21 the launch of both *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, as if they were not competing for the same audience, since the former was dubbed a girl-movie, and the latter a boy-movie. This was not the first time such a counterprogramming game had been played. On July 18, 2008, another parallel contest had taken place on the day when *Mamma Mia!* and *The Dark Knight* were released, the latter having even more in common with *Oppenheimer*, since Christopher Nolan directed both. And history repeated itself, both films being "smash hits", in 2008 as well as in 2023: the competition was "genuinely strong" and the so-called girl-movie posed "an unprecedented threat" to the respective boy-movie in both instances, so none of the films, in the end, really got in the other's way (Scott, 2023). Whilst, as Spencer Perry told *Inverse*, there must have been one hundred *Dark Knight* posters to five *Mamma Mia!* ones, in Barbie's case the success heavily relied on the marketing campaign, because the *Barbenheimer* showdown took on "a life of its own, spawning countless memes", prompting heated discussions and, thus, giving rise to an extraordinary buzz (Scott, 2023).

2.3. The positive hype

In an interview given to Tong et al. (2023), Greta Gerwig explained that what had determined her to embark on the *Barbie* challenge was an interest in “how life is complicated and messy” because “there is nothing that’s either or, either good or bad, but ... mostly it’s both”, which seemed like a very generous place wherefrom to begin the project, since “Barbie as an idea, as a brand, had this mission statement of inspiring girls to be whatever they wanted to be as adult women”.

The Barbie doll was brought to life in 1959, when Matt Matson, along with Ruth and Elliot Handler, established their own company, named Mattel, a portmanteau created by merging the names Matt and Elliot. Nevertheless, it was Ruth Handler, the mastermind behind the enterprise, who saw the demand among young girls for doll play. The initial Barbie doll, with her distinctive ponytail, made her first appearance at the New York Toy Fair on March 9, 1959, dressed in a swimsuit with black and white stripes, just like the one featured in the film’s opening scene. Two years later, Ken was introduced on the market, followed by Barbie’s close companion, Midge, in 1963, and Barbie’s younger sibling, Skipper, in 1964. Subsequently, additional siblings were introduced and, given the change in public consciousness regarding racial diversity and representation, by 1968 she had been issued friend dolls of colour, although these retained specifically Caucasian features. It was not until 1980 that the Barbie model was released in an African American version, whilst the year 1988 witnessed the introduction of the Latina Barbie, later given the name Teresa Rivera, following demands to clearly establish her identity.

In response to the criticism it received regarding its African American dolls, Mattel developed new moulds, including distinct face characteristics, “skin tones, hair textures, and names” during the 1990s (Martínez, 2023). Following backlash against its unrealistic body-size, the doll underwent changes, at the start of the twenty-first century, including reduced breast size, a broader waist, narrower hips and, in 2016, three new variations of Barbie were brought out: tall, curvy, and petite. Moreover, new Ken body types and a variety of features were introduced in 2017. Additionally, in 2019, Mattel created a collection of dolls aimed to accurately represent those with enduring disabilities, such as a doll equipped with a wheelchair, another with a prosthetic leg, one with vitiligo and, in 2023, a Barbie doll with Down syndrome (Martínez, 2023). A year earlier, in

2022, the first transgender Barbie had been released, in celebration of Laverne Cox's 50th birthday, to honour "the impact she has had as an advocate for LGBTQ rights" (O'Kane, 2022). Barbie has some features "particularly conducive to lesbian reappropriation", complete with "a series of wardrobe-crafted identities to pull out of her closet", thus implying that categories are only as rigid as costumes (Rand, 1995, p. 2). The extent of Barbie's evolution and consumption lends credence to the assertion made by theorists who study nonconformity and resistance, namely that "queerness and resistant readings" can take place not just on the fringes of dominant society, but also within its core (Rand, 1995, p. 12).

Throughout the decades, albeit primarily motivated by financial gain, Mattel has been making efforts to enable an ever greater number of children to identify with Barbie, to have the doll reflect the reality in which they live, so as to encourage all children to convey more stories through play. Mattel Inc®, through partnership with Oxy Insight Ltd., even funded a project that resulted in the publication, in 2020, of an original research article entitled "Exploring the Benefits of Doll Play Through Neuroscience", whose authors, however, clearly indicated that neither company "had final say in the study design nor played a direct role in the collection or analysis of the data", in the "interpretation of the results", or in the "writing of the manuscript" (Hashmi et al., 2020, p. 8). Nevertheless, the research proved that children's initial experiences significantly impact their views and perceptions, and dolls can have a crucial influence on this development. Thus, playing with Barbie and Ken allows children to manifest their aspirations and envision themselves capable of achieving various goals. Moreover, engaging in doll play during crucial periods of development can have a profound impact on children, as it enables them to cultivate empathy and enhance their social skills. This, in turn, equips them with the necessary tools to succeed, while envisioning a future where everyone has equal opportunities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Gerwig employs Barbie as an effective medium for societal critique, even though the film is not meant, first and foremost, to be a political project, to solve social issues, let alone to single-handedly bring forth political, social and economic justice. On the one hand, Mattel adamantly refused to promote the film as a feminist one, and, on the other hand, a toy movie could never be expected to actually trigger the redistribution of resources and power that might eventually result in social equity across board. But since, to a certain extent, at least, people do "glean their sense of possibility and self-worth" from available cultural products

that foster narratives and trigger interpretations, Barbie can be used “to disrupt and challenge beliefs and connections that have come to seem natural” (Rand, 1995, p. 5). As Rand (1995) points out:

Common knowledge makes Barbie a great vehicle for social criticism. Like the U.S. flag, Barbie calls up for many people an image, a set of issues, and an understanding of the official and dominant raps: we know Barbie is supposed to stand for a female ideal just as we know the U.S. flag is supposed to stand for a U.S. commitment to freedom, democracy, and justice. As a result, Barbie is user friendly for the critic-producer, who can begin on covered ground and move on from there. (p. 153).

Ruth Handler epitomized her own vision for Barbie: a woman who challenged societal norms and cultural expectations to achieve her goals. Yet, unlike Ruth, Barbie was not a wife and mother. Although Mattel promoted several “wedding-themed Barbie and Ken outfits and accessories”, Barbie’s marital status remained ambiguous, this inconclusiveness boding well for the appeal of the doll in contemporary times (Gerber, 2009, pp. 249–250). During the 1970s, Barbie held a diverse range of occupations, including actress, surgeon, and United Airlines flight attendant. In addition, she pursued professional endeavours in the field of athletics, occupations that encompassed becoming an Olympic athlete, participating in downhill skiing, and engaging in figure skating. In the 1980s, there was an increase in the number of women pursuing professional employment even in fields predominantly occupied by men, so Barbie’s range of professions expanded towards positions such as corporate executive, doctor and army officer. By 1992, women had access to almost every job, so, during the 1990s, Barbie pursued several professions such as engineer, pilot, police-officer, fire-fighter, NASCAR driver, and even presidential candidate. Currently, Barbie has the opportunity to select from a vast array of more than 120 occupations. She has had various careers, including architect, news anchor, palaeontologist, and many others (Slater, 2016, pp. 18–19). And the movie *Barbie* attempts to reflect the above-mentioned variety of identities, be they related to ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, ableness and profession.

Every element of this film fully embraces the reality that Barbie is a doll, from the performers’ movements to the design of the sets. And it does this while employing a specific style and a particular aesthetics meant “to pay homage to 1950s soundstage musicals and make everything feel authentically artificial” (elle literacy, 2023, 6:45–6:52). Not only the lead actors,

but also the dancers exhibit a uniform style of rigid, poised movements that remarkably imitate dolls, like Ken effortlessly propelling himself up high, following a head-on collision with a wave, or the automobile gracefully somersaulting through the air. Moreover, the conversational exchanges between Ken and Barbie reflect the simplistic and innocent phrasing that children might employ while playing with the two dolls, naively shaping their conversations. Barbie's unrestrained femininity is evident from the colour palette alone, yet not only does the film heavily rely on a diverse range of pink hues, but each and every frame in *Barbieland* features vibrant colours, the backgrounds having all been painted by hand, each detail of the set meticulously handcrafted, the costumes impressively detailed (elle literacy, 2023, 5:29–6:09). *Barbieland* is not a space where women are judged by and for what they choose to wear, whether they are presidents, lawyers, sanitation workers, drivers, doctors, journalists, teachers, white-collar or blue-collar workers, etc. Just like men in the real world, Barbie dolls are invariably endowed, by default, with respect and deference, regardless of what they are wearing at any particular time. Femininity being seen neither as weakness nor as vanity, *Barbieland* is as safe, for Barbies and Kens alike, as patriarchal society is for white heterosexual men. Hence the shock experienced by Stereotypical Barbie during her journey in the real world, where gender discrimination and sexual harassment run rampant, which points to women's perpetual struggle to emancipate themselves from stereotypes and societal expectations.

The compelling soliloquy offered by Gloria, portrayed by America Ferrera, albeit awkwardly didactic, promotes the acceptance of women's unique qualities and denounces the idea that any woman should conform to a certain stereotype in order to be deemed successful or worthy.

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong.

You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people.

You have to answer for men's bad behaviour, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood.

But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful.

You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.

I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know. (Gerwig, 2023, 1:13:49–1:16:22).

Pointing to the fact that femininity is a contested space, the monologue conveys the great amount of pressure that women face in order to adhere to unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness, conduct, and achievement, thus being strongly reminiscent of Camille Rainville's poem (2017), which went viral once performed by Cynthia Nixon in 2020:

Be a lady they said. Your skirt is too short. Your shirt is too low. ... Dress modestly. ... Men can't control themselves. ... Show some skin. ... Look hot. Don't be so provocative. You're too dressed up. You're too dressed down. ...

Go on a diet. ... God, you look like a skeleton. Why don't you just eat? You look emaciated. ... Men like women with some meat on their bones. ... Be feminine. Be a size zero. Be a double zero. Be nothing. Be less than nothing.

Be confident. You're trying too hard. You look overdone. Men don't like girls who try too hard. ...

Look youthful. ... Women don't get old. Old is ugly. Men don't like ugly. ...

Be pure. Be virginal. ... Men don't like sluts. Don't be a prude. Don't be so uptight. ... Pleasure men.

Don't be intimidating. ... Don't be so bossy. Don't be assertive. ... Don't complain. Let him down easy. Boost his ego. ...

Don't get raped. ... Smile more. ... Don't smile at strangers. Don't attract attention. Don't work late. ... Don't go out at night. Don't trust anyone. Don't say yes. Don't say no.

Just "be a lady" they said.

Gloria's monologue also brings to mind a situation very frequently encountered by women who are in positions of leadership or aspiring to develop their careers, and who must constantly assert themselves, continually strive for progress, and flawlessly accomplish tasks, despite the societal expectations that only men can and should undertake such endeavours. They face what Tannen (1995) calls a "double-bind" (p. 142): a female boss, leader, or manager often finds herself in a paradoxical situation because the communication style typically associated with someone in a position of authority is not considered feminine. Thus, if a woman tries to lead by exercising authority, she risks being labelled aggressive, overbearing, and, shockingly, unsuitable for leadership. Gloria's speech urges women to rally behind one another, liberate themselves from such limitations, and strive for a fairer society where they can flourish without the weight of unattainable ideals.

Barbie eventually emerges as a complex character, whose journey presupposes a struggle with matters of personal identity and self-esteem, doubled by a battle against societal norms. Her quest revolves around discovering her own unique voice and fully accepting her identity. The purpose of this portrayal is to deviate from the simplistic representation of Barbie solely as a doll focused on fashion, and instead advertise her as a symbol of empowerment and strength, as a role model that is both inspiring and accessible. Such a technique is in line with Gerwig's efforts to depict the intricacies of contemporary womanhood through movies that attempt to combine entertainment with significant social critique.

2.4. The negative hype

Striving to strike a balance between providing amusement and delving into a profound examination of feminist topics is a daunting endeavour, especially when undertaken by means of directing a film that centres around a toy which has consistently sparked controversy due to its promotion of unattainable beauty ideals and its reinforcement of heteronormative gender roles. The film's inevitably superficial treatment of serious issues was bound to prompt inquiries regarding the authenticity of its feminist message. Since the elaborate marketing campaign and the resulting excitement were carefully designed to guarantee the movie's commercial triumph, the thirst for financial gain was perceived as one of the main concerns in making this movie. Thus, *Barbie* has been facing strong criticism for a variety of reasons, some especially outrageous – particularly from the alternative right movement and from the involuntary celibate community, others more pertinent – mainly from sophisticated, scholarly, feminist intellectual voices.

The former critics castigate it as 114 minutes of hateful, angry, mean-spirited, insane hatred of males and everything even remotely related to them (The Critical Drinker, 2023, 0:33– 0:41; Thorias Unlimited, 2023, 3:44–4:54; Piers Morgan Uncensored, 2023, 2:11–2:20; Ben Shapiro, 2023, 3:20–3:35). There have been objections to the very first scene (Vine, 2023), “showing little girls happily destroying the embodiment of motherhood” (The Critical Drinker, 2023, 1:46–1:48), as well as to the portrayal of the Kens, throughout the movie, as individuals that simply exist, since they lack intrinsic value, possess no authority or influence in the governance of society, and are essentially regarded as trivial or inconsequential by the Barbie dolls (Vine, 2023; The Critical Drinker, 2023, 2:11–2:23; Thorias Unlimited, 2023, 6:30–7:33).

Whilst the choice of structuring the matriarchal regime as somewhat oppressive can be viewed as misrepresenting the real objectives of the feminist movement, it is actually meant to draw viewers' attention to how women are regarded and treated, even nowadays, in still too many areas of the world, as well as to offer a critique of the way in which Ken – as a toy – has traditionally been designed, structured and marketed, as if he were nothing more than one of Barbie's accessories. Such subtleties were lost on those members of the audience marred by a toxic masculinity mindset, and scenes that actually play an important part in the economy of the plot have, thus, been interpreted by insecure men as offensive (Hasan Reactions, 2023, 9:35– 9:56). To be outraged that Ken is not the hero of a movie called *Barbie*, disappointed that he was not invited to the girls' sleepover party, angry that his feelings were not reciprocated as he would have wished,

in a nutshell, enraged that not everything revolves around him, mirrors a suspension of disbelief on the reverse: both an unhealthy tendency towards taking things too seriously, and an exaggerated exasperation at the perceived loss of privilege experienced by a toy that some white heterosexual males identify with. This position was also reiterated through comments that reveal how out-of-touch with reality the members of the incel and altright communities really are. Piers Morgan, for instance, was derided for stating that he would be “executed” if he created a “male version” of the Barbie movie, a claim that betrays an unforgivable lack of awareness regarding the historical real-life maltreatment of women: “Kinda crazy for the kens to be depicted as just a reverse of contemporary patriarchy and my man’s just like ‘what if women were treated like that’” (Chilton, 2023).

The latter critics contend that the film fails to properly address essential socio-political problems, such as classism, racism, ageism, fat shaming, queer or transphobia, and merely brandishes a feminist veneer, in order to attract as diverse an audience as possible and thus generate profits. Blockbuster filmmaking inherently requires catering to a wide audience, which makes it more challenging to create a truly feminist storyline. Commercial success frequently depends on having a wide appeal, which can trigger compromises in storytelling that weaken the original purpose. This pressure can lead to a narrative that either trivialises or misrepresents feminist discourse, a narrative that may appear to promote empowerment and variety, yet ultimately neither questions the existing state of affairs, nor stimulates deep contemplation on gender roles and expectations.

Moreover, *Barbie* surprisingly garnered over 100 promotional partners worth \$70 million to Warner Bros. and Mattel, so it is not only a standalone film, but rather part of a broader media-business-strategy. The movie has been used to market almost everything, from hair dryers to rugs, from high-heeled shoes or custom pink Crocs, to a Prada clothing line, from Barbie-themed *Summer Baking Championships* and *Beachside Brawls* to the *Barbie Dreamhouse Challenge* – a home-redesigning competition series aimed to create a range of Barbie-themed rooms that evoke different time periods (Mcclintock, 2023). Companies such as Ruggable, Forever 21, Claire’s, Aldo Shoes, Impala Skate, Funboy, Gap, Prada, Food Network, HGTV, AirBnB, Progressive Insurance and General Motors, among many others, proved keen to cash in on a little bit of Barbie magic. And the hype lives on, expertly kept alive long after the film’s release: *Barbie’s Malibu Dream*

House can be booked, in real life, through AirBnB, whereas a Barbie-themed boat cruise regularly sets sail in the Boston area (Badich, 2023). As Josh Goldstine told Pamela McClintock (2023) in an interview, theatrical marketing “has the opportunity to engage the cultural zeitgeist in an exciting way”. That the film’s intensive marketing, which clearly demonstrated the media industry’s ability to capitalize on current trends for financial profit, ultimately exerted a profound influence on the audience’s overall experience cannot be denied, and this has been deplored by many:

If Barbie constitutes a triumph, it’s a triumph not of feminism but of the patriarchy’s so far most unassailable scion – capitalism. Women have been spending millions to watch a giant advertisement more likely to bewilder than inspire them. And now they’re spending millions more on the merch. Mattel’s (male) chairman and CEO, Ynon Kreiz, has plenty of cause to be pleased. But feminists? Perhaps not so much. (Cox, 2023).

As Woods (2023) pertinently explains, at certain points in the movie, sexist messages are presented as feminist statements. First, the pernicious claim that men might hate women, but women hate women even more, which rests on two very different definitions of “hate”. The latter encompasses merely mild discontent materialised through resentful gossip, and obscures the horrifying consequences of the former, namely that men’s hate of women recurrently results in institutionalized sexism, rape, and murder. Second, the sexist myth that women talk much more than men, which has been proven to be nothing more than the result of unconscious bias springing from the preconception that only men deserve to be heard:

Demonizing women’s talk is a classic sexist trope with profound consequences that has been examined by countless feminist theorists for decades. The specter of women’s gossip has been used to justify female lobotomization, witch trials and executions, repression of the vote, keeping women out of the workplace, and ultimately, to dismantle solidarity among us. (Woods, 2023).

Third, the idea that mothers should be “a matronly monolith” functioning as “placeholders for their daughter’s achievements” reveals yet another glaringly sexist double standard (Woods, 2023). There is no need for parents of either sex to sacrifice themselves so as to allow their offspring to thrive; suggesting that this is a mother’s duty sounds highly objectionable:

The view that children's lives are more important than the lives of their mothers just resulted in the repeal of Roe Vs. Wade. This notion has kept women at home, in the kitchen and unable to vote or participate in society for most of modern history. (Woods, 2023).

Fourth, the misogynist notion that a man is just a mind, so ageing and looks will never define him, whilst a woman is just a body, so the loss of beauty and youth equals loss of worth, transpires through Barbie's conversation with the elderly woman at the bus stop. Barbie's words, "You are beautiful", are meant to be reassuring but, instead, sound shallow and patronizing, since they uphold the sexist tendency of valuing women based on their perceived attractiveness:

And maybe it is a radical act, in a patriarchal society, to expand definitions of beauty so that more women can fit into the pretty, pink cake we're all supposed to be priming to jump out of, but this terminal faux-feminism is nothing I want to be party to. (Woods, 2023).

For all its stunning aesthetics, convincing acting, superb music and skilful choreography, which evoke a strong sense of nostalgia, effortlessly captivating former Barbie enthusiasts and prompting fond recollections of childhood fantasies, *Barbie* is "a trojan vehicle", rather than a feminist masterpiece:

A gorgeous cake decked with all the trimmings of capitalist achievement and pants-suit-nation-style female liberation, lined with candied pearls, topped with a bubblegum pink bow of social importance. But inside, the cake is hollow. And if you were expecting a newly empowered, albeit scantily dressed woman to jump out of it tossing her hands in the air in celebration of some uniquely articulated sisterhood, I think what you'll actually find once you cut in is a pile of toxic, melted plastic, poisoning everything, a sexist goo unable to stand up to the heat of the most basic scrutiny. (Woods, 2023).

For Gerwig to have engaged with feminist rhetoric only to eventually offer a simplistic and reductive surface-level perspective on gender issues was viewed as an unforgivable mistake by feminist academics, who saw the outcome as emblematic of the global capitalist commodification of feminist ideology, and argued that, instead of challenging the dominant mechanisms of mainstream cinema to create more inclusive and liberating portrayals of feminine experiences, the feminist criticism of the movie got assimilated into the patriarchal neoliberal culture.

3. Conclusion

The most anticipated movie “of the summer – if not the year” had been expected to have something for everyone, since its trailer had posited: “If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you.”, to which Margot Robbie added: “If you feel indifferent about Barbie or haven’t thought about Barbie in years, this movie is also for you.” (Dockterman, 2023). In light of the film’s reception, assessed both in terms of numbers and opinions, the trailer could not have provided a more veracious account. It seems that *Barbie* managed to achieve the impossible: to be loved by so many, yet hated by many more, to garner huge amounts of harsh criticism from both female and male audiences, not only from the woke, but also from and the anti-woke, from feminists and anti-feminists alike, while dominating a substantial portion of the socio-cultural and intellectual discussions throughout the year. Since Mattel had not been keen on advertising the movie as feminist, it is unclear whether its portrayal as the feminist breakthrough in 21st century filmmaking was, in fact, meant to dispel any potential complaints before they even surfaced, in the hope of generating huge profits for a corporation that had been accused of merely posing as progressive, whilst failing to address stringent issues such as gender pay gaps, workplace sexual harassment, and lack of support for the work-life balance of its workers, many of them women (Sequeira, 2015; CLW Report, 2020). It is, nevertheless, clear both that Gerwig fully intended to convey a truly feminist message, and that the final product fell short of many feminists’ expectations.

Any attempt to effectively reclaim such a controversial toy in the postmodern context was bound to be a daunting task, especially through a film that was not to be produced independently, so as to steer clear of corporatist interests; hence, the film’s unimpressive lacklustre treatment of feminist issues and its rather superficial criticism of corporatist sanctimoniousness. A Hollywood movie about a doll may bring its modest contribution to feminist debate in the media sector by advocating for diversity and inclusivity, yet it will never be the cinematographic counterpart of a treatise on current feminist trends covering the plethora of issues relevant to postmodern society, among which gender fluidity, queerness, and the impact of intersectionality in the contemporary context. Despite Gerwig’s sincere attempts to be inclusive by casting diverse supporting Barbies and Kens, the film’s feminism, reminiscent of the 1980s, is simplistic and reductive, rooted in a

gender-binary heteronormative mindset, an obvious result of its coming-of-age story being centred on the white cishet main characters. But the film's existence in the male-dominated cinemascap is cause for celebration, because it does address, albeit rather clumsily, several serious social issues that still need to be discussed. The fact that it is not the perfect feminist movie, that some directorial choices were less inspired, and that it obviously contributed to the (re)popularisation of Mattel's products and image as a whole warrants the pertinent critique of Gerwig's work. Yet this should neither belittle all the genuine efforts made by the renowned director and her cast to bring this project to fruition, nor ignore the countless ripples of validation and encouragement generated by its release and felt by numerous audience members. The ugly reality is that, in spite of the constant efforts to eradicate misogyny in popular culture and in society at large, sexism is still commonplace, as it was in the 1980s, in the media industry and elsewhere. The reactions of incels and altrighters to the *Barbie* movie prove that taking a stand on anything even remotely related to women's issues still generates unusual and intense antagonism since these individuals perceive feminists as rigid, outdated, and excessively irate.

Barbie's feminism is the classical one, not its neoliberal variety, given that it portrays the causes of gender inequalities primarily as structural rather than individual, although it does not adequately probe their historical and political roots. Gerwig's work does not advance the idea that women have achieved equal rights or that discussions of social justice are no longer necessary, so the film is not post-feminist either. It simply embodies a genuine attempt to challenge mainstream cinema's dominant patriarchal mechanisms and depict feminine experiences in a more inclusive and empowering way. That this was done in a somewhat basic and oversimplified manner, tributary to the 1980s feminism, without considering the relevance of intersectionality in contemporary times, especially in the aftermath of a rather boisterous advertising campaign, aroused suspicions of femvertising. But the interviews given to the press by all those involved in the project from its inception appear to counter the claim that the intent might have been to merely transform feminist ideology into a marketable product within the context of worldwide capitalism (Dockterman, 2023; McClintock, 2023; Rubin, 2023; Scott, 2023; Tong et al., 2023).

The sheer amount of criticism that *Barbie's* director has had to face outweighs, by far, that received by *Oppenheimer's*, for instance, which warrants the question why the very few female directors often find themselves under much harsher scrutiny than their many white heterosexual

male counterparts. Not incidentally, Gloria's speech from the *Barbie* movie could provide an answer to this conundrum. An objective assessment which is not blinded by one political agenda or another will show that, despite its shortcomings, Gerwig's highly engaging and visually stunning film should at least be commended for having sparked serious discourse on issues as diverse as gender equality, feminism, toxic masculinity, faux feminism, neoliberalism, femvertising, capitalism, corporate greed and media industry coups.

The Barbie doll has left its mark on the collective consciousness of many generations of children, shaping their perceptions of gender and corporeality on the one hand, and their patterns of consumption on the other. Throughout her process of evolution from a basic fashion doll to a significant cultural symbol – prompted, indeed, primarily by financial interests, rather than simply by the ever-changing socio-political climate, the doll has been both criticized for upholding unattainable beauty standards and praised for pioneering new ground in female representation, so the film had to skilfully reconcile Barbie's historical background with the modern feminist discourse, whilst navigating the troubled waters of corporate commercialist pressures. The interviews given by those who contributed to the making of this “rare blockbuster catering directly to women” reveal an impressive combination of team effort, drive and perseverance in the face of Mattel's resistance to accept certain scenes that felt either too political or off-brand (Dockterman, 2023). Under these circumstances, the mere fact that this film – made by women for women, yet not only – was brought to completion and successfully released constitutes a victory in itself, and most of the weaknesses that critics keep emphasising could have been predicted from the start. After all, it is no secret that ours is a patriarchal capitalist society where corporatist projects are always designed to generate financial gain, so a film produced in Hollywood, by Mattel Films and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures should not have been expected to emerge as an incisive critique either of heteronormative patriarchal culture or of media industry's thirst for profit.

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