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**“I’M NOT PRETTY ANYMORE:”
FEMININITY AND BEAUTY IN THE *BARBIE* MOVIE**

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Abstract: *The Barbie movie swept across the world and became the highest grossing movie of 2023, but it is also considered a controversial film, as the public and academic discourses around it show. Can Barbie be feminist? Is Barbie feminist enough? The expectations levied against the movie come from outside of it, reflecting on Barbie’s history from 1959 until today. Barbie embodies patriarchal views of women but she also showcases the way women entered the workforce, became less reliant on men, and more independent within society. While many critics blame Barbie for unrealistic body standards and capitalist overconsumption, I argue that the doll’s evolution also reflects the way women’s roles changed over the last sixty years. The aim of this paper is to analyze the way Barbie grapples with questions of beauty and femininity in 2023, with a sixty-year-old past of constantly changing definitions of what it means to be a woman.*

Keywords: *Barbie movie, beauty myth, Greta Gerwig, body image, hyperreal, gender expression*

1. Introduction

Over the six decades of her existence, Barbie was celebrated and criticized for her femininity. She is a stereotypical femme white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes, with an unrealistic and unachievable body, living in perpetual privilege (Barbie has a Dream House, a car, a boyfriend, a family, an endless wardrobe, etc.). It is not surprising, then, that feminist critics were quick to point out the harmful stereotypes the doll created. However, Barbie also turned away from preconceived notions of womanhood. Before Barbie came on the scene, young girls were expected

to play solely with baby dolls. This directed their play towards the notion of motherhood. Comparatively, Barbie appears to be a young adult, a woman who can interact with men, can have a job, and, in some cases, can even have a daughter of her own. Barbie moved little girls' play away from the mother role and allowed them to experiment with other themes of adulthood. This is also illustrated in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023). The movie opens by recreating the iconic intro of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The Kubrick movie shows that by using tools, humankind would no longer remain the prey, thus ushering in the dawn of human civilization. Comparatively, the young girls shown in *Barbie* smash their baby dolls, and the dawn of Barbie brings about more opportunities to play.

Within this paper, the name "Barbie" encapsulates a multitude of ideas, sometimes overlapping. Barbie is a product sold by Mattel, a cultural artifact that may mirror or question notions of femininity; it is a corporate icon shaped by capitalist values; and in the case of *Barbie*, it is also a fictional character in a film. The aim of this paper is to prioritize the fictional character played by Margot Robbie, but due to the film's metatextual nature, such distinct lines cannot be clearly drawn between product, symbol, character, etc. because each version of Barbie intersects with the themes of the film.

Much of the feminist discourse about Barbie centers on her role in empowering young girls. The doll's existence is analyzed as she ages, from the 1960s to today, so we are witness to second-wave, third-wave, and contemporary intersectional understandings of Barbie the symbol. Critics rightfully point out that the doll's unattainable features and lifestyle are more damaging to children than the good she represents. Barbie is an enigmatic figure. She is two things at the same time: a quite literal objectification of women in a capitalistic society and a constantly changing toy that tries to replicate the current expectations of adults about what toy to give their children. Therefore, it is not surprising that Barbie has taken on many roles (not just as a doll, but also as a star of animated movies, shows, YouTube channel, etc.) over her decades-long career and had plenty of changes in her features. This duality is also observable in *Barbie* (2023), the highly anticipated, controversial, and seemingly "woke" blockbuster. The common criticism levied against the Barbie doll is reiterated in many reviews and articles about the movie as well. How does *Barbie*, the movie, deal with common feminist criticisms of the past? Does the movie represent contemporary intersectional feminist views? Is that its goal?

In a review for the *New York Times*, Pamela Paul (2024) points out that “[t]hose who openly hated [*Barbie*] mostly did so for reasons having to do with what it ‘stood for’ [...]. For those who hailed it, there was a manic quality to the ‘Barbie’ enthusiasm, less an ‘I enjoyed’ and more of an ‘I endorse.’” After the media frenzy around female-led movies such as *Ghostbusters* (2016) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), it seems like it became part of the culture to either wholeheartedly support such films or to be unwaveringly against them. *Barbie* generated this media attention from the very beginning. The movie was pitted against *Oppenheimer* (2023) in a strange battle of genders and aesthetics. Would *Oppenheimer*, the typical Oscar movie about the creation of the atomic bomb, with an almost exclusively male cast, defeat *Barbie* at the box office? While many of these comparisons resulted in the creative phenomenon Barbenheimer (see Travis, 2023), they also created an unnecessary correlation between the two films. Many times, *Barbie* was presented as a vapid, simple movie for girls, whereas *Oppenheimer* was the high-quality movie that would win award after award. *Barbie* did not pretend to be Oscar-bait. On the contrary, director Greta Gerwig emphasized the potential commercial success of female-led movies. In an interview with CNBC, Gerwig claims that “women’s stories are commercial. They are not niche. They can reach a large audience” (Martin, 2020).

Gerwig emphasizes the potential commercial success of female-led movies because Hollywood executives do not invest in women’s stories. For example, Lauzen (2024) reports that “the overall percentage of women in speaking roles contracted from 37% in 2022 to 35% in 2023, and the number of female major roles remained the same at 38%. The percentage of films with female protagonists declined from 33% in 2022 to 28% in 2023.” Even though *Barbie* was the highest-grossing movie of 2023, the overall representation of women in film decreased compared to 2022. So, Greta Gerwig is right to focus on the financial aspect of movie making. Within the Hollywood system, capital is king, so a movie’s financial success can make or break a film. Furthermore, a movie’s “flop” could discourage executives from funding similar projects.

Barbie is undoubtedly a cultural phenomenon that ruled 2023. It became an instant classic; people can quote dialogue from it, and the songs, the looks, and the red-carpet events mesmerized the public. Of course, part of this is due to an excellent marketing strategy.

Warner Bros. and Mattel have partnered with everyone from Bloomingdale's to Pinkberry to roll out pink products. The fashion and makeup collaborations were perhaps to be expected. But Barbie pasta? A Barbie Xbox? Barbie and Ken popping up on the Bumble dating app? (Dockterman and Lang, 2023).

The financial success of *Barbie* is undoubtedly important. Not only does it reaffirm that movies about women can be financially worth investing in, but it also paves the way for other movies about similar topics. This, in turn, begs the question: is *Barbie* taking women's films in a good direction?

Due to the long history of Barbie, encompassing various art forms, products, and media, it is difficult to only look at what the film has to offer. However, I find it important to try to focus on *Barbie* first and foremost, as the film cannot correct past mistakes made by Mattel and cannot rewrite history. I find that Barbie dolls are often attacked for their role in making children have unrealistic portrayals of their bodies, their role in society, and more. It is important, though, to question whether Barbie dolls shaped culture or merely reflected it. In this paper, I will attempt to focus on the themes and topics discussed in the movie and only mention the toy and other Barbie media when the film interacts with them.

2. Woman, doll, hyperreality

Barbie's central themes revolve around womanhood and its representations. The film opens with the introduction of Barbieland, an utterly perfect pink plastic world in which Barbie always has a good day. In Baudrillard's terms, Barbieland is hyperreal. Baudrillard (2010, p.1) defines hyperreality as "generation by models of a real without origin or reality". *Barbie* grapples with this concept of hyperreality because within the realm of the movie, Barbie is a doll, she is an idea, and she is a living being in her own universe. Furthermore, there is a connection between the "real world" of the movie and Barbieland. Barbie can cross into the world of humans by taking a magical journey, much like any protagonist in a folk tale. The movie also transcends these two worlds and connects directly with the audience. For example, there is a narrator whose sole purpose is to guide the watcher through some storylines. This narrator even breaks the fourth wall when she makes a joke about the actress who plays Barbie. In this scene, Stereotypical Barbie admits, "I'm not pretty anymore" (Gerwig, 2023, 1:13:05). The scene shows Barbie in tears, unable to find it within her to

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fight back against the Kens' newly established patriarchy. However, the film halts its emotional momentum for a brief moment to break the fourth wall. The narrator, voiced by Helen Mirren, quips: "Note to the filmmakers: Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point" (Gerwig, 2023, 1:13:37).

Barbieland is a matriarchy, but it was born out of a patriarchal system that is present in the real world. This is noticeable in the discrepancy between values represented by the dolls. In Barbieland, women are in power, every woman's occupation is important and respected, and all the problems faced by women in the real world have been seemingly solved in Barbieland. Subsequently, most Kens also have some jobs, but they do not serve much of a purpose. For example, the main Ken (played by Ryan Gosling) is not a lifeguard or surfer, his job is "just beach" (Gerwig, 2023, 11:00). So, the Kens certainly do not serve any purpose in Barbieland, they do not have their own Dreamhouses, and their only goal is to interact with the Barbies.

Barbie's Barbieland showcases a fictitious world in which many ideals of womanhood are represented and combined together, from the very beginning of the doll's existence, all the way to current real-world ideals and social norms. For this reason, even within Barbieland, some ideas and preconceptions clash. For instance, real Barbie dolls started featuring culturally and racially diverse dolls. Mattel came out with disabled, pregnant, and not straight-sized Barbie dolls, etc. Anna Kérchy (2005) notes that

[a]lternative versions of Barbie, such as the black or the disabled Barbie, instead of rendering visible as an autonomous entity on [sic!] its own right the marginalized other, contain and (re)interpret it according to the 'logic of the same' by using the very same mold of the classic blonde, white, and beautiful Barbie [...]. (p. 175).

So, although there are some changes implemented, Barbie is still Barbie, there is no real difference between the dolls, for better or worse. This phenomenon is less observable in the Barbie movie as multiple actresses play different Barbies. The film showcases able bodied, disabled, straight-size, plus-size, racially diverse Barbies, but they look different from one another, so this uncanny comparison between dolls is not as prominent. One of the only ugly Barbies we encounter in Barbieland is Weird Barbie, who also used to be a regular Barbie before her change. Weird Barbie represents a bridge between the hyperreal Barbieland and the "real" human world due to

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the fact that a real girl's aggressive playstyle altered her looks, which has its consequences in the Barbie universe.

While Barbieland is meant to celebrate all kinds of women, the first signs of disarray focus directly on the way the doll looks. Weird Barbie is considered ugly and in Barbieland she is shunned together with some unfortunate Mattel projects that were not popular with consumers. This crew of reject Barbies and companions includes Barbie Video Girl, who has a TV embedded in her back, Sugar Daddy Ken, whose name is supposed to refer to his dog, Sugar, but could be misunderstood as an adult role in a sexual relationship, and even Tanner, the dog who constantly defecates everywhere. These toys represent parts of human life that are considered uncanny, ugly, or unseemly. Some Barbies have strange features that could be considered deformations (e.g., a TV embedded into her back or a voicebox that keeps playing music). Other "strange" aspects that do not fit in Barbieland include real human physical characteristics such as digestion, sexual feelings, bodily changes (e.g., puberty, pregnancy, cellulite, etc.). So, there is a very distinct line between what is an acceptable representation of Barbie and what is not. Even though Barbies are meant to be above societal standards of beauty (perpetuated largely by patriarchal patterns of thinking), above all, Barbie's most significant characteristic is her beauty.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler defines gender as something "performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (2002, p. 33). They claim that gender is not something inherent to culture, but consists of practices that are constantly repeated and reinforced within society until they are considered social norms. As such, gendered identity is rigorously taught to both men and women. Furthermore, these performative aspects of gender are so ingrained within society that they are now considered biological differences between men and women. In *Delusions of Gender* (2010), Cordelia Fine further explores this topic from a biological and philosophical point of view, noting that many of the male and female attributes we consider sex characteristics are ingrained in human culture because there is no such thing as gender-neutral upbringing (see Fine, 2010, pp. 231-232).

These cultural gender characteristics are strongly represented in *Barbie* as well. In the opening scenes of the movie, we see the Barbies performing their perfect gender roles: they wake up looking perfect, they have the perfect outfit on, they do their work flawlessly with a smile on their faces, etc. Even though there are additions to Barbie's world (e.g., important jobs such as

presidents, doctors), some Barbies' personalities are still largely reliant on stereotypical female gender markers. This is particularly relevant for Stereotypical Barbie (played by Margot Robbie) who seemingly does not have a job, her day consists of looking pretty, having parties, and going to events where other Barbies have important roles.

3. What does it mean to be Stereotypical Barbie?

Stereotypical Barbie is an outlier even among the Barbies present in the movie. She is supposed to be the quintessential Barbie, defining herself by claiming that "I'm like the Barbie you think of when someone says 'think of a Barbie.' That's me" (Gerwig, 2023, 22:43–22:48). Despite this description, in the current cultural context, Stereotypical Barbie seems shallower and more pointless compared to her friends. Most of the other Barbies are doctors, Nobel Prize winners, the President of Barbieland, etc. Comparatively, Stereotypical Barbie does not have any responsibilities within this world. Her value as a doll is directly linked to her beauty and the fun elements of being a woman, at least based on early stereotypes of Barbie. She is interested in fashion, parties, and looking pretty.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf notes that even though women managed to reach high-power positions in government and the job market, "eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty" (2002, p. 10). Wolf equates this phenomenon to a patriarchal control tactic. In her view, many of the older myths of femininity (e.g., motherhood, domesticity, chastity, etc.) were somewhat diminished during and after the industrial revolution, but the beauty myth still has power over women (see Wolf, 2002, pp. 10-11). Wolf claims that "inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret 'underlife' poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control" (2002, p. 10). Before her inner conflict, Stereotypical Barbie still embodies myths of femininity and beauty, even though she considers herself emancipated. The Barbies of Barbieland are under the false impression that they solved any women's rights issues by setting a good example for young girls around the world. But this is a falsehood as Barbie is hyperreal; her reality does not copy, recreate, or follow the reality of women.

Barbie's first clashes with the real world include her body changing (e.g., her feet are no longer arched for high heels) and her thoughts branching out towards the negative. These new emotions are influenced by her human companion, Gloria, in the real world. While most Barbies' companions are children who experience girlhood without so many negative emotions, Gloria is an adult woman who is more aware of the world around her. This knowledge shatters Barbie's view of Barbieland as a perfect utopia. Barbies do not age, die, or experience real pain. Their consciousness is frozen in a state where little girls play with them, combined with the surface-level understanding of feminist values that Mattel packs into the newer Barbies' marketing strategy. How could a Barbie understand feminist theory when her reality is created by a company to roleplay a perfect world where Barbies fixed everything? How could Barbie reflect on capitalist overconsumption when her world does not have an economy? Thus, it is no wonder that the Kens overtake Barbieland with a featherbrained idea.

In Barbieland, Stereotypical Barbie is unaware. Her vocabulary does not extend to describing negative emotions. For example, when she first experiences sexism in the real world, she claims that "I feel kind of ill at ease. Like... I don't know the word for it, like I'm conscious but it's my self that I'm conscious of" (Gerwig, 2023, 28:06–28:13). Such clashes with the real-world difficulties women face not only showcase the familiar unsafe environment real women find themselves in, but they also underline that Barbie's world is sterile and surface-level. Additionally, Barbie is not a real woman, even after she made the journey to join the real world. She declares to the men catcalling her that neither her, nor Ken have any genitals. They are still dolls.

In *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, Kim Toffoletti likens Barbie to a transformer, "an in-between phenomenon constantly circulating in the ambivalent space between the image and its referent, between illusion and the real" (2007, p. 58). Her body is reminiscent of a woman's figure, but it is overexaggerated, it shines with an unnatural plasticity, her limbs are somewhat pliant but not exactly like a human's, her feet are frozen in an arch. Furthermore,

Barbie is indicative of the plastic body of endless transformations and eternal youth, manifested via the consumption of mechanisms of control such as cosmetic surgery, fitness clubs and health retreats. (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 61)

Many feminist critics associate this characteristic of the doll with consumerist propaganda aimed at young girls, which is certainly a ploy used by Mattel. However, within the context of the *Barbie* movie, the everchanging nature and the frozen youth is a central theme when it comes to gender expression. While Stereotypical Barbie is supposed to be a young adult, she is also infantilized. She does not understand sexuality and aging, so her relationship with Ken can never progress past the sterile parties and conversations they have. Comparatively, Ken was designed to be Barbie's boyfriend so his desires mostly revolve around impressing her, even though Ken is also kept as sexless as possible within the Barbieland universe. Moreover, the dolls change constantly, so we can see the same odd relationship dynamic repeat itself between other Barbies and Kens within the movie. Although both characters have multiple versions, they never change their core characteristics.

4. The beauty myth and its representation in *Barbie*

In the movie and in most of Barbie's iterations, she mimics womanhood and femininity to a degree, but it cannot be anything but shallow. Barbie does not equal a woman. Toffoletti notes that "[e]ven when stripped bare of her frilly, feminine accoutrements, Barbie reveals nothing about 'real' women because her longer-than-long legs, masses of blonde hair, and pneumatic breasts exceed the limits of phallogocentric signification by virtue of their hyperfemininity" (2007, pp. 67–68). Barbie dolls are women the way drag queens are women. They perform femininity at its most exaggerated. "The way that the markers of the feminine are exaggerated on her form confounds the category of 'woman' because it can no longer be contained to a fixed set of attributes" (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 68). In the *Barbie* movie, the physical characteristics of Barbies are not as jarringly unreal since they are played by real women, but the plasticity is still present. The Barbies do not use stairs, they do not eat, age, etc. Stereotypical Barbie's exposure to what it means to be a woman starts with general "symptoms" of womanhood, or better yet, humanity. At the emotional culmination of the movie, Barbie lists her insecurities that sound very familiar to Gloria. "I'm not stereotypical Barbie pretty. [...] I'm not smart enough to be interesting, I can't do brain surgery, I've never flown a plane, I'm not the president, no one on the Supreme Court is me. I'm not good enough for anything" (Gerwig, 2023, 1:13:05-1:13:18).

For Stereotypical Barbie, the beauty myth is still a prominent feature. Her existence is tied to a time before the second wave of feminism. Her inherent value comes from her beauty even if she is part of a more emancipated Barbieland. Stereotypical Barbie does not have an important role even within the confines of a perfect world for Barbies. Her intrinsic quality of beauty to the point of perfection is her sole characteristic. Thus, when her body starts to change and her day becomes less than perfect, Stereotypical Barbie goes through an identity crisis. If she is not a good enough Stereotypical Barbie, then what is her purpose in Barbieland?

Barbie goes through changes due to her connection to other women. This process is kickstarted by Gloria, but her discussions with Ruth Handler, the older woman she meets at the bus stop, and women she runs into as she tries to find her person, all lead to a deeper understanding of what it is to truly be a woman. By the end of her journey, even though she helped save Barbieland from patriarchy, Stereotypical Barbie is no longer comfortable with staying the way she was before. Towards the end of the movie, she tells Ruth, “maybe I’m not Barbie anymore” (Gerwig, 2023, 1:42:09-1:42:14). So, while Barbieland turns back to its regular carefree but contrived normal, Barbie chooses to leave and join the real world as a full-fledged human being. But before she makes this big decision, Ruth shows her what it truly means to be a woman. The slideshow she shows Barbie features girls and women of all ages in mostly happy moments of their lives, encompassing the idea of girlhood and womanhood. These short videos ignore any negative sides of being a woman in the real world, even though Barbie was already exposed to such things. Furthermore, the first thing we see her do as a human being is to go to the gynecologist, which is an inherently uncomfortable female experience. The movie chooses to keep its ending lighthearted, emotional, and uplifting, even though there are real concerns for women in the real world.

5. Conclusions

Much is expected from a plastic doll and all of its reiterations in popular culture. Barbie dolls were called whores, consumerist propaganda, overly sexualized, vapid, performative feminists, etc. Even so, Barbie is an icon, for better or for worse. Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* was expected to be a beacon of feminism or an insipid tale of a doll that we heard many times over. In my view, *Barbie* does not try to redefine Barbie, but it recontextualizes the doll and its

characteristics in society today. Barbie has changed over the sixty-year career she had. The *Barbie* movie captures these changes and the hiccups along the way, even if the movie relies on a more light-hearted tone. But is it really Barbie's place to lecture us about feminism? Feminist theory and concepts have evolved over the decades in which Barbie has been part of our society. She was created before the second wave of feminism, and, with each new ideology and paradigm shift, she tried to adapt. Her style and body could be viewed as a net negative but is it only that?

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* breathes life into the plastic world of Barbies, pointing out that even Barbieland, a place where patriarchy does not exist, was designed within the patriarchal system of the real world. As such, Barbie can never escape some characteristics that come from patriarchy. For example, the beauty myth still prevails when it comes to femininity, not only in Barbie's world, but in reality as well. Moreover, Barbie is stuck between an infantilized and an adult role. She looks like a grown woman, but she is a product aimed mostly at children, so large parts of being an adult woman could never be represented by Barbie. That is why the heavily pregnant Midge looks so uncanny and why Growing Up Skipper's expanding breasts make us uncomfortable. Judith Butler claims that gender is performance (see Butler, 2002, p. 33), and Barbie's performed hyperfemininity is femininity and beauty at its most plastic. Her unwavering smile and good mood, the focus on perfection in her day-to-day life, her style, and looks that align with the beauty standards all point towards a very specific version of womanhood, engrained within the doll (both in the movie and the product). Thus, Stereotypical Barbie's decision to step out of Barbieland also means the end of this performance of hyperfemininity. Stereotypical Barbie finds more meaning in the beauty of an aging woman and of changing bodies and finality, freed from the endless youthful monotony of a doll's fate.

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