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## Faux Feminism in a Capitalistic Fever Dream: A Review of Greta Gerwig's Barbie (2023)

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# Faux Feminism in a Capitalistic Fever Dream: A Review of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023)

## Introduction

Barbie, a feminist icon, or the greatest candy-coated long con of all time? To attempt to answer this, we must step into the minds of Mattel's marketing machinists and the producers of the box office hit film *Barbie*. Reluctantly, we must also hitch a ride in the pastel Corvette (and the rocket ship, the tandem bike and the jet boat) to Barbie Land, a nauseating neon acid trip where Barbies rule in matriarchal fashion and Kens are essentially second-class citizens. Greta Gerwig's directing is an earnest attempt to tap into the cultural zeitgeist of a post #MeToo movement and spark overdue discourse on female subjugation disguised as cultural norms. A scan of giddy social media commentary suggests this attempt may have been a successful one. "The barbie movie was good but what's better is seeing men squirm bc [sic] they can't handle seeing fictional men being treated like women" (Mitchell 2023) posts one satisfied female viewer.

Just like the unbounded potential of her real-world plastic muse, depending on her fabulous attire, Barbie is all things. She is a doctor, a pilot, and a President, and even serves on the Supreme Court, as *all* the justices, thus breaking away from traditional gender stereotypes. Ken, on the other hand, serves simply as Barbie's unrequited paramour. The film opens with the line, "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him." Ken's subservience and eagerness to please as a subplot to the lead character's greater ambitions of self-discovery is deeply unnerving. It is supposed to be. After all, this uneasiness is born from the realization that this is simply a borrowed and well-worn trope that moviegoers have witnessed since the dawn of film, only in reverse. Here, we witness a man's naïve satisfaction with his supporting role. Ken is strapping and shirtless for most of the film and we watch as the female lead looks through him with an air of indifference. "She's everything. He's just Ken," reads the film's tagline, and in the spirit of this, his narrative journey will remain inconsequential to this paper.

We structured our review to first delve into "The Globalized Idealization of Stereotypical Barbie" within its socio-cultural context, examining the traditional doll as an idealized White female archetype. Next, we explore the "'You Can Be Anything' Myth" and Mattel's original mission statement for Barbie as a feminist icon, comparing it to the unattainable body standards it historically normalized.

"Fashionista Barbie Dolls" are then introduced as "An Attempt to Deconstruct Embedded Beauty Ideals," whereby we analyze Mattel's recent efforts to keep up with evolving beauty standards and market a more inclusive representation of womanhood.

We critically scrutinize "Barbie's Problematic Positioning as a Feminist Film," highlighting the film's ambition to enter feminist discourse, while illustrating its tendency to minimize issues related to sexuality, violence against women, and gender politics. Finally, in "Reconciling Mattel's Commercial Interests with *Barbie* as a Patriarchal Disruptor," we evaluate female roles in Hollywood in the context of Mattel's profit motivations and its strategic attempt to right the wrongs of its past.

We conclude our paper by exploring a fundamental question: Is Barbie a feminist film? We aim to shed light on the multifaceted transformation of Barbie and the critical dialogues it has sparked surrounding feminism, body image, societal ideals, and aspirations.

## **The Globalized Idealization of Stereotypical Barbie**

For Mattel, this film was an endeavor 64 years in the making. The toy company has made previous ill-fated attempts at bringing its best-selling doll to the big screen. However, in the pursuit of protecting its brand, it was met with one ineliminable problem: the stinging reality of Barbie's baggage.

Since her advent, Barbie has faced criticism for promoting unrealistic body standards and an inherently racist depiction of beauty. Her creator, Ruth Handler, modeled Barbie's bodily proportions after a German doll named Lilli. Not a doll intended for children, Lilli was an escort, marketed as a bachelor party gag gift (Rhodes 2016). Introduced to the market in 1959, Barbie was targeted at children, but just like Lilli, her depiction was Caucasian, thin, and featured blonde hair and blue eyes (Jones 2008). In the 2023 film, this foremost iteration of the doll is brought to life by actress Margot Robbie and is labeled "Stereotypical Barbie."

While numerous instances can be cited, the creation of Barbie stands as a significant milestone in the establishment of narrowly defined beauty ideals within a wider cultural and historical context. This constructed notion of Western beauty and femininity, as posited by Taylor (1999), has "racialized beauty" (p.17). It has essentially defined beauty in terms of White features and characteristics, predominantly aligning with the physical attributes associated with White individuals (Cavusoglu and Atik 2022). These notions of Whiteness typically feature a lighter complexion while emphasizing thinness as a central component of the female beauty ideal (Mussell, Binford and Fulkerson 2000).

The international reach of the stereotypical Barbie was notably catalyzed by the globalization of American cinema, as women worldwide became more routinely exposed to these ideals, profoundly influencing perceptions of female beauty (Cavusoglu and Atik 2023). The beauty industry harnessed the power of Hollywood celebrities to endorse its cosmetic products, utilizing films, television advertisements, and sponsored game shows as channels to proliferate the demand for the stereotypical Barbie aesthetics (Basten 2008). The confluence of globally disseminated Barbie dolls, Hollywood movies, and fashion magazines played a pivotal role in shaping ideals that emphasized features such as a narrow face, high eyebrows, large, round, light-colored eyes, high cheekbones, thin nose and lips, and straight hair (Cunningham et al. 1995; Kim 2010). For instance, Hollywood movies like "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (Hawks 1953), starring Marilyn Monroe, epitomized the ideal of a thin waist, large breasts, blonde hair, and blue eyes.

Although the film does include a diverse cast of supporting characters (such as Asian, Black, and curvy Barbies), it is insufficient at promoting true inclusivity as the two lead characters are White. In the film, we are also introduced to "Weird Barbie" (now available for purchase, of course), a disfigured version of the doll who is said to have experienced a "tough life" of abuse at the hands of her previous owner. She is the oldest Barbie cast member, with short, spiky hair, a marked face, and legs stuck in a permanent split-leg position. Weird Barbie is labeled a social outcast and is a source of comic relief, raising questions about how society views people who have unique appearances or disabilities, particularly as a result of previous traumatic experiences. The stigmatization that these features make her "weird" may perpetuate ableist discrimination and further the belief that those with typical appearances and abilities are superior.

As a cultural icon, the stereotypical Barbie stands as a tangible representation of this complex interplay between beauty ideals, racialized standards, and their profound impact on societal perceptions of femininity.

## **The 'You Can Be Anything' Myth: Unpacking Societal Realities and Aspirations**

One of Mattel's earlier marketing slogans for Barbie was "We can do anything, right Barbie?" and echoed the message of its creator, Handler, who wrote in her autobiography that despite its criticism, she always believed Barbie represented the idea that a woman had choices (Handler 1994). In their purest form, Barbies intended to teach girls they could be anything, but what else were Barbies teaching them?

Barbie's transition from a symbol of empowerment to one of oppression is well-documented. In 1963, Mattel sold a teenage Barbie doll that included a book accessory with an unambiguous title: "Don't eat" (Dockterman 2019). With her almost cartoonish proportions, Barbie's waist (relatively speaking) is nearly eight inches smaller than a sampled group of anorexic patients, and with her BMI, she would likely not be capable of menstruation (Maine 2000).

Early on, filmmakers toyed with casting Amy Schumer to portray Barbie, a comedian who made a career out of self-deprecating fat jokes but later denounced *Glamour Magazine* for slapping her with a plus-size label. "I go between a size 6 and an 8," Schumer (2016) retorted on Instagram. "Plus size is considered size 16 in America." Schumer's argument was salient because if she were to represent plus-sizes, then most American women would slide off the scale and essentially be rendered obsolete.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Schumer left the *Barbie* project, later citing "creative differences" and stating that the film no longer felt "feminist and cool" (Sharf 2023, citing Schumer).

Instead, the filmmakers settled on Robbie as their lead and were forced to break the fourth wall to acknowledge their failure at casting someone who could be taken seriously while saying, "I'm not pretty anymore. I'm not 'stereotypical Barbie' pretty." The narrator (Helen Mirren) interjects by saying, "Note to the filmmakers: Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point."

What were impressionable young women to make of Robbie declaring herself less than pretty? Did her prettiness matter? In one pivotal scene, the filmmakers attempted to convince us it did not. It occurs after Barbie spirals into an existential crisis, fighting intrusive thoughts of death as she finds cellulite on her legs and her famous arched feet suddenly become flat.

With the encouragement of Weird Barbie, she ventures into the Real World with tagalong Ken, still inconsequential, at her side. Less paradisiacal than patriarchal, it is here, in our world, under the leering eyes of predatory men, that she begins to have a series of epiphanies. Barbie sits at a bus stop and stares at a grey-haired woman whose face is etched with the lines of a life well-lived. After an anguished moment, Barbie declares: "You are beautiful".

With these words, the writers triumphantly expand the narrowly defined scope of beauty, hoping we would look past this less-than-rosy moment in its storytelling. The subtext is clear: beauty matters.

## **Fashionista Barbie Dolls: An Attempt to Deconstruct Embedded Beauty Ideals**

Over time, public sentiment toward Barbie shifted as consumers felt Mattel was marketing a deceptive message that women could do anything, provided they looked like Barbie. In 2020, Mattel introduced the 'Fashionista Barbie' doll line in a concerted effort to diversify deeply ingrained beauty ideals and the long-standing image of the stereotypical Barbie (Rhodes 2016). By offering a range of body types, skin colors, and hair textures, and including a doll in a wheelchair and another with the skin condition, Vitiligo, Fashionista Barbie dolls were produced as an attempt to acknowledge the inflexible beauty standards that have been embedded in our society and sought to deconstruct them by redefining what it means to be beautiful (Dockterman 2019).

In 2021, the introduction of the "Barbie: You Can Be Anything" series further amplified this message by showcasing diverse role models engaged in various activities and highlighting their achievements. This series aimed to reinforce the idea that rigid, conventional norms should not constrain an individual's potential.

The introduction of Fashionista Barbie and the "You Can Be Anything" series marks the first genuine bid by Mattel to enter a broader conversation aimed at dismantling societal norms around beauty, body image, and diversity. While the introduction of these diverse body types represented a positive stride towards promoting body diversity in children's toys, it is crucial to acknowledge certain failures. Notably, both the tall and petite dolls continued to depict remarkably slender body proportions. Even the curvy Barbie, with her fuller figure, fell short of accurately representing the average American woman's body.

To provide context, the tall Barbie would approximate 5'11" with a US size 2 on hips, while the petite Barbie stood at 4'11" with a US size 0 waist and size 2 hips. In contrast, the curvy Barbie was around 5'6" with a US size 4 waist and size 6 hips, whereas the average American woman stands at 5'4" and, as referenced earlier, is a size 16 (Christel and Dunn 2017). Given these size proportions, the central question persists: Does the line of Fashionista Barbie dolls truly exemplify a more realistic and wide-ranging version of what most women see when they look in the mirror?

Unfortunately, although these dolls tried to deconstruct the notion of idealized beauty, a clear preference for thinness, as seen in stereotypical Barbie dolls, highlights the challenging nature of changing these ingrained beauty ideals (Cavusoglu and Atik 2023).

A study utilizing Mattel's Fashionista Barbie dolls as stimuli found that within a sample of girls aged 3 to 10, there was a pronounced inclination towards more negative attitudes directed at the curvy Barbie doll, juxtaposed with more favorable attitudes exhibited towards dolls characterized by slimmer body sizes and shapes, specifically the original, tall, and petite dolls (Harriger et al. 2019). The curvy Barbie was identified as the least preferred choice for play, underscoring the deep-rooted social preference for thin bodies and an aversion towards larger bodies among young girls.

This raises a second question: Does the Fashionista Barbie line genuinely aim to deconstruct beauty ideals and instill the message in young girls that they can be diverse and unique? Or is it a strategic move by Mattel to expand its market and enhance profitability rather than democratize the market (Atik et al. 2022)?

The answer, as it often is with commercial consumer products, lies in a complex interplay between profit motives and social progress, prompting a broader discussion on the commercialization of body image and self-esteem. Unfortunately, simply making body-diverse dolls available may not be sufficient to counteract distorted beauty ideals (Harriger et al. 2019).

### ***Barbie's Problematic Positioning as a Feminist Film***

Gerwig and Robbie, who seemed intent on tackling the more problematic aspects of Barbie, have both been quoted as saying this was "most certainly a feminist film." However, interestingly, Mattel has rejected the description (Ferguson and Freri 2023).

Fifty years ago, a British film theorist, Laura Mulvey, wrote an essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she effectively posited that women were seen as less useful in a narrative than they were as an adornment of it. The term "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975) was henceforth coined, and it is fair to say that Hollywood leaned in. Whether positioned as Bambi-eyed love interests or leather-clad femme fatales, women are rarely cast for more than an object of heterosexual male desire.

Although Barbie is the star of the film, her role as an object of male attention is a central theme, reinforced by Ken's unrelenting infatuation with her, Mattel's feverish need to control her as a money-making enterprise (both on and off the screen), and the unwanted harassment she receives from men while in the Real World.

As Barbie rollerblades down California's Venice Beach, she encounters unwelcome whistles and comments from men about her appearance and attire, to which she states feeling "ill at ease..." and



references an "undertone of violence." Despite the disturbing reality that one in five women report being raped at least once during their lifetime (CDC 2010), this line is written and delivered as a humorous quip. Ken smugly responds by saying he feels no such sense of violence.

After the film's release, Greta Gerwig told Rolling Stone Magazine it was "fascinating" to see how fans who witnessed the filming of this rollerblading scene displayed a different attitude towards Robbie than to Ryan Gosling, who played Ken. "People would go by Ryan, high-five him, and say, 'Awesome, Ryan, you look great!' And they wouldn't actually say anything to Margot. They'd just look at her. It was just surreal. In that moment, she [Robbie] did feel self-conscious" (Hiatt 2023, citing Gerwig).

Within the scene, a group of construction workers say to Barbie, "If I said you had a hot body, would you hold it against me?" and "Baby, you are an angel. I can see myself in your shorts", to which Barbie retorts "I don't have a vagina. He doesn't have a penis. We don't have genitals."

The film's conclusion, with Barbie's transition into a human and her subsequent gynecologist visit, introduces a thought-provoking but contentious element to the storyline. This decision culminates the recurring theme of dolls lacking genitals, suggesting that Barbie only acquires them when she opts for human existence. While some might argue that the scene aims to underscore the significance of reproductive health and broach a typically taboo topic, others may interpret it as reducing a woman's identity to her genitalia. This raises questions about whether the film, in its attempt to provoke discussion, inadvertently perpetuates gender stereotypes by emphasizing anatomical aspects above other facets of identity and agency. Furthermore, for those who identify as transgender, it highlights just another example of the film's exclusionary narrative.

To its credit, there is one unequivocal feminist delivery in this film, a monologue by actress America Ferrara. Here is an excerpt:

You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin... You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean... You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time... 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.

Its premise is worthy of applause; however, it loses its potency when you realize it is simply a more sanitized version of a heralded feminist rage poem written by Camille Rainville (Rainville 2017), and powerfully delivered by actress turned activist, Cynthia Nixon (Nixon 2020):

Be a lady they said. Your skirt is too short. Your shirt is too low...

Don't be a temptress. Men can't control themselves...Don't be a whore...Don't be a prude... Smile more. Don't be so emotional. Fold his clothes. Cook his dinner. Keep him happy. That's a woman's job.

You'll make a good wife someday. Take his last name. You hyphenated your name? Crazy feminist. Give him children. You don't want children? You will someday...

Don't get raped... Don't get drunk. Don't smile at strangers. Don't go out at night. Don't trust anyone. Don't say yes. Don't say no.

Just 'be a lady' they said.

While the film's writers adopt similar cadence and messaging, Rainville's poem is arguably more unflinching in its presentation of the violent and grave concerns women face.

Barbie is neither a frivolous romp nor a noble dissertation on feminism. Fresh off a nouveau feminist #MeToo movement, where a baseline definition of "the patriarchy" (Anyangwe and Mahtani 2023) sadly needed to be published for a generation of neophyte libbers, the film's biggest crime is that it failed to find footing in either camp. It instead presents as a sexist sleight of hand, mimicking feminist ideologies while repeatedly undermining its own message about gender politics.

## **Reconciling Mattel's Commercial Interests with *Barbie* as a Patriarchal Disruptor**

Behind the scenes, *Barbie* marks a refreshing departure from the patriarchal scenes it depicts on screen, with Gerwig becoming the only woman with sole directorial credit to enter the billion-dollar club (*Barbie* was the highest-grossing film of 2023, crossing the \$1.4 billion mark at the global box office). She co-wrote the film with Noah Baumbach, but her producers were an even gender split, inclusive of Robbie.

Although there has been some momentum in affirmative action in Hollywood, women still represent the minority. A recent study reports that just 33% of films in 2022 featured female protagonists, up only two percentage points from the previous year (Lauzen 2023a). It should come as little surprise that women's on-screen presence is underwhelming, with

the same author publishing a separate study showing that more than 80% of films are still financed and directed by men (Lauzen 2023b). This scarcity of female voices tends to lead to an on-screen mirroring of gender roles as the patriarchy sees them, reinforcing a yawning chasm between passive femininity and active masculinity.

With women at the helm, Barbie jumps headlong into conversations surrounding femininity and the pressures of female perfection. It was an ambitious undertaking considering this was essentially a feature-length toy commercial.

Mattel's earnings for *Barbie* include 5% of the film's billion dollars in box office revenue, a portion of the overall profits as a producer on the movie, and additional royalties as owner of the Barbie IP portfolio (Stewart 2023). These numbers do not include the staggering profit hike still being seen in the sale of new and old Barbie products. Mattel's CEO Ynon Kreiz believes gross billings from Barbie will total more than \$125 million this year alone.

Mattel achieved much of this success through carefully crafted self-mockery portrayed on screen. For example, Mattel is run by Will Ferrell, and the entire brains trust responsible for marketing female dolls to young girls is made up of men.

Ken, in the Real World, asks a man in a suit how he can get a job in an office. Ken is surprised to hear that being a man will not help him. The filmmakers are clearly referencing the recent pressure on corporate America to close the pay gap between men and women and address the "glass ceiling," a metaphoric barrier to professional advancement for women and minorities. "We're actually doing patriarchy very well..." the man tells Ken, before lowering his voice and adding, "we're just better at hiding it." The unintended consequence of this delivered line is that it appears to have revealed Mattel's own trickery at play. At its core, *Barbie* is undisputedly an advertisement for a socially problematic doll. By simply acquiescing and poking self-deprecating fun at its economic motivations and historically sexist undertones, Mattel attempted to get in front of the criticism, hoping its consumers would give the company a pass. If profits are the only indicator, it appears to have been a successful strategy.

## Concluding Observations

A film that includes musical interludes, campy dialogue, and a neon mise-en-scène is not typically the subject of a critical essay. Nevertheless, as *Barbie* entered *itself* into discussions about feminism, toxic masculinity, and corporate greed, it must be critiqued through this lens. The film purports to challenge the status quo, although it has been argued in this paper that both

the on and off-screen issues surrounding Barbie conversely perpetuate the status quo.

It is essential to commend the film for some progressive elements such as portraying Barbie as a character who embodies agency, determination, and a commitment to her goals. However, the question of whether it can be considered a "feminist movie" is a nuanced one.

It is unknown what backchannel negotiations looked like with *Barbie's* producers and what sacrifices to creativity were made to appease the Mattel board members. What we do know is that where commercialism and corporate-driven censorship exist, you can place a pretty pink bow on it, but a feminist magnum opus is unlikely to emerge.

Feminism encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs and values, and evaluating a film's alignment with this ideology is subjective. While some viewers may perceive Barbie as a feminist film celebrating female empowerment, we see problematic areas where the film could further challenge societal norms, representation, gender, and equality.

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