

FILM REVIEW

Barbie — reclaiming pink, pastels, and sparkles

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Barbie, Producers: David Heyman, Margot Robbie, Tom Ackerley, Robbie Brenner and others, Director: Greta Gerwig, English, 1hr. 54 minutes, July 2023.

The colour pink has undergone several generational shifts — from Barbie’s iconic branding, synonymous with fragile femininity, the rise of women’s empowerment movements and gay activism, to its current guise as androgynous and inclusive across sexual identities. Greta Gerwig’s highly anticipated film, *Barbie* (2023) has its audience once again immersed in Barbie’s world of plastic and pastels, but with a twist. Gerwig feeds on nostalgia to collaborate with Mattel’s legacy of globalising the elite American Dream with the aim of deconstructing the plasticity and “perfection” of Barbie Land. Whether this film was successful in its intention and execution in facilitating a wider debate on the ethical and moral factors in a changing landscape of gender justice requires more reflection.

Barbie (2023), set in Barbieland revolves around the life of the “stereotypical Barbie” (as she refers to herself and as others call her) played by Margot Robbie. Barbieland upholds a seemingly utopian life — a land ruled and governed by multiple Barbies (of different ethnicities, body types and personas) where their conventionally handsome male friends (all named Ken) are happy to become romantic accessories to the Barbies. The “fantastic” lives of the Barbies are disrupted by a breach between the human world (with its preoccupation with mortality) and the non-ageing pastel Barbieland when Barbie starts to think about Death. Accompanied by Ken (played by Ryan Gosling), Barbie goes to the human world to close this breach between the two worlds. Barbie and Ken experience the perils and beauty that come with life as a human. Barbie takes back with her, the beauty in the spectrum of emotions and perfections and Ken discovers patriarchy which he implements in Barbieland. Barbie’s trip back to Barbie Land, accompanied by her human

friends/owners results in her plan to bring Barbie Land back from anarchy — to rid her world of the infestation of a patriarchal system.

Life in plastic, is it fantastic?

Mattel globalised the American Dream of the “perfect” body, lavish lifestyle and their tagline, “You can be anything.” With India’s move towards liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation in 1991, Barbie became every little girl’s dream doll. Growing up with a Barbie was a privilege — the privilege of aspiring to live life just like Barbie. Even decades after her introduction in 1959, Barbie has been infamous for promoting damaging stereotypes of women, often creating a negative impact on children’s body image, understanding of femininity and sexuality, career options, and self-esteem. Gerwig’s cinematic recreation of the beloved, yet infamous, Barbie has subverted the idea of the lavish lifestyle and bodily “perfections” that the “stereotypical” Barbie itself represents. Barbie’s initial thoughts of Death signify the beginning of the death of the “stereotypical” Barbie that many have grown up with. Barbie is seen to be tired of her mundane life in plastic Barbieland — the beach parties, Girl’s Night, and synchronised dance routines. Soon after, “abnormalities” such as flat foot and cellulite on the “stereotypical” Barbie cause a great scandal in Barbieland, instigating a pursuit to get rid of her human-like flaws. Barbie embarks on her mission to get rid of her cellulite only to fall in love with the lines and wrinkles of the human body. Barbie’s journey to the world of human “flaws” not only brings out her awe of the beauty that lies in the natural phenomena of wrinkles and cellulite, characteristics that we have all feared or hated, but also a realisation of what Barbie truly represents in the Real World. Barbie’s eventual decision to stay in the Real World as a human being, to embrace all it has to offer, even cellulite, leads to her figurative death and rebirth as Barbara, bringing an end to the synthetic Barbie.

“Imagination, Life is YOUR Creation”

Gerwig redefines this line by Aqua in their song, “Barbie Girl” (1997) by transferring the imaginative power to Barbie. Barbie’s decision to become the person who does “the imagining” from the person who is “the idea”, takes control of her own identity from all male creators in the “phallus-shaped building”. This is signified by Barbie’s choice to shed her identity as Barbie to become Barbara — commemorating her human life with a trip to the gynaecologist. Prior to her existential transformation, the film repeatedly reminds the audience of the lack of

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genitals in Barbie and Ken, especially when Barbie is catcalled by men in the Real World. The lack of genitals in Barbie not only arouses displeasure amongst the men but it also encourages the audience to think of Barbie's life as devoid of imagination and sexual desires. This film leaps one step ahead to give agency to the "stereotypical" Barbie who chooses to continue her life in the mortal world of humans — to live life embracing her "abnormalities" and sexual organs. The finale, while leaving the audience with mixed reactions unravels the discomfort of talking and learning about women's reproductive health. Ending the film on an open note, Gerwig facilitates a larger conversation around the shame and taboo associated with talking about female genitalia.

Embracing the "glamour in pink"

Barbie, in its film and social media marketing, showcases diversity through its primary colour, pink. The racial diversity amongst Barbies and Kens reflects the diversity America proudly fosters — a black female Barbie President, an American Ken of East Asian descent, and a Latin American human aspiring for everything Barbie embodies. Gerwig's display of racial diversity amongst the lesser-known Barbies and Kens in relation to the "stereotypical" Barbie and Ken seems superficial. Furthermore, Gerwig's adaptation of a binary lens (despite three openly LGBTQ actors playing Barbie and Ken dolls) falls short of displaying diversity and inclusivity of gender identities. At a crucial time in the empowerment of women and gender-fluid, non-binary beings, feminist and LGBTQ movements are fighting for their rights,

encouraging inclusive language and understanding of the colourful spectrum. The Barbies representing women and men all cater to the heteronormative standards of a cisgender male and female. As this reviewer walked into a full-house theatre wearing pink, *Barbie's* social media marketing trends made it evident how the film has resonated with the mass audience — the rebranded Barbie as a symbol of feminist empowerment. While apparently embracing the feminist and queer movements, the film seems regressive in its inexplicably white and black (or blue and pink?) binary portrayal of gender identities.

Even with Mattel's launch of the gender-neutral Barbie in 2019, this collaborative project between Mattel and Warner Bros to "sell empowerment" makes me wonder if it is yet another desperate attempt to connect with the current times. The effort to stay "hip" was made very evident with Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice's remake of Aqua's song, *Barbie Girl*. Yet, despite Mattel's incessant marketing blitz shaping the aspirations of children, I could not resist the nostalgia that Greta Gerwig tempts us with. Momentarily transported into a world of sparkles, pastels, and laughter, I walked out of the theatre surrounded by young men wearing pink and assuring their female friends of their pro-feminist stand. On the one hand, it was heartwarming to see young men take this stance and while *Barbie* has successfully left a gentle reminder to embrace our imperfections, its lack of inclusivity and superficial display of diversity, makes me wonder whether its reclamation of pink has been truly subversive.

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