



Feeling Barbie: mothers, daughters, and white feminist genealogies

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Abstract

In Greta Gerwig's record-breaking blockbuster *Barbie*, feminism is popular and popular culture is feminist: the film engenders a plethora of commentary on the (feminist) present. It deploys a narrative of feminist generations as Barbie's quest for true womanhood (a vagina!) is set in motion by a mother–daughter conflict. Our contribution critiques *Barbie*'s intergenerational feminist nostalgia and its sentimentalising of white feminism. We show how, despite its nods to diversity and inclusivity, *Barbie* reinforces Anglo feminist genealogies with a penchant for girlhood play, for biologist notions of womanhood, and for mainstream, neoliberal feminist ideas and contemporary popular feminism. The doll thus becomes a vehicle for pop culture empowerment that bolsters the heteronormative American family and the romance of matrilineal feminist relations.

Keywords

Barbie, mother–daughter relationships, popular feminism, sentimentality, whiteness

This brief article maps the sentimental deployment of intergenerational feminisms and feminist temporalities in Greta Gerwig's blockbuster film *Barbie* (2023). We argue that the film's 'emotional ties [to feminism]' (Chamberlain, 2017; Evans and Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021) are established through a ludic engagement of patriarchy and gender binarism. The plastic doll's 'biopic' revolves around the quest to preserve

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Barbie Land from Ken's takeover and to save the Barbie doll from irrelevance in contemporary feminist discourses. We circumscribe the film's affective labour with regard to its sentimental appropriation of feminist tropes and ideas in three short instalments (for an extended argument, see Gerund and Schaefer, forthcoming): the film's pop feminist 'pink-pilling' of auteur cinema and of popular culture; its nods to the 1950s and to second-wave feminism; and its usage of white tears and of matrilinear reconciliation.

Barbie toys with the contemporary feminist moment through a plethora of film quotations and their feminist rewriting, all presented in a deliberately playful, tongue-in-cheek mode. Staged in a production design that, according to Gerwig, presents an 'authentic artificiality' (cited in Aguirre, 2023), the story appropriates the male Hollywood tradition to tell the doll's life story, most obviously the science fiction classics *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, 2021). The first two minutes of *Barbie* replay *2001*'s 'Dawn of Mankind' and its grandiose score of Strauss' 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' but where *2001* has apes in a wasteland discover the usage of bones as tools, Gerwig has little girls interrupted by the arrival of a colossal Barbie. The doll frees girls from playing mothers and gives them licence to imagine being anything they want. The Zarathustra theme returns when Ken has his own grand discovery of manhood, but in an updated digital version (00:30:25–00:31:40). With this quoting in narrative and in sound, the film attributes Barbie (and Ken) monumental status in the history of humankind. And conversely, just like *The Matrix*'s Neo, we see Barbie shattering her bubble and setting off to an adventurous quest narrative when she takes her own 'red pill,' i.e. the Birkenstock sandal. Her fight against her own deformity involves fundamental doubts: over and over, she asks, with Billie Eilish, 'What was I made for?'

Hence, the title character's sentimental journey towards 'feeling (right)' lays bare the gendering of humanity in *2001* and *The Matrix*, and asks, in a feminist poise, what it takes to grow into 'true' womanhood as Barbie abandons her doll life. Throughout the story, Barbie meets and debates with her creators and puppeteers, including Gloria (the woman who plays her), Ruth Handler (her inventor), and Mattel (i.e. the corporation's all-male board). Barbie's refusal to be silenced and get back into the sales box as well as her embrace of a 'sad, weird' (00:52:42) but at least human persona have what we would describe as a pop feminist pink-pilling effect: in seeing the world through Barbie's eyes, viewers recognise the patriarchy at work in the film industry, reiterated at the 2024 Academy Awards and Ryan Gosling's 'seriously silly' audience-engaging performance of 'I'm Just Ken' (Kornhaber, 2024). The pink-pilling also works through *Barbie*'s play with the pop culture archive in Ken's knockoff sentimental journey. His 'discovery' of patriarchy parades late 20th-century white US masculinity: Ken gets to play cowboys and horses, don *Rambo* coats and humvees, browse the high school library's well-stacked shelf to read about horses, sports, and wars, and enjoy Brewsky Beer from tiny fridges.

Barbie taps into the contemporary phenomenon of what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: 2) describes as feminism's threefold 'popularity': Gerwig shows feminism's ubiquity, its embattled stance, and most importantly its mainstream acceptance. The story deploys female direction, girls' play, and the authority of Barbie Land as laboratory for the (post-)feminist present. In doing so, the plot offers an emotional experience for

reconciling mothers and daughters and for shaping an intergenerational feminist coalition. The pasts *Barbie* draws from and the empowered futures it gestures at are mapped onto the plastic doll's fate, because, as the voice-over tells us in the beginning, 'Barbie changed everything' (00:02:52). From its present-moment vantage point, the narrative looks back at the birth of Barbie in the 1950s and, as a side effect, also deploys second-wave feminist tropes. It shows us suburban bliss, 'family togetherness,' and versions of the 'happy housewife heroine' (Betty Friedan), in keeping with a 'nostalgia for a largely mythical family' that often dominates political and popular discussion (Coontz, 2016: 42, 374). In *Barbie*, the heteronormative family is upheld by mother-daughter relationships: between Gloria and Sasha, between Barbie and Ruth Handler, and, implicitly, between feminist generations, as the male partner/father figures remain on the sidelines. This storyline attributes crucial roles to childhood play, innocence, and familial happiness, touching a 'special sentimental nerve' through its reference to a cherished childhood toy (Cross, 2015: 3), thus connecting second-wave tropes to contemporary emotional economies.

Cinematically, Barbie's quest for restoring her own 'disfigured' body and finding peace of mind by healing the girl who plays with her is shown as telepathic sequences in two sepia-tint montages, complete with the sentimental repertoire of childhood play, abandonment, motherly love, and tears: in the first (00:31:42–00:32:34), we see a girl as she grows out of Barbie-playing age, throwing out her dolls and fleeing from parental affections. Later, this montage is repeated from a different point of view, uncovering that Gloria, the mother, is Barbie's puppeteer, and her dark feelings are related to motherhood and womanhood under patriarchy (00:53:06–00:53:31). Barbie's and Gloria's versions of femininity (and feminism) are criticised by Sasha, a spokesperson of Gen Z. Being rejected by this next generation of feminists reduces the doll to tears ('First I only got one tear, and then I got a bunch,' 00:43:52). Back home in Barbie Land, a disappointed Ken has his own grand moment in a five-minute ballad-cum-musical number about his 'blonde fragility' (1:25:37–1:30:55). Hence, both Barbie and Ken are connected to a version of the affective labour of 'white tears' and to 'white saviourism': when Barbie manages to state that '[b]y giving voice to the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under the patriarchy, [Gloria] robbed it of its power,' Sasha, the beloved daughter, feminist of the future, and Gen Z kid, shouts 'Hell yes, White Savior Barbie!' (1:16:44).

Thus, while Barbie and her player Gloria help each other to ascertain the survival of their fantasies and the existence of the contemporary post-feminist moment, neither the somewhat ironic take on white saviourism nor the post-racial fantasy of Barbie Land debunk the privileges and properties of whiteness: when Sasha finally agrees to support her mother and Barbie in their rescue mission, she acknowledges her feminist foremothers and validates white mainstream feminism of old with its post-feminist and consumerist popular culture reiterations as critiqued by contemporary thinkers (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

Barbie's sentimental development begins with the helper figure's task to fix the relationship between Gloria and Sasha (in order to save her own doll body and mind from cellulite and thoughts of death), and it culminates when she becomes her own, feeling,

human being. As Barbie the character learns about white tears and meets her own maker/mother, the feminine idea(l) of Barbie the doll is rewritten as a (post-)feminist empowered womanhood—now equipped with a vagina! In becoming a (biological) woman in the patriarchal Real World, Barbie trades iconicity and immortality for what is cast as the everyday life of women in a present shaped by heteronormativity, patriarchal power, and gendered double standards. At first glance, Barbie's choices (refusing to get back into her box, literally and metaphorically; naming herself while acknowledging her mother; starting a new life) signal empowerment: after all, she moves from a pink pseudo-feminist utopia into a patriarchal reality that is far from being unmade by the advances of (popular) feminisms. Yet, as our closer look at the film's use of sentimental props, narrative strands, sepia aesthetics, and musical cues reveals, its superficial feminist politics are not the big liberation promised by the opening.

Among the many failures of *Barbie*, its salience in intergenerational feminism is particularly striking. Despite its gesturing at intergenerational feminist reconciliation and at feminist genealogies, *Barbie* does not even bother to envision structural change. Instead, it thrives on individual plight and fulfilment: the doll saves *one* woman in the Real World, she is the *only* doll to turn human, and her sentimental journey is safely contained within an affirmative use of masculinist Hollywood film history. The film's nostalgia for mainstream second-wave feminism, and its romanticised mother–daughter relationships (Gloria/Sasha, Barbie/Ruth), capitalizes on sentimentality to sell a generational teleology of (feminist) progress to its audience, and to defend the continued relevance of playing Barbie—for women of all generations—in the face of ongoing real-world struggles for equality.

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