

Up-Cycling Barbie: "Bad Feminism" for Mixed-Up Times Suzanne de Castell¹ and Jen Jenson² ¹Simon Fraser University, Vancouver BC Canada ²The University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC Canada jennifer.jenson@ubc.ca decaste@sfu.ca

Abstract This paper explores both the critical and the contradictory ways 'gender' is enacted in what has become a blockbuster at once wildly popular, and as well a site of controversy and censorship. Examining the reporting on and reviews of the film *Barbie*, providing some of the actual history of its design, as against its narrative re- presentation in the film, looking in particular at its ironic remediation of gendered games and play, the paper also identifies some of the cinematic techniques through which the movie reinvents Barbie as a filmic feminist, through a deconstructive and reconstructive upcycling of the iconic material Barbie en plastique. The director's embrace of an explicitly feminist narrative re-frames a 60-year-old doll and upcycles Barbie for a new generation, reaching an unprecedented global audience with its diverse, inclusive casting, its satirizing of patriarchy and a passionately feminist speechifying moment that couldn't happen nowadays across an increasingly litigation- sensitive academy, yet has gained astonishing traction in popular media, and enthusiastic re-citation in TikTok. Those commitments, however, sit uncomfortably with the Mattel Toy company's embrace of a new market for a product at risk of obsolescence from a generation of mothers raised on one or another 'wave' of feminist thought, and the considerably different versions of feminism that the film avows, and those it enacts.

Keywords: Barbie, Feminisms, Gender, Media

Figure 1 All images are screenshots of promotional material /?p?sik(?)// verb gerund or present participle: upcycling reuse (discarded objects or material) in such a way as to create a product of higher quality or value than the original. (Oxford Languages)

1. Introduction How many of us harbor memories of dismembering our dolls, hacking off their hair, positioning them in compromising postures? What does it mean that so many of us have memories like this? ¹In 1999, a paper in Jenkins' and Cassels' edited collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, began with those very same questions intended to interrogate the gender stereotypes that deeply inflected playthings designed for girls, paradigmatically, Barbie. When *The Barbie Movie*² re-introduced an old and nearly obsolete character, and

1 Re-Tooling Play: Dystopia, Dysphoria and Difference, Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson, p. 232, in "From Barbie to Mortal Combat", Justine Cassels and Henry Jenkins (Eds) MIT Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0347-y>

St James, Emily (2023) "Barbie and Ken and Nothing in Between" The New York Time Aug. 15, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/15/movies/barbie-transgender.html> Accessed Jan 5, 2024

Storyboard18 (2023) "Decoding Barbie movie's marketing blitz; Mattel spent \$100 mn on marketing" Quantum Brief. July 21, 2023. Available at <https://www.storyboard18.com/quantum-brief/decoding-barbie-movies-marketing-blitz-mattel-spent-100-mn-on-marketing-10731.htm> Accessed Jan.5, 2024

Torres, Libby (2023) "Behind-the-scenes photos show how the 'Barbie' travel montages came together without the use of CGI" Business Insider, July 25, 2023. Interestingly, many of the reviews shared by individual viewers make the same mistake: those who condemn the movie for its concluding portrayal of "emancipation" in Barbieland manage somehow to forget that Barbieland is precisely NOT the "real world", it's a world imagined in play, and the Barbies' imaginary political overthrow could not be more explicitly represented as a fantasy, no less than the ridiculous patriarchal fantasy of the Kens. Most frequently criticized is the negative,

stereotypical representation of men that reinforces traditional gender roles, (the same criticism that has for decades been levied against Barbie dolls), and the contradiction between impassioned feminist speeches, and the enactment of a decidedly unfeminist takeover of patriarchal Kendom by the newly emancipated Barbies, who promptly re-interpret emancipation as the resumption of their previous positions as girl bosses of Barbieland. Their superbly ironic promise to the kens is that in time they will have all the opportunities and privileges women enjoy in the real world. What most needs acknowledging is that there has never before been any such widespread public conversation about the gender formations and deformations engineered by Mattel's designs on girls' play, and brilliantly illuminated in this updated re-visioning of all things Barbie.

3. Barbie is, materially, the same doll, before and after the shift in its value. The object is the same; its context is what changes. And it is in precisely this way that director Greta Gerwig brilliantly deploys of both technical and narrative techniques to endow immutable plastic with plasticity. For the movie's many "travel" shots, Gerwig eschewed both location shoots and GCI in favour of what Production Designer Sarah Greenwood characterized as "theatrical methods of making things work" (Torres, 2023), using conveyor belts to move the settings backwards while the characters and vehicles stayed in place. Broaching that question requires moving beyond the film's literal feminist performances: its verbal repudiations of "patriarchy", the inspirational speechifying by America Ferrera, by "weird Barbie", and by Barbie herself, the motherly backstory performed by the film's Ruth Handler, and of course the very graphically performed racial and gender diversity.

5 Legal proceedings brought against Mattel by Lili's original makers, O&M Hausser, for copying Lilli in the design of Barbie, were settled out of court and the US toy giant bought Lilli's copyright in 1964. (Javaid, 2023)

6 Contrary evidence appears in one research study that found that "...girls who played with Barbie indicated that they had fewer future career options than boys, whereas girls who played with Mrs. Potato Head reported a smaller difference between future possible careers for themselves as compared to boys." Sherman, A.M., Zurbriggen, E.L. (2014) p. 195

120 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research

Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson of both Barbies and Kens, and, on the other side, portrayals of the overtly sexist abuse Barbie encounters once in the 'real world', the literal and figurative restraints placed on Barbie by the Mattel executive team to try and re-immobilize "Enlightened Barbie" in her cardboard packaging, the sexism of the newly patriarch-ified Kens and the reverse sexism displayed in the hostile Barbie takeover, as well as the fact that this takeover is accomplished entirely through the Barbies' strategic deployment of hyper-stereotypical "women's wily ways": flirting, seducing, rapt attention, indulgence, compliments and compliance ---all these evoke, display or perform, whether affirmatively, satirically or negatively, recognizably feminist ideas, aspirations and sentiments. The contrary position is taken by those who argue that a diversity of "window dressings" of the identical plastic doll is simply a. way to evade "the important correlation between multiple versions of Barbie and rampant capitalism that has for centuries subjugated women". (Gibson, 2023)

Whatever its director's intent, or its impact on audiences, the movie's intent---and result--- is profits for the Mattel toy company whose product, a doll now over 60 with a hitherto declining market, now boasts billions, with brand partnerships massively extending the doll's profitability. It's unlikely we've ever before seen a film whose production cost of 1.45 million is so closely matched by the 100 million Mattel invested in marketing it.

(Storyboard18, 2023) An even deeper, and far riskier, interpretive dive needs to be taken, though, beyond the recognition that feminism is being handily deployed by corporate capitalism to round up and re-engage previously alienated consumers of Barbie and to groom hitherto reluctant novices, in the process generating billions from ticket sales and streaming, and presumably even more from branding, product placement, and massive sales of plastic dolls, costumes, vehicles, clothing: the vast array of Barbie-associated commodities celebrating *La Vie en Plastique*. Leaving aside debates about whether that alone disqualifies Barbie from being a "feminist" movie, what hasn't received nearly as much critical attention, but needs to, requires plummeting down into the perilous depths of what feminism means and looks like when confronted with contemporary gender theories, policies and practices.² While none has been the cultural and financial blockbuster "Barbie" (2023), 40 Barbie movies were released between 2001 and 2022. <https://www.radiotimes.com/movies/barbie-movies-order/> 116 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson propelled her directly centre stage for a global culture, we recalled then revisited that old chapter, to reconsider its critical analysis of the culture and gender politics of Barbie decades ago, and to see whether and here that critique lands today, in the light of the cultural work this film has done. This paper is about Barbie's dramatic up-cycling, deconstruction, reconfiguring, and repositioning, asking what has changed in its wake. It's also about how director Greta Gerwig's re-visioning of this apotheosis of girls' toys represents feminism, in these mixed-up times³ when 'gender' becomes too often a flashpoint inciting often toxic ideological battles, instead of being a site where emerging conceptual and ethical challenges to traditional understandings get radical interrogation so that understanding is built, rather than bastions of conviction defended. Engaging in critical gender theory and research under such conditions can feel like walking on eggshells, neither knowing how, nor being courageous enough, preferring not to think very deeply nor indeed to say very much at all about 'gender'. And that makes this an important movie for gender researchers to take seriously. This film's audacious bravery in making people laugh while so directly, so literally, and so frequently indicting and ridiculing "patriarchy", is an impressive ideological takedown accomplished remarkably, if also problematically, with its counterpart, 'feminism', being scarcely heard. The Barbie movie has been banned in many places, and for many reasons: Russia (promoting morally degraded Western values); Algeria (damaging morals: "promotes homosexuality and other Western deviances"); Viet Nam (inclusion of a map of the North China sea displaying the "nine-dash line" used on Chinese maps to depict as Chinese territory a contested area considered by Vietnam its own continental shelf); Kuwait ("ideas and beliefs that are alien to the Kuwaiti society and public order."); Lebanon (contradicts "moral and religious values as well as the principles of Lebanon" and "promotes homosexuality and sexual transformation... sexual deviance and transsexuality"); initially banned but later released in United Arab Emirates (violating Islamic values); Saudi Arabia (inappropriate for its audiences: released later with LGBTQ+ content removed); reviewed/temporarily banned, then released in the Philippines (same contested map issue as Vietnam, released after request to Warner brother to blur the image); Pakistan (objectionable content, presumed to be LGBTQ+, released but to be censored "where deemed necessary", according to the Punjab Film Censor Board. <https://uk.movies.yahoo.com/barbie-movie-ban-list->

100541130.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlMnVbS8&guce_referrer_s
 ig=AQAAAF0 fvdAo1enLf2GQhaGul9XDcbO2azVXeAP6GQtsqclFGBD-
 ipfIUsvdsGT3GmE57uBmU6lO3fUqAU51QcSBqbw2Zu7lywt7S1Jr6RKM7MAkNtWoJePEsDvYWxqqmh9
 vmQM9PNK97 57 _S09Uaafg2kqmWrPBczrMc4wTdBAeTff Accessed Jan.5, 2024 Lord, M.G. (1994)
 "Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll," William Morrow & Co. New York McArdle,
 Tommy (2023) "Why Some Countries Are Banning the 'Barbie' Film from Playing in Theaters" Aug. 15,
 2023. People Magazine. Available at
[https://people.com/why-some-countries-are-banning-the-barbie-film-from-playing-in-](https://people.com/why-some-countries-are-banning-the-barbie-film-from-playing-in-theaters-7629284)
[theaters-7629284](https://people.com/why-some-countries-are-banning-the-barbie-film-from-playing-in-theaters-7629284) Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 Rowbotham, Sheila (1977) Hidden from history: 300 years of
 women's oppression and the fight against it. Pluto Press: London. Sherman, A.M., Zurbriggen, E.L.
 (2014) "Boys Can Be Anything": Effect of Barbie Play on Girls' Career Cognitions. More than two decades
 ago, we noted the designs of toys for girls "have had very little to do with what a woman wants, and
 everything to do with what is wanted from a woman". (op.cit. p 238). And because that intent continues
 to inflect both the doll and its play, while feminism has done a lot to upcycle Barbie, things haven't gone
 so well the other way. References Banet-Weiser, Sarah., Gill, Rosalind., & Rottenberg, Catherine.
 (2020). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill
 and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. Feminist Theory, 21(1), 3-24 Barbiemedia: "Barbie Careers"
<http://www.barbiemedia.com/home.html> Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 Booth, Molly Horton (2023) "How the
 2023 Barbie Movie Missed the Mark on LGBTQ+ Inclusivity" Gay Parents to Be. August 11, 2023
 Available at [https://www.gayparentstobe.com/gay-parenting-blog/how-the-2023-barbie-movie-](https://www.gayparentstobe.com/gay-parenting-blog/how-the-2023-barbie-movie-missed-the-mark-on-lgbtq-inclusivity)
[missed-the-mark-on-lgbtq-inclusivity](https://www.gayparentstobe.com/gay-parenting-blog/how-the-2023-barbie-movie-missed-the-mark-on-lgbtq-inclusivity) Accessed Jan.5, 2024 Castagnaro, Giulia (2023) "Barbie is
 queerer than you think" Gender GP. July 29, 2023 Available at
[https://www.gendergp.com/barbie-film-review-](https://www.gendergp.com/barbie-film-review-lgbtq/#:~:text=While%20the%20film%20does%20not,Alexandra%20Shipp%2C%20and%20Scott%20Eva)
[lgbtq/#:~:text=While%20the%20film%20does%20not,Alexandra%20Shipp%2C%20and%20Scott%20Eva](https://www.gendergp.com/barbie-film-review-lgbtq/#:~:text=While%20the%20film%20does%20not,Alexandra%20Shipp%2C%20and%20Scott%20Eva)
 ns.(Castagnaro, 2023) Once audiences are mostly on board in viewing the movie as a hilariously
 satirical re-visioning of a stereotypically gendered plaything (some of course condemning the film for
 overturning the gender order), they are well-prepared for its last laugh: "Real-World Barbie" in her final
 scene, waiting for an appointment with her gynaecologist. This concluding scenario suddenly relegates
 diversity and inclusion, represented by Non-Binary (previously gay-coded) Alan, Weird Barbie
 (deformed and dismembered by previous gender-non-conforming owners, her job is to restore damaged
 Barbies), the choice of Hari Nef, a trans actress, to play the role of Doctor Barbie, all back into a hyper-
 binarized world of "real" men and "real" women.⁷ Even though we all must know all kinds of people
 played with Barbies (like my gay brother who designed clothes and knit Barbie a sweater using diamond
 buttons and soft white fur from Rex, our dog), no queer families or trans folk or non-binary kids are
 playing with Barbies in the movie's "real world". Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 Cormack, Lucy (2023) "Sassy with
 a sidelong glance: Meet Lillli, Barbie's German inspiration". July 21, 2023. Sydney Morning Herald.
 Available at [https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/sassy-with-a-sidelong-glance-meet-lilli-](https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/sassy-with-a-sidelong-glance-meet-lilli-barbie-s-german-inspiration-20230719-p5dpo0.html)
[barbie-s-german-inspiration-20230719-p5dpo0.html](https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/sassy-with-a-sidelong-glance-meet-lilli-barbie-s-german-inspiration-20230719-p5dpo0.html) Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 de Castell, Suzanne and
 Bryson, Mary (1998) Re-Tooling Play: Dystopia, Dysphoria and Difference, pp. 232-261 in From Barbie

to Mortal Combat, Justine Cassels and Henry Jenkins (Eds) MIT Press. Gibson, Susie (2023) "Is the Barbie movie a feminist triumph or flop? Perhaps we could say that we are currently witnessing competing sensibilities and discourses that nevertheless overlap, draw on, yet push back, one against the other?" 117 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson Kens' collective transformation into "patriarchs" after discovering male privilege in the "real world", no less than the Barbies' collective emancipation into a powerful ruling class, are both comically extreme and naively child-like: patriarchy for Ken is about horses, Stetson hats and a boys' only playhouse that looks like a saloon; empowerment for the Barbies is about a top-down takeover, becoming "bosses" and subordinating the Kens. Unlike my friends (who had Barbies) I never abused "Baby Wet-ums," who in time, after what I must have imagined would be a respectable period of intense maternal guardianship, lay dusty on her flannel-sheeted metal bed. cit. 251). 119 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson escort girls to their proper place in the gender order, (op. cit, 232), Barbie accomplished a radical "re-tooling" of girls' play, transforming little girls from devotedly nurturing mothers into liberated career women: nurses and airline stewardesses and models and beach babes, then later doctors, pilots, astronauts, computer engineers and game designers. That technique, combined with caricature-ish hair and makeup and noticeable "stiffness" in boldly positioning and movement, manages to enable mobility while giving its characters a feeling of "thinginess" in a plastic world. Having characters acting against a retrograde backdrop supports the film's narrative premise that everything Barbie is and does, her identity and mobility, comes, not from the plastic doll in the foreground, but from the flesh and blood player in the background. Recognizing that the player is always more than the individual, a lot of this film's story details the conditions and experiences of how girls and women are powerfully impacted, in both their identifications and their opportunities, by the patriarchal capitalism of the "real world", including, of course, the kind of doll the kind of doll designed for girls to play with. Three Gender Studies academics have their say" Women's Agenda. Aug. 8, 2023. Available at <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/soapbox/is-the-barbie-movie-a-feminist-triumph-or-flop-three-gender-studies-academics-have-their-say/#:~:text=There%20are%20some%20progressive%20feminist,hate%20women%2C%20women%20hate%20wome> n. Accessed Jan. 5, 2023 Holcombe, Madeline (2023) "Barbie' movie's ending is an important reminder for women's health" CNN, July 26, 2023 Available at <https://cnn.com/2023/07/26/health/barbie-ending-explainer-gynecologist-wellness/index.html> Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 Javadi, Maham (2023) "Barbie's 'pornographic' origin story, as told by historians" May 26, 2023. That strong "mothers and daughters" theme is threaded throughout the movie, reprising both the Ruth and Barbie origin story, and the filmic ex-Barbie-playing mother and her feminist next-gen Barbie-repudiating daughter. From a corporate perspective, a darker intent of the Barbie upcycling project was, for Mattel Inc. ("We empower the next generation to explore the wonder of childhood and reach their full potential.") both to groom an emerging market at risk of mass-refusal, and to re-capture their mother's approval of a plaything widely castigated as damaging to girls' self-esteem and body image---and of its universe of associated commodities. "So I gave her beautiful breasts" That implicitly girl-powered

narrative—designing Barbie to enable girls to play out their aspirations for the future—only makes sense, though, if you bypass Handler and Mattel's full knowledge⁵ of Barbie's origins as a hypersexed comic strip character in Axel Springer's populist tabloid Bild, and then realized in plastic, as a 'jokey' sex toy for men. Breasts were always already 'given' to Barbie, long before Ruth Handler appeared on the scene, and not for the reasons Handler invokes. So beneath Mattel's persuasive rhetoric and plasticized embodiment of the idea that "Barbie" (and therefore her young owner/manager, no longer her 'mother') can be "anything!" Available at <https://www.insider.com/barbie-behind-the-scenes-photos-travel-shots-no-cgi-2023-7> Accessed Jan. 5, 2024

123 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson White, Abbey (2023) "Why 'Barbie' creatives and execs struggle to agree on whether the film is Feminist" The Hollywood Reporter. June 27, 2023 Available at <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/barbie-team-mattel-executives-barbie-movie-feminist-1235524678/> Accessed Jan. 5, 2024

Wood, Olivia (2023) "In the Symbolic World of the Deeply Gendered Barbieland, Allan is Nonbinary" Autostraddle, Aug. 9, 2023. While Barbara Handler was indeed involved in Barbie's origins, it was as a tourist in Germany in 1956, when she and Ruth saw a "Bild Lili" doll⁴ in a shop window, and brought home several to serve as prototype for Handler's pitch to Mattel for a new kind of doll. Ruth recognized in Lili an incarnation of the kind of doll she thought, quite rightly, would revolutionize girlish play, away from the kind of maternal relationship that had been paradigmatic of girls' play, between a young girl and her (sometimes both crying and peeing) baby doll in diapers and nightie, to a vicarious living out of a host of possible adult futures. I remember I cried the first Christmas I got a doll, a baby doll, from my parents. When they asked why I was crying I remember telling them I was "just so happy," when what I was, was terrified and appalled at the realization that this was what I was supposed—biologically supposed—to like. (de Castell & Bryson, Re-Tooling Play, p. 232) Ushering in a new "dystopia of gendered play", a ground-breakingly modernized "treachery of the toy purposely built, like the Princess phone or the Easy-Bake Oven, "just for you", those "special" feminized playthings that⁴ "Barbie," the paradigmatic "girl toy," was modelled on "Lili," a cartoon character, described by one Barbie biographer, M.G. Lord as a "pornographic caricature", that was subsequently developed into a 'sexy' German toy designed not for children but for adult men (op."If [Mattel] hadn't made that change to have a multiplicity of Barbies, I don't think I would have wanted to attempt to make a Barbie film ... I don't think you should say, 'This is the one version of what Barbie is, and that's what women should aspire to be and look like and act like.'" (Margot Robbie, star and producer of Barbie, The Movie, quoted in White, Abby (2023) Whether or not as Handler hoped, Barbie's multiplicity of occupations opened up wider dreams and aspirations for young girls, it would be reasonable to assume that Barbie's primary qualification for any job imaginable is her appearance. And that makes Barbie's vocational diversity more of an affirmation than a challenge to received⁸ Rosalind Gill notes, "It is clear that there's a real relationship between the media visibility of feminism and feminist energy and activism." "We mothers stand still so that our daughters can see how far they've come" says the Ruth Handler character, reprising the traditional narrative of maternal sacrifice. Apart from perhaps cryptically referencing Gerwig's deployment of theatrical techniques of moving the background while keeping the characters in

place that accomplishes the illusion of mobility, it's not at all clear from any other part of the movie what this commendation of "standing still" refers to--- Handler did not "stand still", nor indeed does "standing still" characterize most mothers' daily routines--and why maternal immobility is cast as a model of mothering is puzzling. Poking a bit deeper, we might propose that what Gerwig has accomplished-- getting millions of people worldwide finally not only hearing the word "patriarchy", but laughing at it, her skilful engineering of a massive captive audience compelled to listen to an impassioned speech about the everyday hardships and abuses and exclusions and exploitations women routinely endure--- undoubtedly the largest audience a speech of that kind has ever enjoyed, surely deserves kudos for exemplifying feminist activism with global mass-cultural reach. Strangely, neither that selective portrayal of 'reality', nor its specific "I'm here to see my gynaecologist" ending seem necessarily to make much of a dent either in the film's enjoyment, or in its gender-critical uptake. Both trans men and trans women are targeted by the film's concluding moment. 121 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson lives as humans are united by fundamental truths that supersede all of the false binaries we have constructed to imprison ourselves. "And the movie's conclusion makes completely clear that players of those more equal Barbies are the gender-normative ones, neither those who play "too hard" with their gender-restrictive plastic toys, nor those who embrace gender plasticity in their 'real world' identifications, whether or not they are candidates for a gynecology appointment. It's important to understand how media-mediated and popularized feminism can both advance and impede feminist ways, means and purposes. The Barbie movie does unprecedented cultural work in the name of feminism, and without doubt brings new ideas and new lenses on gender to a massive global media marketplace,⁸ but Ken gets most of the story, the Big Dance Number and the Big Song, and its story ends with biological sex being what affirms Barbie a "real woman". We'll examine the reporting on and reviews of the film Barbie, looking in particular at its ironic remediation of gendered games and play, and identifying some of the cinematic techniques and narrative tropes through which the film reinvents Barbie, the filmic feminist, through a deconstructive and reconstructive upcycling of that iconic Material Girl en plastique. This gender dysphoric play is the kind that produced "weird barbie", (incidentally played by queer actress Kate McKinnon) who lives outside the Barbie community in a very different- looking dreamhouse, with discontinued barbies as housemates. The losers, outcasts and rejects, interestingly enough, all get assigned "therapeutic" roles: Alan is the only Ken who refuses to join the patriarchy, tries to escape it, then helps the Barbies to regain their sovereignty. I am not saying there is 'one true feminism' - but I am struck again and again by which versions get to be seen and heard, and which remain marginalised." (Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). p. 16) 122 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson gender stereotypes, a re-iteration, through an upcycled preservation, of "girls' historically assigned locations in the gender order." (op. In the words of one commentator, "The doll's lack of genitals avoids othering any potential trans Barbie. In real life, anti-trans conservatives often use the concept of genitals to invalidate trans women's womanhood, as though women are solely defined by their body parts. However, in Barbie, this point of view is completely dismissed because the dolls do not have genitals.... While this might not have been intentional, the doll's lack of genitals also negates the assumption that all dolls are

supposed to mirror cis women. In fact, having a trans actress play one of the Barbie dolls showcases that the dolls' womanhood and femininity is not limited to cis women. The film demonstrates that trans women are part of womanhood."For example, the origin story of Weird Barbie, whose job is to repair other Barbies who are broken, is that she was permanently damaged by being played "too hard". So there is a right way of playing with Barbie that ensures she is not harmed, and that right way of playing shapes the kind of Barbie she will become in Barbieland—or whether she will live on its margins as a social outcast. For girls who could no more assume the position of 'teen model' than the position of 'mother', playing with a doll that has, by design, an 'agenda' like Barbie's is a major psychic challenge. Girls for whom grooming and dressing and dates with Ken meant radical gender dysphoria might well have had little choice but to resort to the hair cutting and extreme make up and positional exploration characterized as "playing too hard". Young girls' play with dolls becomes neither mothering nor, indeed, self-projection where girls imagine themselves as the Barbies they play with, but becomes, instead, a "set-up" of Barbie, stage-management, wardrobe, event planning.

5. Barbie the (Feminist?) Movie

Figure 4 In times of radical upheaval to discourses about gender, to the ways gender is spoken about and can be thought about, and lived out, entertaining any discussion focused on the very idea of gender can be perilous. In public media, and no less in academic, political and feminist discourses about gender, new lexical and grammatical imperatives and conceptual prohibitions make it hard to know how even to ask the so-obvious question "Is Barbie a Feminist Movie?"In both cases, play is mistaken for reality: the map is an entirely inaccurate kid's drawing meant to represent how children who play with Barbies might picture a far-flung world through which they might one day travel; and the range of sexualities presumed to be "promoted" is entirely unreal, and could not possibly be sexualities at all, since these are all plastic dolls notoriously lacking both genitalia and any sexual practice whatsoever. As for its gender order reversals, the 3 Catherine Rottenberg observes, "the feminist landscape is shifting so quickly these days. From Baby to Barbie Figure 3 As against the realpolitik backstory of womens' lot in the "real world", the backstory of Barbie, the plastic doll that real-world girls bring to life, is "Hidden from History", as feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham (1997) would say, in a cozy tale of Ruth Handler, co-founder and president of the Mattel Toy Company creating the very first Barbie doll (and naming it after her daughter, Barbara). This "hidden history" of Barbie gives a very different account of origins than the movie's heartwarming Ruth Handler narrative that brings mothering and corporate capitalism together.(Lloyd, 2023; McArdle, 2023) The main reasons given for banning the Barbie movie, then, have been two: first, the controversial map, depicting a child-like hand-drawing of part of the "real world" traversed in Barbie's travels, and second, its "morals and values", specifically the movie's depiction of a gender-inclusive (LGBTQ+) world in "Barbieland", and of an overthrow of the Kens' patriarchal gender order by the Barbies. The word "feminism" is never spoken in Barbieland, however. This paper explores the critical and the contradictory ways 'gender' is enacted in what has become a blockbuster at once wildly popular, and simultaneously a site of controversy and censorship, and whether and how Barbie's cinematic "upcycling" has indeed "created a product of higher quality or value than the original" op.cit). Re-Viewing Barbie While it's been with heady relief that some audiences have embraced this movie's ironic nostalgia for stereotypical gendered play, other viewers have expressed less favourable

sentiments, from boredom through disappointment to anger and even outrage. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/05/25/barbie-trailer-creator-pornographic-origin-doll/> Accessed Jan 5, 2024

Latson, Jennifer (2023) "The Barbie Doll's Not-For-Kids Origins" Time. March 9, 2015. Available at <https://time.com/3731483/barbie-history/> Accessed Jan.5, 2024

Lloyd, Albertina (2023) "Barbie: Which countries have banned the movie?" The word is spoken first in a voice over narration at the movie's opening, (as "the problem of feminism"), and a second time uttered, just once, by its "real world" barbie-disdaining daughter, whose mother's "divergent" play with Barbie resulted in the latter's intrusive (and ultimately transformative) thoughts of death, experiences of cellulitis, and flattened feet.⁶ lies the insidious reality that while replacing the paradigmatic Baby Doll effected a tectonic shift in girls' play, propelling it away from girls' cramped positioning as mothers and domestic servants---it did so only to reposition them within a new universe of subordination, one inspired no less by male fantasies of women's proper place. (St. James, 2023)

Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and professor of health policy and management, construes that conclusion as a vital reminder of the importance of women's health: "Having everyone see Barbie go to the gynecologist normalizes the experience. It solidifies the understanding that reproductive health is an integral part of overall health." This story's telling of how girl-power both drives and is supported by playing with Barbie, brilliantly accomplished by its director's innovative resuscitation of old school film

118 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research

Suzanne de Castell and Jen Jenson techniques, leaves out of account, however, the ways girls are not so much playing with as played by their Barbie dolls. Then there is the criticism that depicting Barbie in the "real world" being sexually harassed is not "realistic", somehow both overlooking that this is a satirical comedy, not a documentary--and forgetting that for many women, sexual harassment is an everyday real-world event. (Gibson, 2023).

What might be more approachably asked is "how does Barbie, the Movie perform feminism?". And what does that performance enact, which is to say, what impacts might this movie's "popular feminism" (Banet- Weiser et al., 2020) have on its audiences, and what does that display bring into being? It's a refusal and rhetorical reversal of an operating principle that feminism has fought for long and hard---that biological sex should not be a straightjacket, and that vastly divergent kind of sexual practice and gender expression are possible and deserving of respect. Available at <https://www.autostraddle.com/in-the-symbolic-world-of-the-deeply-gendered-barbieland-allan-is-nonbinary/#:~:text=In%20the%20Symbolic%20World%20of%20the%20Deeply%20Gendered%20Barbieland%2C%20Allan%20is%20Nonbinary&text=I've%20been%20thinking%20a,%2C%20and%20For%20gay.> These identifiable invocations and performances associated with critical feminist thought are also the kinds of examples audience reviews cite, whether disapprovingly or in solidarity. Since her initial launch in 1959 as a "teen model", Barbie has enjoyed more than 200 different careers (Barbiemedia, 2023)

Handler's doll re-design was indeed radical, just not in the ways we are invited to imagine. She describes the design of Barbie in a 1977 interview (Latson, 2023), "Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future" This meant Barbie needed breasts. One trans commentator writes, "The film's finale suggests that our 7 Trans men do of course also visit their gynecologist---but that medical

engagement doesn't signify their transformation into "real women". Certainly, the movie includes representational diversity both in its many version of Barbie and Ken, as well as in its casting of gender- and racially diverse actors. These two rationales for banning and censoring turn out to be based on an absurd conflation of dolls with people, children's drawings with geopolitical realities, and pretend play with real life. One take on how Barbie approaches the politics of gender conflates the plastic-ness of Barbie with an endorsement (though one that remains unspoken) of gender plasticity. Whatever position one takes on the sex/gender tradition, on binaries and continua, on malleability and identity, what the film is enacting here is a reversion to a pre-feminist heteronormative order. But I'm also troubled by which versions of feminism garner visibility – the largely white, heteronormative, corporate and neoliberal-friendly versions.²³⁴), because the stubborn fact remains that in playing with Barbie, girls are, in reality, playing with a doll modelled on a jokey sex toy designed for and sold to men, and they are exploring, experimenting, rehearsing and building their aspirations for the future on that material premise. Cheerfully generous interpretations as these are, the stubborn fact remains that the film's treatment of gender is regressive, and does not even begin to deal with the complications of contemporary gender policies and politics. Hari Nef's job as Dr. Barbie, and Weird Barbie's repair shop both involve 'fixing' impaired barbies. Mobility and Change in a Plastic World Figure 2 "Upcycling" requires movement and transformation, both of which are, on the face of it, impossible to accomplish in the medium of hard plastic which neither moves nor changes. The lesson here is that Barbieland's utopian freedom to be anything, and the Barbieverse's total embrace of diversity, depends upon plastic, not plasticity. In playing with a doll that actualizes men's sexual ideals young players are projecting and playing out their futures through male desires. How on earth to play with this diapered apparition into which you squeezed water on one end and mopped it up at the other? In this case, however, it's the fantasy of a saucy, scantily clad high-heeled good-time girl. Some Barbies are more equal than others, to echo George Orwell. Accessed Jan. 5, 2024 124 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research All excerpts from this paper appear here in italics. Motherhood is a central, if sometimes puzzling, theme of this film. Director Greta Gerwig's answer is a definite yes; others are not so sure. It's what it does with them that bears scrutiny. Inclusion, in Barbieland, means making yourself useful in a world where everybody else plays. When warm flesh takes over, there is no indeterminacy about gender's relation to biological sex. That's more than retro sentimentalism. Yahoo! Movies, Aug. 16, 2023. (Holcombe, 2023). cit. Sex Roles 70, 195–208. 2.4. To love, even. The Washington Post.