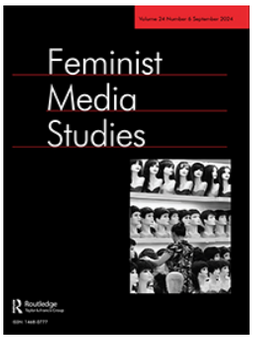

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"That reality-challenged woman": dreams and matter in *Barbie*

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ABSTRACT

This essay will explore some of the ambiguous interactions between imaginary spaces and material reality as articulated by *Barbie*, considering the implications for its understanding of womanhood. First outlining a series of oppositions between fantasy and reality, Barbie and "real women" in the film, I will then highlight the ways in which this binary framework is ultimately undermined. With reference to both media theory and trans theories of embodiment, I will argue that the film resists oppositions between imagination and reality in ways that are generative and progressive, yet which simultaneously serve to enhance the film's marketability.

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Materiality; hypermediacy; womanhood; trans theory; embodiment

Barbie constructs a diegetic world made up of two connected spheres, "Barbie Land" and "The Real World." They appear to be set in opposition to one another, with Barbie Land presented as a matriarchal dream world where every day is perfect. The Real World, on the other hand, subjects Barbie[1] to the humiliations of sexual objectification for the first time, and plants a confused idea of the patriarchy in Ken's mind. Yet, despite its drawbacks, Barbie ultimately yearns to transition into the complex materiality of the Real World, giving up the simplicity of the dream of matriarchy to experience life as a "real woman." In the film's final punchline, being a real woman turns out to mean not only contending with human complexity, but also the biological materiality of female genitalia, suggesting a potentially bio-essentialist conception of womanhood.

However, the film's dichotomy between dreamland and reality is an unstable one. Indeed, the two worlds are separated only by a "membrane" that is relatively easy to traverse for both humans and dolls. There is also a third space incorporated into the film, that of the extra-diegetic audience, addressed by the narrator, while intertextual references highlight the artificiality of the diegesis, reminding us that both Barbie Land and The Real World are a cinematic construct.

This essay will briefly explore some of the ambiguous interactions between imaginary spaces and material reality as articulated by *Barbie*, considering the implications for its understanding of womanhood. First outlining a series of oppositions between fantasy and reality, Barbie and "real women" in the film, I will then highlight the ways in which this

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binary framework is ultimately undermined, resisting any essentialist conception of both reality and women. With reference to both media theory and trans theories of embodiment, I will argue that *Barbie* resists oppositions between imagination and reality in ways that are generative and progressive, yet which simultaneously serve to enhance the film's marketability.

The narrative space of *Barbie* is structured around the contrasts and interactions between Barbie Land and The Real World. We first encounter this juxtaposition during the opening narration, as the narrator explains that the limitless opportunities available to Barbies have been "reflected back onto the little girls of today in The Real World." As the narration unfolds, we are shown an aerial map of Barbie Land: a pink-hued coastal neighbourhood surrounded by a glowing pink heart. An animated pink arrow pings across the screen to reveal a greyish satellite view of South Bay, Los Angeles, labelled "Real World." This striking visual contrast sets up the opposition between a joyful space of play and fantasy and a grittier, more subdued reality.

As the film progresses, the dichotomy between these two spaces is elaborated. Barbie Land is presented as a utopia for women, where Barbie "has a perfect day every day," as the narrator tells us. There are plentiful examples of its dreamlike unreality. It is not that Barbie Land is immaterial, but rather its material substances are free of real-world constraints and complications. Its bubble-gum pink houses have no walls, instead sporting slides down to shiny blue surfaces representing swimming pools. Indeed, nothing here is liquid: the pools and sea are solid, while the shower stream and breakfast milk are thin air. There is no mess, no clutter and everything has its place. The earthly laws of physics and gravity generally do not apply. Social systems are equally frictionless and easy; the President, for instance, does not appear to have much work to do to ensure the smooth running of government. Everyone, except for Ryan Gosling's Ken, seems content with their role and lot in life, and executes their tasks with a smile.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Barbie Land, however, is its centring of women, who occupy every socially important position. At the end of each working day, there are dance parties that culminate in "girls' night" gatherings full of laughter. As Barbie explains to Ken after her party, it will be girls' night every night, forever and ever. This is another feature of Barbie Land at the start of the film: everything is always the same.

Where Barbie Land is static, homogenous, and simple, The Real World is changeable, varied, and complicated. Its first appearance in Barbie Land arises through the idea of mortality when Stereotypical Barbie asks her fellow Barbies: "do you guys ever think about dying?" The Real World is defined by this inescapable finitude. It is also a patriarchy, albeit one that is both partial and semi-disguised. Through Barbie and Ken's naïve perspective, we encounter the male gaze that reduces women to sexual objects. Men, on the other hand, afford one another mutual subjective recognition, as noted gratefully by Ken in his encounters with men who acknowledge him as a fellow subject. Despite this inequality, The Real World is not all bad. Indeed, Barbie is drawn to its messy complexity. When she finds herself shedding tears as a response to telepathically experienced memories of Gloria and her daughter Sasha's relationship, Barbie declares: "that felt achy, but … good." Turning to an older woman at the bus stop (played by renowned costume designer Ann Roth), Barbie smiles and appreciates the woman's appearance, wrinkles and all. "You're so beautiful," declares Barbie, the shot-reverse-shot sequence

emphasising the contrast between Barbie's smooth skin and the woman's weathered features. Barbie discovers the sensory experience of drinking hot tea, the speed and noise of a real car chase, and the ambivalence of her emotions towards Ken, not wanting to hurt him but also angry about his patriarchal ambitions. She comes to appreciate the materiality of The Real World, the variety of its forms of embodiment, and the contradictory feelings associated with bodily fluids such as tears.

In discovering that The Real World is, as Barbie's creator Ruth Handler suggests to her, "marvellous," Barbie begins to wish to become a real woman herself. Here, she follows in the footsteps of many non-human figures who have come to life in the history Western culture. Unlike Pygmalion's statue or Olimpia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (E. T. A Hoffmann 1816), however, Barbie is not a muse who is created and given life by a man. Her story is closer to that of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio (1977 [1893]), who famously yearned to be a "real boy," or perhaps to Wim Wenders' angel in Wings of Desire (1987), who longs to experience human love, coffee and cigarettes. Of course, Barbie's first foray into reality is disillusioning, as she discovers that the Barbies have not, in fact, solved "all problems of feminism and equal rights" as is believed in Barbie Land. She protests to the Mattel employees that "everything is backwards here: men look at me like I'm an object, girls hate me, everyone thinks I'm crazy, and I keep getting arrested!" Indeed, Barbie is perceived as "crazy" in The Real World, even though no-one seems particularly surprised to encounter this type of crazy in Los Angeles. Sasha describes Barbie as "that nut-job," though she quickly corrects herself to "that reality-challenged woman" in a gesture of political correctness.

In fact, "reality-challenged" is an apt way to describe Barbie's existence in The Real World, not because she thinks she's Barbie, but because she *is* Barbie. Her presence is both challenged by and challenges the frameworks of The Real World because people assume that she is a human woman, when she is—as she says at the end of the film—"an idea." Barbie's status as "idea" is underscored at the end of Gloria's speech about the contradictory pressures on women, where she describes Barbie as "a doll just representing a woman." Despite Barbie's apparent autonomy in Barbie Land, she learns in The Real World that she is a "thing that's made" (as she says in her speech to Ruth Handler at the end). The reality she lacks is an ability to "make meaning" herself. In this sense, Barbie is presented as mimetic. The dream of womanhood she depicts can be read along the lines of Susan Stryker's (2006, 9) characterisation of the "seemingly commonsensical view" of sex andcharacterisation of the "seemingly commonsensical view" of sex and gender, in which: "[t]he relationship between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity are imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic—a real thing and its reflections." In the film, Gloria is an example of a "real woman" while Barbie is a mere reflection. As in Stryker's analysis, the mimetic model presents the materiality of biological sex as that which ultimately *matters* (and can be taken up by transphobic arguments).

Barbie's mimetic womanhood is emphasised through her physical features, which are both hyperfeminine and yet lacking the kind of materiality that would qualify her for "real" womanhood. When she is still comfortable with being an "idea," Barbie proudly states to a group of leering construction workers that she does not have a vagina. By the end of the film, however, we see her excitedly visiting a gynaecologist. The implication is that, in her transition from doll to woman, from mimetic reflection to real matter, Barbie—now calling

herself Barbara Handler—has become *materially* a woman in a way that crucially matters: the acquisition of female genitalia.

And yet, despite the apparently clear distinctions in the film between Barbie Land and The Real World, between Barbie and Barbara, the film is filled with inconsistencies and playful allusions that disrupt the boundaries between dream and reality, complicating any essentialist conception of womanhood. The two worlds are separated only by the permeable "membrane." The rip in this membrane that causes Barbie's flat feet and cellulite is produced by a connection between Gloria and Barbie that arises from the adult Gloria playing with her daughter's neglected toy and making irreverent drawings of her in various guises, such as "Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie." Actions in The Real World, in other words, are felt in Barbie Land. Significantly, the reverse is also true, suggesting that Barbie Land is not only being "dreamt" by humans in The Real World: when Ken installs patriarchy in Barbie Land, it affects the Mattel products sold in The Real World: Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa Dream House is an instant bestseller, alongside an array of Ken merchandise. Moreover, despite the emphasis on their contrasts, the film's two diegetic spheres echo one another. Notably, the space of The Real World encompasses only a portion of Los Angeles, with a focus on Century City, evoking film production as the site of a former studio backlot and now headquarters of 20th Century Studios. The narrator highlights this blurring of fantasy and reality by pointing out that Barbie swaps the "pastels and plastics of Barbie Land" for the "pastels and plastics of LA [Los Angeles]."

This idea of Los Angeles is itself as much a dream space as a real one is amplified by the film's self-reflexivity, which constantly reminds us that we are watching a fictional construct. The film repeatedly tears open the "membrane" between the diegetic and extra-diegetic world, incorporating the latter into the film as a third sphere. This process most frequently occurs through the narrator's voice-over, which can be heard by the characters (Alan responds to her remark that there is only one of him) but also addresses the filmmakers outside the fictional world. When Barbie says, "I'm not stereotypical Barbie-pretty anymore," the narrator rebukes the filmmakers: "Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point." This comment acknowledges that the audience has been watching Robbie perform all along, and therefore that the doll or "idea" has always already shared Robbie's material existence. Vivian Sobchack (2004, 276) has theorised the "charge" that such "transformations of spectatorial consciousness and cinematic space" can bring, shifting the audience from the irreal to the real. The narrator's fleeting introduction of commentary on the film's making and casting process forms a link to the extensive marketing teasers, trailers and interviews that stoked audiences' excitement about the upcoming release, emphasising the connections between *Barbie*'s diegetic and extra-diegetic worlds.

As well as reminding us of the material reality of the film's production, *Barbie* also emphasises its cinephilia from the outset, with intertextual references that foreground the film's artifice. The film's opening is an extended reference to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in particular the "Dawn of Man" sequence that imagines the discovery of weapons by australopithecines. The citation uses a similar series of sunrise shots over desert landscapes and the famous melody from Richard Strauss's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1896). This opening sets the tone for numerous other allusions to follow, from the highly explicit parody of the red-pill sequence in *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilli Wachowski, 1999), to more subtle references. Take the nod to *The Red Shoes* (Michael

Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), for example, when Barbie climbs the steps to Weird Barbie's house, or the pink and blue space into which the Kens slip as they are dance-fighting, which recalls a similar "dream within a dream" dance sequence in *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952).[2] With its extreme embeddedness in media culture, *Barbie* can be understood in terms of a "logic of hypermediacy" which "strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement [. . .] by multiplying spaces and media and by repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationships among mediated spaces." Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin 2001, 41–2)

Barbie's logic of hypermediacy has implications for its conception of "reality" and, in turn, its understanding of womanhood. At first sight, Barbie Land might seem aligned with the representational space of the movies, being presented as a space of imagination and play. And yet in Barbie Land the sets were "a lived-in fantasy world," so persuasively constructed that the cast and crew relaxed there together between takes (Eliza Dockterman 2023b). Instead, it is The Real World that exists in the dream space of images. In the closing credits sequence, we are shown the Video Girl Barbie with her slogan, "I am a Real Working Video Camera." The screen in Video Girl's back then fills our screen, over which the credits for the film's crew roll, hinting that perhaps the film we have been watching was made by Video Girl's "real" camera. Reality and film therefore further intertwine, underscored in the song lyrics to "Barbie World" heard at this moment: "imagination, life is your creation." Indeed, "life" in *Barbie* is a cinematic creation. When Barbie travels to The Real World, she telepathically experiences the memories of her owner, Gloria, "seeing" these memories as a montage of film images. This is clear from the fact that these images have an ambiguous point of view, allowing Barbie to mistake them for Sasha's memories when she first "watches" them. More significantly still, Barbie learns "what it means" to be a human woman through a montage of home movie footage, provided by members of the film's crew (Jessica Wang 2023). The sequence features shots of girls and women experiencing a range of moments in everyday life, emerging through slow dissolves as though to convey the layered potentiality of human existence.

I suggested above that *Barbie* may appear to suggest a bio-essentialist conception of womanhood through its positioning of the doll Barbie as a reflection of a "real woman," and its association of womanhood with an anatomical reality. However, the indeterminacy and hypermediacy of the film's articulation of what "reality" means suggests we should also think differently about what it means to be a "real woman." The home movie montage sequence is cued by a series of extreme close-ups on Robbie's lips, chest and eye, emphasising her fleshy embodiment by revealing the moisture between her lips, the grain of her skin, and the leakiness of her eyes as a tear rolls out. If Barbie becomes "real" it is both through flesh and through screen image, both through matter and dream. Such a position resonates with trans theory that attempts to overcome the apparent incompatibility between biological discourse and social constructivist positions. Riki Lane (2009, 137) argues that "[d]ebates about bodies as authentic/real vs bodies as constructed/mutable presuppose a false dichotomy." Lane prompts us to rethink the assumption that biology and nature are "fixed and immutable" (2009, 140) and demonstrates that "biology is wildly excessive and wasteful, with diversity always bursting out at the seams." (147) Instead of thinking of matter as deterministic, argues Lane (2009, 147), we should think in terms of an "interaction of the biological and the social in producing gender

variance as diversity." Similarly, *Barbie* involves us in an almost dizzying interaction between materiality and (screen) construct that undermines a dichotomy between the two. This reading allows us to reconsider Barbie's bodily becoming through a lens of transition. After all, might her gynaecologist visit be to check up on her vaginoplasty?

Barbie resists any fixed opposition between "dream" and "matter:" in the end Margot Robbie's Barbie is both at once. The film's internal contradictions and instabilities encourage a reading of it as an art film, as canonically defined by David Bordwell (1979, 60) in terms of *ambiguity*. Consequently, we are prompted to tease out its generative and progressive possibilities for an understanding of womanhood. And yet, such readings are contingent rather than clearly affirmed, making elusive the film's potential disruption of hegemonic understandings of womanhood. Indeed, interviews with those involved in the making of the film and Mattel CEO Ynon Kreiz (cited in Elizabeth Wagmeister 2023) suggest that *Barbie*'s complex textuality serves their business strategy: "We actually wanted to create something ambitious and unique" Kreiz explained, going on to suggest that *Barbie*'s success "could revolutionize the company's business model, tapping into content categories that, in some cases [. . .] are actually bigger than the toy industry." *Barbie*'s cinephilic delights and layered signification are open to multiple readings. This is both intellectually exciting and an extremely intelligent marketing plan. While Barbie's trans potential shows how film form challenges categories by which we understand sex and gender, such potential is difficult to actualise when the film remains equally appreciable within less expansive frameworks, its openness always available to be recuperated by the market.

Notes

1. Although almost all the dolls in Barbie Land are named "Barbie," for ease of reference I will use this name to refer to the "Stereotypical Barbie" played by Margot Robbie, unless otherwise specified.
2. See Eliza Dockterman 2023a for a comprehensive list of references and allusions in the film.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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