

# Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*: All's well that ends Mattel

Joanne Laurier  
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Filmmaking partners Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach reportedly wrote the script for *Barbie*, ultimately directed by Gerwig, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. That catastrophe has caused over 20 million deaths and served as a “trigger event,” accelerating all manner of social, economic and political processes.

The pair might have put their time to better use, thinking about the momentous changes taking place.

Instead, Gerwig and Baumbach produced a shallow, moralizing feminist fable. Of course, from the point of view of the parties immediately concerned, it has turned out brilliantly: so far *Barbie*'s earnings worldwide come to half a billion dollars—and climbing.

The film is about a doll, launched in 1959, very popular with children. US toymaker Mattel has sold more than a billion of them.

One feels a little embarrassed having to spend much time describing the story-line.

*Barbie* opens with a scene parodying Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Little girls playing with tea sets and dolls are suddenly confronted by a monolith, a giant Barbie who motivates them to shatter their dull toys. The narrator (Helen Mirren) intones that Barbie is more than “a lady in a bathing suit ... She has her own money, house, car and career. Since Barbie can be anything, so can women ... Girls become women who can achieve anything they put their minds to. Thanks to Barbie all the problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved.”

Of course, the tenor is ironic, but the overall presentation of Barbie's world is not at all what one expects, especially from “hipster” filmmakers. After all, the “Barbie phenomenon” has been attacked for decades by a certain type of middle class radical as the embodiment of the mass media-induced imposition of conformity and consumerism.

Along these lines, one earnest 2016 feminist essay, for example, after arguing that the “canonical female body is first of all middle class, white and young, with fine facial features and unwrinkled skin, fit and well-toned and especially slim,” refers to “an ‘American,’ and more

specifically Californian ‘body-beautiful’ ideology,” and asserts that “the Barbie doll is the highest expression not only of this ideal but also of a socially induced brainwashing of young girls for the purposes of acceptance and conformity to this canon.” (“Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the ‘Normalization’ of the Female Body in Western Culture”)

However, and their need to gain the approval of Mattel presumably played a role, Gerwig and Baumbach have rejected all this, and seriously treat Barbieland (albeit with a wink and a nod), complete with its all-female construction crews, US government cabinets and Nobel Prizewinner cohorts, as a feminist utopia. This central idea and guiding motif makes no sense whatsoever, and that does create difficulties.

In any event, “Stereotypical” Barbie (Margot Robbie) lives in Barbieland with other Barbie iterations such as Doctor Barbie, Astronaut Barbie, President Barbie, etc. There is even the short-lived Proust Barbie (Lucy Boynton) “that didn't sell very well.” The full bench of the Supreme Court is a set of Barbies, presumably an oblique reference to the recent anti-abortion decision.

Barbieland is a matriarchal society awash in maximalist pinkness and “Dreamhouse” architecture. Women are confident and successful. Whereas Ken (Ryan Gosling) and all the other Kens (Simu Liu, Kingsley Ben-Adir, Ncuti Gatwa, Scott Evans, and John Cena) are essentially beach bums hanging out in a setting of fake waves and fake sand.

Stereotypical Barbie is suddenly stricken with thoughts about her mortality, her high arches go flat and she develops cellulite. How is this possible? She goes to Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon), disfigured with a scribbled-on face, punk hair and splayed legs thanks to her owner in the “real world,” who tells Stereotypical Barbie she must find the girl playing with her, who is causing the disturbances.

Barbie goes with Ken to “real world” Los Angeles. She tracks down her owner, a disaffected teenager named Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), and her mother Gloria (America Ferrera), the actual source, as it turns out, of Barbie's

existential malaise.

While Barbie encounters the all-male directorship of her manufacturer, Mattel, led by its CEO (Will Ferrell), Ken is busy reading up on (and becoming inspired by) the notion of patriarchy. As the Mattel executives try to put Barbie back in her display box (it's not clear why), Ken transforms Barbieland (it's not clear how) into Kendom with his "Mojo Dojo Casa House." All the Barbies are now in subordinate roles ("We explained to them the infallible logic of patriarchy and they collapsed. It's like the 1500s with the locals and smallpox, they had no defense against it").

Stereotypical Barbie, along with Gloria and Sasha, proceed to deprogram the victimized Barbies ("You take advantage of their [the men's] selfishness and stupid jealousies and you create discord among them"). In the end, Barbie's self-assurance is encouraged by a meeting with the spirit of Mattel co-founder and Barbie doll creator Ruth Handler (1916-2002)—played by Rhea Perlman.

Eventually, Barbie leaves behind "the pastels and plastics of Barbie Country for the pastels and plastics of Los Angeles."

*Barbie* has a few amusing moments. The vivid, dazzling production design (Sarah Greenwood), costumes (Jacqueline Durran) and imaginative props, however, are asked to do a great deal, including supplying thematic coherence to a work that has very little. Inadvertently or not, the filmmakers wield the décor and design as a means of papering over the large gaps in their generally unfunny script, flat like Barbie's feet. To say the least, the movie's style is more impressive than its substance. "More impressive," but not enough to carry the film over the threshold.

How is a doll, identified for decades with American triumphalism and success at the height of the postwar boom, with a blond, beautiful fantasy, going to be made over and placed at the center of a feminist fairy-tale? Not without a great deal of contorting and wrenching.

That, however, does not seem to bother the large swarm of film critics and the identity politics zealots. This empty-headed film has been taken up by the social layers obsessed with gender. Its keynote speech has been almost universally lauded. In that, Gerwig has Gloria angrily proclaim that it is

literally impossible to be a woman. ... we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong. You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. ... You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. 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 have to be a career woman, but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining...

and so on and so forth!

Self-pity is not attractive, particularly coming from well-to-do Hollywood personalities, some of whom stand to make tens of millions of dollars from this film.

It is no accident that the reviewer in *Jacobin*, the voice of the affluent, complacent "left" petty bourgeoisie, quips that "when it comes to picking a team, if the choice is Team *Oppenheimer* or Team *Barbie*, I know I'm on Team *Barbie*." A film about dolls is no doubt less troubling. The *Jacobin* milieu would prefer not be shaken up.

*Barbie* is strained and smug without much wit. One should bear in mind that Mattel, with revenue of \$42 billion in 2022, partnered with Warner Bros. on the making of the movie. Gerwig's film takes a few pot shots at big business. References are made to capitalism and Sasha at one point calls Barbie a "fascist," to which the latter responds in confusion, "I don't control the railways or the flow of commerce!" It's doubtful anyone will make much of that.

Moreover, the Mattel executives are portrayed as well-meaning bumbler, à la the Keystone Cops. For the toymaker, absorbing a few toothless jibes is a small price to pay for a marketing and sales bonanza, opening up vast lucrative vistas.

Director Gerwig may think she's outwitting and outflanking Mattel, but Mattel knows better!



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