

# Aesthetic Investigations

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Barbie is not born, but rather becomes, Barbie

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**Abstract:** I begin this paper by identifying several criticisms of the film *Barbie* (2023), several of which have been proposed as reasons to deny its feminist content. I then circle back to what I consider the film's most coherent theme, which exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's best-known quote, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.' This claim emphasises that what it is to be a woman is not biological, but social. That is, who we become is influenced by external factors such as family upbringing, available role models, class expectations, and our freedom to navigate our choices. A post-script relates the theme of this film to the current political situation in the U.S., after the re-election of Donald Trump.

## I. THE CRITICS

A few months after *Barbie's* debut, *Le Monde* columnist Nicolas Santolaria lamented, 'Having decided to become a "real" woman, she makes an appointment for a gynaecological consultation, implying, through this inaugural ritual gesture that goes against any deconstructive ambition, that gender is entirely limited to sex.'<sup>1</sup> I understand Santolaria's worry, since this scene is preceded by a motherhood-laden mashup that presumably depicts her mental states. Even so, Santolaria's casting Stereotypical Barbie's essence as biological seems a bit hasty, since Greta Gerwig's film spans the vast trajectory from Stereotypical Barbie (SB, incidentally Simone de Beauvoir's monogram) to 'Barbara'. SB's existential odyssey begins when she suddenly blurts out, 'Do you guys ever think about dying?' In order to discover what's causing her 'unBarbie-like' feelings and newfound liabilities (flat feet, cold shower, falling off her roof,<sup>2</sup> she decides to visit the real world.

Barbara's motivation for visiting an Ob/Gyn in the last scene is entirely speculative. Like Barbie itself, her next move rather depends on each viewer's imagination. Having witnessed both a frustrated mother and men harassing women, there's no good reason to believe she desires motherhood any more than manhood. She's still in the process of shedding her impervious, plastic 'body armour' for sensitive skin that lets her feel the real world's multiple dimensions. Her Ob/Gyn appointment confirms her arrival in the real world. Presumably, her next stop is the gastroenterologist so she can start digesting food and water.

Barbara's more immediate plan seems to be to live a life that has a purpose, even if doing so means experiencing suffering, uncertainty, and complications. Pursuing this goal requires escaping a feminist utopia reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), such that women hold all positions of power. In Barbie Land, predictability is *de rigueur*: the Barbies exercise an *unnatural* advantage and Beach Ken (BK) is 'just too into her'. As she departs Barbie Land, he tells her, 'I just don't know who I am without you... I only exist within the warmth of your gaze.' To which she replies, 'Maybe it's time to discover who you are *without me*.' In liberating herself, she attempts to liberate BK. His self-image clearly echoes Virginia Woolf's characterisation of women: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.'<sup>3</sup>

Critics claim that *Barbie* only superficially addresses patriarchy. Since real-world children 'play-acting' their Barbies are largely oblivious to patriarchy, it's no wonder 'unhoused' Kens are more Barbie accessories than companions. BK's slyly importing a macho parody of patriarchy (men in faux minks riding horses and fridges filled with beer served by Bimbo Barbies) suggests that patriarchy too is more accessory than necessity. Perhaps the film's most stereotypical moment is the scene where the Kens attempt to change the constitution to legitimise Kendom, which the Barbies thwart by pitting

one Ken-tribe against the other. Like women in the Real World, the Barbies must unite to prevent the Kens from usurping their power, which required an acute course in consciousness-raising to deprogram the Bimbo Barbies.

Yet another criticism is the film's omission of intersectionality, which by definition covers the way race, class, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, gender, and other forms of discrimination intersect with sexism, thus further complicating feminism.<sup>4</sup> America Ferrera's 'real-world' character Gloria, a Latina mother working as the executive secretary for Mattel's comical, all-white male corporate board, sufficiently conveys the complexity of multi-ethnic personal and working relationships, thwarted dreams, and fragmented family relationships. In fact, it is Gloria's two-minute monologue that awakens the Bimbo Barbies to their plight. So long as the Barbies hold sway, feminism is archaic in Barbie Land, where happily-single Barbies represent myriad colors, shapes, careers, abilities, and activities. The documentary *Black Barbie* (2023) describes how Mattel's finally launching Black Barbie in 1980 was sufficient to boost the self-images of Black children who longed for more representative dolls.

Despite SB's exuberance, *Barbie's* real-world teens treat her with contempt. To SB's surprise, Sasha, SB's original owner whose name recalls a Bratz Fashion Doll (Barbie's rival)<sup>5</sup> delivers a monologue all her own, in which she criticises Barbie for promoting unattainable beauty standards and for advertising unrealistic standards of wealth that drive consumer capitalism. In fact, Barbies owned homes decades before US banks lent single women money to purchase homes.

A final criticism is that Barbie Land and the Real World are mere Hollywood facsimiles. Modelled on actual Barbie Dreamhouses, this pink metropolis is real for girls whose dolls inhabit it. No doubt, SB and BK's spontaneous arrival in Venice Beach via rollerblades, their jotting about Los Angeles sans vehicle in stolen Western outfits, and the chase scenes around the Mattel penthouse offices are pure spectacle. What matters here is the difference between these two worlds. SB's telling a real-world older woman seated on a park bench that she's beautiful snaps us out of this fairytale. Not only was this SB's first encounter with ageing, but her reaction demonstrates courage, openness, and generosity, skill-sets that she suddenly realises are superfluous in Barbie Land.

## II. THE BARBIE *ITSELF*

It goes without saying that a Barbie, like any toy, is first and foremost an *it*, an object of play enacted by a subject. In *Existentialism* (1947), Jean-Paul Sartre uses the example of a 'paper-cutter' to characterise a tool that is designed for a particular use. He continues, 'Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way... Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence — that is, the ensemble of both the production

routines and the properties which enable it to be both produced and defined — precedes existence.<sup>6</sup> Sartre's central point is that the human being's existence, unlike that of designed tools, precedes its essence, leaving human beings in a constant state of becoming.

While a Barbie is no less manufactured than a paper-cutter, it is very different from a designed tool, or even an ordinary 'baby doll', since a Barbie's essence comes into being as its owner 'play-acts' it. Even a Barbie with a 'pre-ordained' career, such as fashion designer (1960), flight attendant (1961), nurse (1961), tennis player (1964), astronaut (1965),<sup>7</sup> can still do anything its owner imagines. Lest people forget, today's Barbie packaging is plastered with the slogan, 'You can be anything you want', thus prompting future owners to project their dreams onto their Barbies' constantly fluctuating essences. As *Weird Barbie* put it, 'We're all being played with, babe'. SB eventually discovers that her 'irrepressible thoughts of death' were initiated by Sasha's mom Gloria, who had been projecting her grievances onto SB, as if she were a voodoo doll.

The character Ruth Handler (Barbie's originator), whom SB accidentally bumps into behind a closed door at Mattel, admits that the feminine ideal has changed since 1959. She tells SB to close her eyes and feel, which is how the mash-up mentioned above comes about. SB's eagerness to depart Barbie Land is quintessential Sartre, who advised his pupil, 'You're free; choose, that is invent'.<sup>8</sup> Later in the book, Sartre explains:

Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts. Nothing else than his life.<sup>9</sup>

SB's ensemble of 'perfect' acts no longer proves fulfilling for her, or for anyone, save perhaps BK. Exemplary of her process of becoming, one of her last statements is 'I don't think I have an ending'. Ruth counters, 'Humans have only one ending. Ideas live forever'. Ruth remarks how humans make things up just to survive.

Quintessentially existential, SB opts to experience humanity in all its messiness. As Quinci Legardye observes:

This new Barbie has now felt all of the worries and societal pressures that human women feel, and more importantly she doesn't want to get rid of them and go back to before.<sup>10</sup>

Having acted on choice, she is transformed, as is everyone around her. Although Santolaria correctly refers to someone's first Ob/Gyn visit as an 'inaugural ritual gesture', he mistakes its significance. It stands for the moment teens depart a rather carefree existence, where 'ideally' life is predictable, children have an *unnatural* advantage, and their parents are 'too into them' (a bit like Barbie Land), for 'the real world' invented by imaginative adults. Barbara insists:

I want to be part of the people — to make meaning — not the thing that’s made. I want to do the imagining — I don’t want to be the idea. Does that make sense?

It must be noted, however, that Sartre’s pat notions of free will, choice, and invention are no less problematic (and outdated) than the Barbie ‘ideal’. To my lights, *Barbie*’s critics owe their complaints more to Sartre than Mattel.

### III. POST-SCRIPT

While the U.S. media claimed that bodily autonomy and equality were front and centre on the 2024 ballot, it turns out that most voters found these issues of tertiary importance at best. Since the election, pundits have been falling over themselves, trying to figure out how they failed to tap the public’s pulse. For fans of the *Barbie* film, and for scholars of disgust, the results of the US election are hardly surprising. Following Ken’s trip to the Real World, Macho Ken (MK) transforms Barbie Land into Kendom, which leads the Barbies to abandon their independence and autonomy for something more ‘attractive’. By attractive, I mean alluring and distracting, not beneficial or better. MK dons a white fur, headband, and boxing gloves and converts Barbie’s Dreamhouse into his Mojo Dojo Casa House. Hardly attractive, the ‘bro-aesthetic’ is ridiculous, even disgusting, yet the Kens rapidly steal everyone’s attention, including young girls for whom Mattel rolled out a new product line, while manipulated Barbies become bimbos. I write ‘steal,’ since only a trained stoic could resist disgust’s attention-getting ploys. As if to mock Trump’s tantrums, MK takes out a golf club and starts smashing things, thus manifesting disgust’s capacity to draw attention.

As I’ve remarked elsewhere, disgusting smells have superpowers to attract attention, frame perception, stage deceptions, signal values, enhance retention, boost concentration, and accelerate task completion.<sup>11</sup> Disgusting images wield similar superpowers. Perception depends on the imagination, but the imagination is easily *primed*, which engenders misperception and thus deception.<sup>12</sup> As Adrian Furnham notes, ‘Primes have an effect on beliefs and behaviors because they activate powerful associations.’<sup>13</sup> For example, exposure to anxiety-provoking images distorts people’s perceptions. Alternatively, simply describing things as disgusting has been shown to trigger biases against certain people, including immigrants, gays, and liberal politicians deemed illegal/illicit or purchases deemed unwarranted.<sup>14</sup> Using disgust as their superpower, the Kens attracted attention, manipulated perceptions, and staged deceptions.<sup>15</sup> In no time at all, the Barbies made 180-degree turns, placing the Kens at the centre of their attention, as they basked in the warmth of the Kens’ glow.

To my lights, Trump’s campaign took a page from MK’s wielding disgust to attract and sustain attention. As the election approached, the deleterious language and imagery that fueled Trump’s rallies emphasised ‘disgusting’

others, while his attention-getting stunts (in addition to his usual ridiculous composure: cooking fries, and driving a garbage truck) approached MK's audacity and ridiculousness. In Trump's hands, disgust functioned as the 'October surprise'. The omnipresence of disgust made it impossible for the Harris Walz Campaign to deflect attention, all the while Trump's disgusting ploys primed the electorate for deception.

Meanwhile, the Trump campaign doubled-down on MK's insight gleaned from the Real World, 'where everything exists to elevate and expand the presence of men'. Apparently, Barbie Land, where childless women thrive, posed such a threat to Trump's manosphere that campaign representatives, especially J.D. Vance, found it imperative to demonise single women as 'cat ladies'. The spokesman for alienated males everywhere, MK demanded that Barbie choose between being either his 'bride wife' or his 'long-term, low-commitment, casual girlfriend'. Trump's campaign effectively repositioned the US as Kendom, where 'your body, my choice' makes sense. Only time will tell if Stoic Barbie (SB2), decked out in pastel plaid, will arrive to disarm Kendom's disgusting allure. As Rachel Herz has observed, 'Though we learn to turn off our outward zeal for for these fascinations, the questions, temptations, and fears never go away. This is why we remain lured by disgust throughout our lives.'<sup>16</sup>

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### ENDNOTES

1. Santolaria 2023, 23.
2. 'Falling of the roof' is a euphemism for menstruation
3. Woolf (1929) 1998, 45.
4. I thank Zachary Dempster for pointing this out
5. Thanks to Elizabeth Scarbrough for pointing this out
6. Sartre 1947, 479.
7. Lisitza 2023.
8. Sartre 1947, 33.
9. 484.
10. Legardye 2023.
11. Spaid 2021, 75.
12. Spaid 2023, 110.
13. Furnham 2014, 251.
14. Spaid 2021, 80.
15. 74.
16. Herz 2012, 52.

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