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Part of the people or apart from the people?: A critical note on the liberal feminism of *Barbie* (2023)

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Abstract: *Barbie* (2023) is both a feminist and a metaphysical film. It is a story of ideas regarding girls and their fantasies and the relation of the two vis-à-vis each other. This critical note draws attention to a way in which the film's metaphysics gets in the way of its feminism. I will argue that the film's conception of Barbie Land and the Real World as discrete planes of existence, is itself a symptom of the alienated state of existence that *Barbie* aims to overcome. Consequently, *Barbie*'s escape from this alienated state is doomed to fail from the start.

Spoiler alert: this essay discusses significant plot twists, as well as the endings, of both *Barbie* (Gerwig 2023) and *Labyrinth* (Henson 1986). It is highly recommended to have first watched these films before reading, lest the essay spoil these films for you.

I. INTRODUCTION

[A simple, abstract dissatisfaction with empirical reality] would actually remain purely subjective: a ‘value-judgement’, a wish, a utopia. And even when the utopian will takes on the more clarified form of an ‘Ought’, by no means does it go beyond acceptance of empirical reality, nor, at the same time, beyond a philosophically more refined subjectivism regarding the tendency towards change.

— Georg Lukàcs¹

There is the girl and the doll. And never the twain shall cross.

— Weird Barbie

Barbie (2023) is a feminist film. I wholeheartedly agree with Sue Spaid’s drawing attention to the film’s existentialist themes to underline its liberatory message. This message is all the more important in times where right-wing extremists, having just returned Donald Trump to power in the USA, gleefully inaugurate a new age of chauvinism using the slogan ‘your body, my choice’. But aside from being a feminist film, and in virtue of its existentialism, *Barbie* (2023) is also a meditation on metaphysics, a story of ideas regarding subjects and objects, girls and their toys, and how those two relate to one another.

What I want to draw attention to in this critical note, is a way in which the film’s metaphysics gets in the way of its feminism. I want to argue that the film’s conception of Barbie Land and the Real World, of dream and reality, as discrete planes of existence, where one properly transcends the other and “never the twain shall cross”, is itself a symptom of the alienated state of existence that Barbie aims to overcome. Consequently, Barbie’s escape from this alienated state is doomed to fail from the start, something at which the film can only hint with cynical irony. More to the point, Barbie’s (in my view) failure to overcome her own alienation, is a blemish on the film’s otherwise forceful feminist politics.

II. SANDALS AND STILETTO HEELS

Barbie Land is introduced to us as a model, an ideal utopia that instructs girls in the ways of becoming successful, independent women. Helen Mirren’s ironic voice over provides relief to the viewer who understand that things cannot possibly be so simple:

Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything. And this has been reflected back unto the little girls of today in the Real World. Girls can grow into women who can achieve anything and everything they set their mind to. Thanks to Barbie, all problems

of feminism and equal rights have been solved. At least that's what the Barbies think. After all, they're living in Barbie Land, who am I to burst their bubble?

In fact, however, Barbie's bubble is burst as the repressed remainder of humanity — the thoughts, feelings, and biological functions that do not smoothly integrate into the Barbie Land model, break free from it and start causing problems for Barbie.

When the ordinary functioning of a Barbie's body reasserts itself, it is experienced as an *alienating* event; a moment where Barbie encounters her own body and actions as foreign to herself. This is played out symbolically at the start of the film when Barbie's feet start touching the ground, making her high heels uncomfortable on her feet. But rather than ditching the shoes, she goes on, saying 'I would never wear heels if my feet were shaped this way!' In a single statement, she testifies not only to the inhumanity of the Barbie Land model, but also betrays her own complicity in the violence of this model, even if she experiences it as someone else's doing. 'Other people may like doing this, but *I* would never wear these heels on these feet!' And yet she does wear them, even though her feet *are*, at least from that point onwards, shaped that way.

How did this alienation come about? The film shows us Barbie visiting Weird Barbie, a pariah among the Barbies but also a sage to whom they can turn to for advice. Weird Barbie tells us of a portal that has been opened up; 'a rift in the continuum that is the membrane that separates Barbie Land and the Real World'. The stylistic device of the exaggerated technobabble serves to emphasise for comedic effect the metaphysical border that must separate the two worlds. Though it is played for laughs, it still impresses upon Barbie, and consequently the viewer, the grave wrong of intermingling. To put it in terms of the choice that Weird Barbie puts to Barbie: it is *either* the vulgar sandal, ergonomically shaped to accommodate real feet, *or* the stylish stiletto heel, a torture device that only truly fits the imaginary feet of the Barbies. Barbie must venture out into the Real World to find the girl (or woman, as it will turn out) playing with her in such a way that it upset the order of the two worlds. But Barbie must do this only in order to heal the rift, reassert the border between worlds, and close the portal, so that once again everything may settle into its proper place.

III. THE BEST THING BARBIE CAN THINK OF

Of course, the viewer already knows that a true solution to the film's problems requires more than simply reinstating the barrier. Barbie was in trouble all along, even before she experienced her alienation. Indeed, part and parcel of her alienating experience is becoming aware that she consciously applied the repressive model to herself *by herself*, or was at the very least a willing accomplice to her own repression. We catch glimpses of this when Weird

Barbie argues that Barbie must have had a hand in opening the portal, and when Greta Gerwig, in the director's commentary to the film, describes Barbie as:

very smart, but she just considers herself to be Stereotypical Barbie. She hasn't allowed herself to be kind of a myriad of different things, even though there is all this evidence to the contrary.²

And now, when finally forced to confront these other aspects that do not fit the model she applied to herself, she can no longer return to how things used to be. Nowhere is this expressed more beautifully than in Billie Eilish's 'What was I made for?', the haunting, melancholic song that contrasts the cheery, pink Barbie world:

Taking a drive, I was an ideal
Looked so alive, turns out I'm not real
Just something you paid for
What was I made for?

The alienation expressed here is real and communicated with full force, with a candour that, in Hollywood productions, is rarely accorded to the complex phenomenology of alienation. Nevertheless, because the film never deviates from its metaphysical belief in the separation of fantasy and reality, it is thereby ruling out a real solution to the problem of alienation: a reintegration of human desire and existence, of the dreams we have and the lives we lead.

I quoted from Lukács's 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in one of the epigrams above, because it is his insight into the shortcomings of bourgeois metaphysics that I am relying on to make this point. Lukács is mostly concerned with the kind of alienation afflicting workers in the capitalist economy, i.e. those who generate value through their labour and who encounter the wealth they created as an alien entity that controls them and in service of which they must labour, capital. But the point works equally well for those who generate value through their imaginative activities: girls playing with Barbies and who encounter their own fantasies as an alien entity, Barbie Land, with strict borders policed by the Mattel Corporation.

I return to the role of Mattel in the film below. For now, note that the only way in which the film can accommodate a conclusion for Barbie's story is for her to flip to the other side of the metaphysical border, from object to subject. Speaking to her creator in the penultimate scene of the film, Barbie says:

I want to be part of the people — to make meaning, not [be] the thing that's made. I want to do the imagining, I don't want to be the idea.

And so the film shows us Barbie having chosen, literally, the vulgar sandals, wearing them for her appointment with her gynaecologist in the final scene of the film. I agree with Spaid that this scene is ill understood as a symbolic assent to biological essentialism regarding gender. Indeed, the voice over quite clearly tells the audience that Barbie has now ‘left behind the pastels and plastics of Barbie Land for the pastels and plastics of Los Angeles’. In other words, her new world has no more ‘biological reality’ than her old one. But clearly the scene must symbolise *something*. It is after all, the final scene, the concluding statement, the image that will linger among the audience as they file out of the theatre.

Gerwig, in the feature commentary, has this to say:

I remember shooting this and I had that feeling of like... you know, she’s so winning and you just want the best for her. You want everything in her life to be great and you’re just on her side in a traditional comedic heroine way... [When Barbie says she’s there to visit her gynaecologist,] this is the happiest way anyone ever said that sentence. I think there is so much embarrassment about things like that. And I was like, ‘Well what if this was like the best thing that Barbie could think of?’

It is certainly an uplifting feminist statement, to conclude the film with non-apologetically reappropriating the topic of women’s health. But it must be noted that this reappropriation occurs in the context of a rather cynical joke on Barbie’s behalf. Mere seconds earlier, Barbie had expressed her deepest wish to ‘do the imagining’ and no longer to be ‘the idea’. But now, in order to teach the audience not too be embarrassed by the topic of women’s health, she’s childishly presented as someone who has a mundane, laughable imagination; someone who teaches us to resign ourselves to the situation simply because she lacks the social context necessary for understanding why someone should be embarrassed of it in the first place. There might be real anxieties in play, nevertheless, the film is saying, look at the bright side. More generally, it seems, the film is telling us to be satisfied with the kind of life that Barbie has chosen, a life that is basically our own, to take pleasure in that life and not bother with the more ambitious project of imagining a different possible world. As a result, one gets the feeling that the narrative is cynically making fun of Barbie for not being imaginative enough, and by consequence of us as well for being on her side and wanting the best for her.

IV. WEIRD BARBIE AND ORDINARY BARBIE

Barbie’s cynical ending is woven into its narrative. First, it cannot imagine any other future than that in which a strict boundary between utopia and the real world is maintained. But second, the film must at the same time scoff at the existence of that boundary because it is, in effect, what engenders the troubles driving the plot of the film.

I already mentioned that the film makes it clear that Barbie had a hand in her own alienation, that, in other words, it couldn't have started simply at the point at which she starts having thoughts of death. The point, as I've shown, is that Barbie can be so much more than Stereotypical, *if only she permits herself to be that*. In other words, her problem is that, for whatever reason, she cannot take control of the fantasy that she embodies.

Conversely, Gloria, the woman playing with Barbie, finds herself yearning for a time where she could just play with her Barbies without being troubled by all the ways in which her life has fallen short of the ideals promoted by Barbie Land. She wants to play pretend, but without the products of her imagination acquiring the power of an 'Ought', an ideal abstracted from her imaginative activity and that she will never measure up to.

It is worth dwelling on this topic because the film never really makes it clear *why* Barbie Land could have come to function as an unattainable and imperative ideal. Yet this is hardly obvious. For one, to position Barbie Land in this way actually blatantly misconstrues the actual practice of playing with dolls. Girls do not treat their dolls as ideals, they use them as tools to act out imagined scenarios. And often these scenarios are not at all utopian and pristine, but rather violent and messy, infused with all the mess and violence of *this* world. Ironically, the only Barbie in the film to actually bear the signs of child's play is Weird Barbie, who is called 'weird' by the other Barbies precisely for bearing these signs. The flip side of a Real World devoid of imagination, it appears, is a Barbie Land in which the traces of real human activity are considered perverse.

Regardless, in both cases, the real problem is not with the rift but with the membrane between the worlds. Both Barbie and Gloria suffer from a lack of agency because of the gap that is maintained between imagining and the products of that imagination. This gap is maintained by capital, represented in the film by the all-male executive board of the Mattel Corporation. The executives are also, in fact, the only ones that spend most of the film trying to reinstate the barrier between the worlds. Their ostensible reason for doing so is to prevent chaos from breaking out, but they also have a clear, and clearly capitalist, incentive. As the self-appointed bosses, mediators, and border police of Barbie Land, they have managed to insert themselves into a process that in actual fact has no need for them. After all, it is girls themselves who, by the power of their imagination, come to shape the scenarios and stories of Barbie Land. What the Mattel executives fear, in other words, is not so much that the depressing stories acted out by Gloria are not in line with the Barbie canon, but that Gloria will start to become conscious of the fact that she can shape that canon herself without having to consume Mattel's products.

The con that Mattel is running becomes especially clear in a key scene towards the end of the film. The Barbies have overthrown the patriarchy of the Kens, with the help of Gloria who deprogrammed the Barbies so that they become conscious of their own power. Now, they find themselves in a

revolutionary moment, a moment where the old order is dead and the time is at hand to inaugurate a society where everyone can use their imagination to shape their lives as they see fit.

It is at this moment that the executives from Mattel show up to goad everyone into returning to their own worlds and to reinstate the barrier between these worlds. And, amazingly, inexplicably, bizarrely, everyone immediately agrees. Of course there are some reformist measures, but nothing that would endanger those in power. In another cynical joke, the film shows us Mattel's CEO telling everyone of his newfound insight: 'Thanks to the Barbies, I too can now relieve myself of this heavy existential burden, while holding on to the very real title of CEO.' Gloria even makes use of the opportunity to pitch an idea for a new Barbie to the CEO:

What about Ordinary Barbie? She's not extraordinary, she's not president of anything. Or maybe she is. Maybe she's a mom, maybe she's not. Because it's okay to just want to be a mom, or to wanna be president, or a mom who is president, or not a mom who is also not president. She just has a flattering top, and she wants to get through the day feeling kinda good about herself.

This *would* be liberating, a Barbie symbolising the crushed dreams and adjusted expectations of a female worker fully integrated in the capitalist economy, and thereby communicating to us the real conditions of breakdown we are living under today, conditions of welfare state collapse and increased servitude to capital. It would be liberating, were it not for the fact that Gloria clearly already has the means to bring such a Barbie into being. What would she need Mattel's permission for? The only reason to ask, is if Gloria is somehow still convinced that the broken down capitalist order that she inhabits, can still be made congruent with her desires. And indeed, after the CEO's initial reaction that Ordinary Barbie sounds like a terrible idea, it turns out that Mattel could profit from it, and so it is done: Mattel expropriates Gloria's fantasy and will sell it as an alienating ideal to a new generation of women.

V. YOU HAVE NO POWER OVER ME

I am reminded of another film where a girl's runaway imagination sets the scene for a dramatic reckoning with the reified world which seems to ensnare us, even though we are the ones actively bringing this world about; Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986). The girl, Sarah, spends the film trying to undo a mistake; wishing her baby brother away to be kidnapped by the Goblin King, Jareth. Her wish, by the power of her own imagination, has come true, and now she must face 'dangers untold and hardships unnumbered' to reach 'the castle beyond the goblin city' and take her brother back from Jareth by reciting the magic lines from her favourite book. If only she can remember the final line.

Jareth, for his part, believes he is doing Sarah a favour. After all, she asked that her baby brother be taken herself. If, moreover, she relinquishes responsibility for her brother, he is prepared to give her even more in return: ‘look what I am offering you: your dreams. I ask for so little, just let me rule you and you can have everything that you want. Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave!’ It is at that point that Sarah does in fact remember the final line: ‘You have no power over me!’ with which the Goblin King’s curse, his hold over Sarah and her baby brother is indeed broken and the young woman, having now come of age, returns to the real world.

Sarah’s journey to adulthood follows quite closely Lukács’ narrative of the proletariat’s becoming conscious of its own power to shape the course of history. She lives through a life of contradiction, being simultaneously both the one who by her own imagination gives power to the objective world around her, as well as the one who ends up being dominated by that world of her own making. That contradiction is unmistakable in Jareth’s pleas, promising to be her slave, if only she does as he says. But the power of the Goblin King (or: capital) is finally broken when she becomes conscious of the fact that its power is merely that which she herself gives to it. She becomes *class* conscious, alive to the reality that it is *her* labour on which the world turns.

But, crucially, Sarah’s consciousness of her power to shape the material conditions of her existence through her labour also leads her to acknowledge her dependency on an other, an objective context which supports her imagination without alienating her from it. Having returned to her bedroom, her imaginary friends have come to say goodbye to Sarah. As they slowly fade from her vision, they leave a small opening for her: ‘should you need us, for any reason at all...’ at which point Sarah replies ‘I need you, all of you!’ Like Barbie, Sarah thus wants to become part of the people and to make meaning. And so the film ends with Sarah in her bedroom, surrounded by all the wonderful creatures she imagined, no longer a child, yet still revelling in her fantasies. But contrary to Barbie, Sarah understands that making meaning also depends on overturning the dichotomy between fantasy and reality and to see her imaginary friends not as ideals or moral exemplars, but as supporting others on an equal footing.

When compared to *Labyrinth*, *Barbie* turns out to be much less optimistic about our ability to overturn the alienating power of capital. And perhaps these are not in fact times for optimism. If that is correct, however, the film would do well to underline Barbie’s failed emancipation: not so much a part of the people, but standing *apart from* the people; making meaning to be sure, but bereft of the collective power to decide for ourselves what meanings we make.

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ENDNOTES

1. Lukács 1923, 155.
2. Gerwig 2023, around 18 mins.

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