

Barbie

—The Combination of Feminism and Commercial Film

Han Li^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Art & Cultural Management, The Graduate School of Business Administration,
Kyung Hee University, Seoul, 02453, Korea

a. dizzylee62@khu.ac.kr

*corresponding author

Abstract: With the continuous development of feminism in recent years, there have been many new manifestations in the field of culture and art. In 2023, the movie *Barbie* was released, which became a phenomenon of feminist artworks in the new era and triggered a wide discussion in society. This study explores the feminism embodied in *Barbie* through the analysis of the contents and characters in the movie. It provides new ideas and references for the combination of feminism and commercial film. By combining feminist and commercial films, *Barbie* has managed to spark a big debate on social issues while claiming the top spot at the 2023 box office. In terms of movie content, movie box office, movie reputation and so on, the movie *Barbie* is a very successful work. The success of *Barbie* undoubtedly provides a very new and good reference for the development of feminism in literary and artistic works. In today's still patriarchal world, feminism wants to have a better development in literary and artistic works, and the combination of feminism and commercial film models is a very effective means.

Keywords: Barbie, Film, Feminism, commercial film.

1. Introduction

The continuous development of feminism promotes the continuous development of feminist films. However, feminist films have not received widespread attention. The release of the movie *Barbie* in 2023 has changed this dilemma to some extent. *Barbie* became the most powerful pink force in the summer of 2023, sparking a worldwide debate about *Barbie* and feminism. Unlike the previous feminist films, *Barbie* uses a more gentle, non-simple binary feminism to arouse the audience's thinking; *Barbie* shows the plight of women by comparing the real world with the virtual paradise; *Barbie* combines the commercial film model with feminism, *Barbie* makes feminist film work have a new form of expression and provides a new reference for the development of feminism in film.

This study takes the movie *Barbie* as an example to study the feminism presented in the movie.

Through the movie *Barbie* and the feminism expressed in it, explore how to express feminism under the combination of feminism and commercial film; How to promote the development of feminism and feminist films. It provides reference for the development of feminist film and the combination of feminism and commercial film in the future.

2. Barbie

Barbie is a fantasy movie directed by Greta Gerwig and starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling, and is released simultaneously in the United States and Mainland China on July 21, 2023. The movie *Barbie* is based on Mattel's Barbie line of products, and thanks to the success of the Barbie line, Mattel has expanded its business into the movie field, and has released several Barbie animated movies before. The movie *Barbie* adaptation has been called a "cultural event" by Mattel's chief executive [1].

The film tells the story of Barbie, who is living a perfect life in Barbie Land, but suddenly finds herself surrounded by a series of imperfect events, and Barbie and her boyfriend Ken, who realize their existential crisis, try to figure out the truth in the real world.

At the beginning of the film, all the Barbie and Ken are living in the pink Barbie Land. Barbies don't worry about anything, don't think about the meaning of life, and even don't face old age and death. In life, Barbies play volleyball on the beach during the day and have parties in the big house at night. At work, Barbies can become anything from physicists to Nobel Prize winners to presidents. However, one day, classic Barbie (By Margot Robbie) finds herself becoming not perfect, with breath, flat feet, and burning toast when cooking. In order to find the truth and get the perfect life again, Barbie and Ken (By Ryan Gosling) to the real world, after some twists and turns to meet Gloria (By America Ferrera) mother and daughter. In the real world, Classic Barbie suffers from all kinds of challenges that are completely absent in the Barbie Land, such as appearance anxiety and sexism. On the other hand, Ken, after seeing the charm of the patriarchal society, has the idea of changing the Barbie Land in his heart. At the end of the film, with the joint efforts of Gloria, her daughter and Barbies, they break the patriarchy under Ken's leadership and successfully take back Barbie Land. But at the end of the story, the classic Barbie chooses to leave Barbie Land and enter the real human world, becoming a real woman: Barbara.

3. Feminism in Film

3.1. The Differences between Barbie Land and the Real World

Barbie Land is like a sex version of the Garden of Eden. In Barbie Land, "Barbie's mother" Ruth created Barbie, Ken is born because of Barbie. Just as Eve is Adam's rib, Ken is Barbie's vassal. In Barbie Land, women love each other and women are in charge. But in the real world, Barbie encountered all kinds of trouble and incomprehension: being stared at by men, being attacked by new age women. One is a fantasy paradise lost, while the other is a real female dilemma.

The film presents an old-fashioned self-contemptuous mother and a modern proud daughter. The mother is not valued at work, and the dolls she designs are not understood. In life, the estrangement with her daughter makes her not know how to get along with her daughter better. The daughter has her own views on women and understanding of feminism, and she is the one who is willing to speak out in her small group. In most mother-daughter relationships, the mother always seems to be the one who is behind in both thought and behavior. But the mother does not exist to let her daughter who is standing in the position of the new era to criticize. The daughter in the film (By Ariana Greenblatt) is clearly aware of feminism and has already received feminist guidance, and it is also through the daughter character that Barbie's portrayal contains the male gaze. She also once completely denied Barbie, but when Gloria and her daughter were ready to leave the Barbie Land, it was the daughter who first proposed to go back to save Barbies, and then recapturing the Barbie Land with her mother and Barbies. The daughter represents the young generation of feminists, they are vanguard, radical, although there are immature places but the first to raise questions; The mother, on the other hand, represents women who have moved forward in history, whose experiences are more comprehensive

and mature, and whose problem-solving methods are less radical but more effective and more compromised. As Ruth says to Barbie at the end of the movie, "A mother exists so that her daughter can look back and know how far she has come." This is the embodiment of feminism from generation to generation and step by step development.

3.2. Comparison of Power Structures in *Barbie*: Identity Replacement and Gender Balance

Instead of emphasizing women's rights, *Barbie* emphasizes equal rights for women and men after women get the respect they deserve. *Barbie* is looking for a balance between the sexes. Neither Ken in Barbie Land nor women in the real world should be discriminated against just because of their gender. Both sexes should respect and tolerate each other. Barbie can't keep Ken down, and Ken can't keep Barbie down either. The real world should not be controlled by just a single gender, or a single person, but everyone can be themselves and build the real world together. "*Barbie* is a sophisticated and nuanced exploration of feminism. It challenges unrealistic standards of beauty, promotes female autonomy, and emphasizes that women can achieve any idea they set their mind to [2]." Barbie doesn't have to be beautiful, she doesn't have to be a doctor, an architect, a writer, a Nobel Prize Owner, the president, etc. On the other hand, Ken doesn't have to prove his worth by taking over the world, or even become Barbie's lover.

Barbie expresses the oppression of women by patriarchy in a clever and lighthearted way. Breaking one stereotype with another stereotype. As a doll who is living in Barbie Land, Barbie enters the real world for the first time and faces various difficulties and unfriendly male stares. Ken, on the other hand, went from being a foil in Barbie Land to being a respected object in the real world. Thus, Women in real society are not a gender, but a situation. "Women are not born, they are made. [3]" Put Ken in a woman's position and Ken becomes a woman. By comparing Barbie Land to the real world, the movie makes a clear feminist statement that it wants to make -- that "patriarchy" is just a construct and "Female" is just a situation.

3.3. Barbie from the Unreal Scene to the Real Subject - the Awakening of Barbie's Consciousness

The protagonist in the movie *Barbie* is the classic Barbie, she has no identity, no career setting, almost everything is blank, but this also brings her infinite possibilities. At the same time, "classic" has become a kind of constraint. Classic Barbie is required to be forever young, always charming, never have any other thoughts, and to live every day "beautifully." When she suddenly began to find that life was no longer perfect, found that she had become flat feet, and began to think about the problem of "death", she fell into a crisis about the meaning of existence, did not know what she lived for, and began to explore who she was. "Subject is a real individual, and subjectivity refers to the individual's consciousness, unconsciousness and feelings, which is the way to feel the self and understand the connection between the self and the world [4]." From the blank set to the beginning of the search for the meaning of life, *Barbie* is from the illusory to the real subject of the performance. The real world is full of many imperfections, and the perfection of Barbie Land is just a fictional scenario.

3.4. Barbie is A Blend of Truth and Fiction, Sincerity and Rigidity

All the highly saturated colors and plastic backgrounds of Barbie Land in the movie remind the audience of the falsity of these scenes. If Barbie Land is a perfect but false world, then does a perfect paradise really exist, or does a perfect woman really exist? And does a completely "secondary sex" subordinate to the other gender really exist? In the Barbie Land, Barbie can become a writer, astronaut, president, etc. Barbie seems omnipotent, but in fact, this standard that requires women to constantly get better and perfect is exactly what traps women. As Robbie said: Barbie begins by

putting herself in a cage where "she can be anyone." Many of the demands placed on women in the real world have long been absurd and unreasonable. Women's life is constantly wandering in this unreasonable pursuit of perfection and the resulting frustration. Through the *Barbie* film, the director wants to tell the audience that there is no perfection to pursue, and the existence of anyone is the value itself. The true self is the value of human existence. Instead of being a perfect but unreal Barbie, be an imperfect but real woman. The story of Paradise Lost is not true because there is no perfect paradise. Eve, who is attached to Adam, does not exist, and none of us in the real world need to be attached to anyone.

4. Discussion

4.1. Moderate, Non-binary Feminism

Barbie is a comedy and full of song and dance color, in the direct satire of patriarchy at the same time. Barbie use a humorous way to reveal the reality of women's situation, with stereotypes to break the stereotype. *Barbie* can be said to be a kind of post-feminism, which is not as critical and confrontational as the previous feminist waves have emphasized, but raises controversial topics through moderate narratives. By making the audience aware of the problem to achieve the purpose of thinking. *Barbie*'s ability to directly say on the big screen that "patriarchy is just hidden deeper" is already a success of feminism in a certain sense.

In previous waves of feminism, *Barbie* has been a target of criticism. In the subsequent feminist movement, *Barbie* also began to emphasize the call and norms of ideology, while emphasizing the existence of subjectivity. It does not adhere to a critical stance, emphasizing a different cultural value, a self-expansion and a self-expansion of life. As Professor Dai Jinhua commented, "*Barbie* is a post-modern feminism, emphasizing the strong impact of feminism on mainstream American society and European and American culture, and the revision that this strong impact forced them to carry out. [5]" The film is an echo of contemporary feminism. Re-deconstructing *Barbie*, from another way to explore contemporary feminism. As director Huang Shuqin said, "Women's observation vision can open up a new horizon for film creation and show the audience a unique perspective [6]." *Barbie* takes the complex gender issues in the real world, packaging them with easy-to-understand fantasy fairy tales, packaging sharp topics into some comedy jokes. And *Barbie* directly presses the head output, presenting problems and expressing opinions, while not being too radical and offensive. That's the way director Greta Gerwig has always been. *Barbie*, as a conservative and moderate feminist film, wants to tell the audience that not only Barbie in the real world, but also Ken in the Barbie world, both of which need equal society and opportunities.

4.2. Crossing and Crisis in Barbie Land and Real-World travel

People often use the fantasy world to mask the real world, but sometimes people need the real world to invade the fantasy world to avoid the real crisis. Barbie was so ridiculous and so real; So fairy tales are so rigid; Barbie is funny, and touching.

4.2.1.A Reconciliation between Mother and Daughter

The reconciliation of the relationship between the mother and daughter in the film reflects the step by step development of feminism. It is because of the presence of the mother that the daughter can realize how many steps feminism has climbed from generation to generation. How many muddy and bumpy women have gone through in the development of The Times. Women have been making progress, have been growing, Women do not need others to save. Women can always be reborn. Women must be clear self-subjectivity. Women are omnipotent. The mother-daughter line in *Barbie* is a

reconciliation and relay between two generations of women, radical daughters, from hating Barbie to understanding Barbie, but it is in her insistence that the mother decided to turn back to the Barbie Land. The gentle mother also came to understand that it was not "Barbie can be anyone", but "anyone can be Barbie". Accepting a true self is far more important than pursuing a perfect self, and doing your best to create a world suitable for women's survival is far more real than expecting a perfect and painless rescue. Women in different situations and attitudes need more tolerance and understanding of each other than fighting. "The mother always stood where she was so her daughters could see how far she had come." In a way, slowly but surely, the women's movement is moving forward. Each generation of women is limited to its own era, but each generation of women believes that the next generation will go further than the previous generation, and will have a wider world.

4.2.2. A Patriarchal World That Remains Unchanged

As in the movie "Your patriarchy didn't go far enough", "No, we just buried it deeper", and the final conversation between Mattel executives and the employees: "I want to create an ordinary Barbie", "No", "it makes money", "I love ordinary Barbie". The real world of patriarchy is still the same, but the appearance of a movie like *Barbie* already has meaning. Just as Barbie began to know herself, women began to know themselves, began to want to be themselves, began to strive to be themselves. It is breaking the patriarchal dilemma that is shrouded in the head of real women. The situation of women under patriarchy still exists, and women in the real world still bear a heavy burden. But *Barbie's* appearance provides women with this dream utopia. Perhaps contemporary women still can't completely invent a Barbie Land of fantasy, but being true to themselves is a possibility that contemporary women can reach, and fighting patriarchy is also a step that contemporary women can take to change their situation.

4.3. The Combination of Feminism and Commercial Film

The pleasure brought by *Barbie* and the inspiration felt by female audiences are both promoting the development of feminism. The intimacy, identity and emotional appeal of Barbie dolls have brought *Barbie* a large audience base. "*Barbie* encourages women to identify with themselves and their bodies, to feel the power and beauty of womanhood, and to understand the complexity and diversity of culture [7]." *Barbie* can be said to be a commercial film with a feminist core. While softening social problems, *Barbie* does not shy away from them, but uses absurdity to tell the audience that these problems can be solved. Professor Dai Jinhua believes that female directors are a specific social role, similar to the image of "Mulan", many directors choose to shoot mainstream films, rather than marginalized or anti-mainstream works, in her opinion, the real female films are bound to be deviant [8]. But director Gerwig is not trying to change the world through this film, but only using debate, the relationship between gender, and cultural symbols and commodities placed in a dream playground - Barbie Land, with stereotypes to break stereotypes, and with gentle and decent speech to connect the audience. While the movie's long call for female awakening may sound like a slogan, such slogans that women can relate to are not common in today's movies.

Commercial film refers to the film with the highest purpose of box office revenue (profit), which caters to the taste and appreciation level of the public, from the writer to the director and the actor. The commercial film pursues the market value of the box office and its derivatives, and takes consumer recognition as the goal. Therefore, commercial films are often designed to cater to the taste of the broad audience. The director tells feminism through Barbie, a doll, in such a straightforward, commercial way. Just like "beating magic with magic", what the director wants to do is "beating business with business".

In terms of box office results, *Barbie's* global box office of \$1,445,638,421, becoming the world's top 2023 box office film, Greta Gerwig also became the highest-grossing female director in film history, *Barbie* is undoubtedly a success [9]. From the gender distribution of the audience, seven out of the audience became female audiences, it is undoubtedly a success. In today's patriarchal society, power and capital are still in the hands of men. "In male-dominated films or ideologically sexist works, women are often presented in images that are meaningful to men. Although the film emphasizes the importance of women from the landscape level, there is a general absence of women and women can only play the function of symbols. In the film, women become tools just to convey men's fantasies and desires, rather than women's 'real' lives [10]." If a director wants to make the movie she wants to make in the film industry and express his own point of view, she has to make some compromises. Therefore, only by commercialization, *Barbie* can ensure the maximum range of dissemination, so that it can achieve the ideal income, and more women can see the content. *Barbie* admits that women still live in the reality of patriarchy, and dares to wake women up to face this dilemma, from this point, the practical significance of *Barbie's* movie is greater than its cinematic significance.

In terms of word-of-mouth, *Barbie* is undoubtedly one of the most controversial films of the summer of 2023, if not in recent years. It's not just the two sexes that are at odds, it's also the women who are at odds. Controversy is a concern in another way. *Barbie*, let the whole society pay more attention to gender equality, the situation of women under the patriarchy and other issues, *Barbie* brought social hot topics, brought attention to the content, brought benefits to the business, and triggered thinking for the society. In this regard, *Barbie* is undoubtedly a success.

5. Conclusion

"Say goodbye to perfection, live yourself", when dolls have begun to explore the meaning of life, then how can contemporary people not explore the unbound life?

Barbie is a film that tells a story from the perspective of a woman. *Barbie* wears a pink coat to talk about feminism, so that the feminism represented by pink becomes a power. *Barbie* is a film that perfectly blends truth and fiction, sincerity and rigidity, and is a landmark film for feminism to some extent. *Barbie* combines its own core with the model of a commercial movie. From the content point of view, the feminist content has been spread, the hot social issues on the table; In terms of revenue, *Barbie* became the top box office in 2023 with more than \$1.4 billion in revenue. *Barbie* has managed to combine content and profit, acknowledging the plight of women. Combined with the situation of this film, *Barbie* brings new thinking to the whole society, and is a successful commercial film that combines content.

From the perspective of film production, how women uprising under patriarchy is a topic that feminist filmmakers need to explore more. In today's film market, there are many commercial films that only use feminism as a selling point in order to cater to the market. Commercial films incorporate a little feminism into their content, or even just add female characters who have no plot promotion role, and then use them as selling points and directly market them as feminist works. Neither the content quality of the film nor the development of feminism is of great significance. Under the patriarchy, the film content, filmmakers, and the film industry still fail to better express feminism, and more feminist films are still needed to promote change. Film, as an important channel for the dissemination of content, conveys cultural content and value to the audience is very direct. The combination of feminism and film can be said to be an important means of spreading and propagating feminism. In the future, the society needs the emergence of movies like *Barbie* more, in order to point out the current predicament of women, in order to let women more clearly understand, face or even break the dilemma, and provide more thinking and reference for the further development of feminism.

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