

The "Ultimate Performance" of De-Musicalization: The Structural Transformation and Adaptation of Hollywood Musical Narrative Formulas in Barbie

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Abstract. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Turner's ritual theory, and Butler's concept of gender performativity as its theoretical framework, this study analyzes the transformation and adaptation mechanism through which the film *Barbie* appropriates and reconfigures the generic structure of Hollywood musicals. Through close textual reading and semiotic analysis, it is found that the film converts the classic musical formula of "utopia-crisi-ultimate performance" into a threefold ritualized process: the disintegration of rules in Barbieland symbolizes the vanishing of structured space; the patriarchal gaze in the real world triggers the liminal stripping of identity; and the act of walking in the gynecological clinic serves as an anti-spectacular rite of passage. The study reveals that the field of game rules, instead of the physical stage, undertakes the function of conflict resolution (e.g., the power reversal game). Furthermore, it reconstructs the paradigm of female growth through four dimensions of bodily practices, such as the visual politics embodied in the transition from an upward framing of Barbie to a level framing, and the exaggeration and collapse of Ken's patriarchal performance. This transformation and adaptation mechanism not only provides a systematic analytical framework centered on the three core elements of "performance, space, and power" for contemporary women's cinema but also holds significant methodological value for addressing the predicaments in the localization development of musical films.

Keywords: De-Musicalized Transformation and Adaptation, Ritual Field, Narrative Structure, Generic Deconstruction, Barbie.

1. Introduction

In the practice of genre hybridization in contemporary Hollywood cinema, *Barbie* (2023) has blazed a new trail by integrating a gamified narrative spacename, the "Barbieland" created by Mattel--and the structure of musicals. Wenhui Daily points out that "beyond the game space, this film also subtly draws on the story structure of classic Hollywood musicals" [1]. Even in an interview, Gerwig, the director of *Barbie*, mentioned that *Barbie* is similar to an old Hollywood musical [2]. Existing studies mostly focus on feminist interpretations: for instance, Deng Xinyue has conducted an in-

depth study on Barbie as a new attempt in feminist commercial cinema, and He Zeqi has interpreted feminism from the promotional posters of the Barbie film [3,4]. However, no research has yet focused on systematically explaining its genre transformation and adaptation mechanism--that is, how it converts the core of Hollywood's narrative structure--characterized by "ideal world establishment, conflict escalation, and climactic resolution"--into ritualized bodily practices and rule-based narratives. The innovation of this paper lies in being the first to systematically demonstrate how Barbie completes a comprehensive transformation and adaptation of the narrative structure of musicals through an alternative cinematic form, thereby providing a new perspective for the study of genre evolution. By analyzing the film's practices in terms of carrier replacement (where the structured space of "Barbieland" created by Mattel replaces the traditional stage), functional transcoding (where verbal/bodily practices replace musical forms), and structural transplantation, this paper reveals the paradigmatic significance of Barbie in the development of contemporary film genres.

This study adopts an integrated tripartite theoretical framework, consisting of the following:

Goffman's dramaturgical theory is used to decode the "perfect day" in Barbieland as an institutionalized performance; Turner's ritual process theory is employed to analyze the liminal experience in the real world and the rite of passage in the gynecological clinic; and Butler's concept of gender performativity is utilized to reveal the politics of bodily practices (such as Ken's imitation of patriarchy as a subversive repetition). Through a comparison of plot sequences (the structural correspondence between Barbie and Singin' in the Rain) and a close reading of symbols (the de-performative signs in the four character narrative lines), this study focuses on three core questions:

How is the musical structure transformed and adapted into a ritual process?

How does the rule-based field replace the function of the stage?

How do bodily practices reconstruct the paradigm of growth?

This paper will first, through narrative analysis, deconstruct how Barbie reproduces the three-act structure of "ideal world establishment, conflict escalation, and climactic resolution" in classic musicals in a non-musical form. Then, combining Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Turner's ritual theory, and Butler's concept of gender performativity, it will reveal how the rule-based field and bodily practices replace the stage function and emotional expression of traditional musicals. Finally, through a close reading of audio-visual symbols in the four narrative lines, it will demonstrate how bodily politics reconstructs the paradigm of female growth and completes the contemporary transformation and adaptation of the "DNA" of musicals.

2. The narrative structure of musicals and the genre transformation and adaptation in Barbie

In the field of contemporary film studies, Hollywood musicals, as a unique film genre, possess both profound historical heritage and distinct artistic characteristics. Since the birth of sound films, they have rapidly emerged as one of the most representative genres in Hollywood. By integrating music, dance, and narrative, and through vivid performance sequences paired with twisting storylines, it crafts a sensory world brimming with fantasy and passion for the audience.

The narrative structure of Hollywood musicals has formed a relatively stable system in the long-term development, among which the "backstage mode" has become the most common narrative mode for musicals. The core framework of such films can be refined into a closed-loop structure of "utopian display-crisis and disillusionment--resolution through musical climax--establishment of a new order". In specific narratives, this structure can be simplified into three core logics:

Taking the preparation for a song and dance performance as an opportunity, different characters gather together to build an ideal utopian scene.

The protagonist encounters an identity crisis (career bottlenecks or emotional entanglements) during the preparation process, which breaks the utopia; the resolution of the crisis is accompanied by romantic love and self-breakthrough, and finally the protagonist establishes his/her identity as a song and dance performer.

The film ends with a spectacular song and dance performance, which is not only a display of achievements but also an artistic resolution of conflicts. A comedic and fulfilling ending establishes a new order, echoing and transcending the initial utopia to meet the audience's expectations [5].

Classic musicals represented by *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *West Side Story* (1961) perfectly illustrate this narrative structure. In *Singin' in the Rain*, the technological prosperity of the color film studio is the embodiment of utopia, Lina's defect in sound-image coordination constitutes the crisis, the song and dance segment of dancing in the rain serves as the resolution node, and finally the kiss in the theater establishes a new order. In *West Side Story*, the dance party carnival builds the utopia, the street fight triggers the crisis, the group dance in the gymnasium completes the resolution, and the truce after carrying the corpse forms a new order. Both films strictly follow this structural thread with songs and dances as the carrier.

Although *Barbie* is not a musical, it accurately reproduces this narrative structure in a non-musical form, and the corresponding relationship is worthy of detailed analysis:

In the "utopian display" stage, the morning ritual in the pink paradise is the core carrier. The fixed process and the unified "perfect" state, just like the initial scenes of classic musicals, construct an ideal closed loop dominated by consumerism. The only difference is that it replaces the stage fantasy of musicals with a symbolic life scene.

In the "crisis and disillusionment" link, Sasha's criticism of "plastic dolls" becomes a key turning point. It directly breaks the rule logic of the paradise and makes *Barbie* question her self-identity. Just like the conflicting events in classic musicals, it tears the appearance of utopia, except that it converts the dramatic contradictions of musicals into an ideological impact.

The dual-track design in the "resolution" stage shows even greater wisdom in transformation and adaptation. This kind of transformation and adaptation refers to the transplantation and deformation of existing narrative paradigms, emphasizing creative reuse rather than mechanical reproduction: Gloria's speech undertakes the function of the climax segment in musicals, deconstructing the predicament with the power of language and replacing the emotional outburst of songs and dances; *Barbie*'s process of learning to walk in the clinic is just like the dance steps that promote the narrative in musicals, completing the internal transformation through the awakening of the body. These two elements together constitute the core link in resolving the crisis.

The "establishment of a new order" culminates in *Barbie*'s choice to go to the gynecological clinic. This act completely breaks away from the presupposition of a "perfect doll" and marks the establishment of her self-subjectivity. Meanwhile, the pink paradise also transforms into a new form that is inclusive and diverse. Just like the ending of classic musicals, it completes the reconstruction of order, except that it converts the artistic fulfillment of musicals into identity awakening in the real dimension.

It is evident that through the creative replacement of scenes, conflicts, resolution methods, and endings, *Barbie* completely reproduces the core of the narrative structure of classic musicals in the form of a non-musical film.

3. Identity performativity in the rule-based space: narrative transformation and adaptation from a theoretical perspective

The physical stage in classic Hollywood musicals has been subtly transformed into an intangible rule-based performance system in *Barbie*. To interpret this creative transformation, an analytical framework can be constructed based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Turner's ritual theory, and Butler's theory of gender performativity. Although these three theories originate from different sociological research traditions, they share a core concern with "the ritualization/performativity of identity construction and presentation", which enables them to form theoretical complementarity and provide a multi-dimensional interpretive perspective for the film's transformation and adaptation of the stage narrative of musicals. Specifically, the dramaturgical theory can be used to analyze the logic of identity presentation in the rule-based performance system; the ritual theory can explore the order-constructing function behind performative behaviors; and the theory of gender performativity can focus on the significance of performative practices in reconstructing gender identity.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory views society as a huge theater, and all interactions between people in different situations are like a performance. On the "front stage", individuals need to play specific roles in accordance with social expectations--just like the perfect Barbie and the domineering CEO Ken in *Barbie*--following the established "script" of rules and maintaining an idealized image through words and deeds that conform to the role settings. On the other hand, the "back stage" is a private space away from the public eye, such as a dressing room or a moment of solitude, where people can temporarily let go of their performative disguise and reveal a more authentic private state. This distinction between "front-stage performance" and "back-stage authenticity" is precisely the implicit mechanism by which social order is maintained [6].

This theory helps researchers understand that *Barbieland* is essentially a carefully designed performance system. In this pink utopia, every day is a repeated performance of a perfect script: from the suspended wake-up in the morning, to the gravity-free breakfast, and then to the endless party dances, all Barbies and Kens strictly abide by the established code of conduct. This superficial perfection is completely broken when Barbie suddenly raises a question about death. This seemingly simple question is like inserting a completely inappropriate line into a stage play performance, causing an obvious "malfunction" in the entire system--the music suddenly stops, the movements suddenly freeze, and other Barbies show expressions of panic. This scene vividly demonstrates the strong rejection of any "off-script" words and deeds by this perfect system. When Ken brings back the concept of patriarchy from the real world, the performance rules of the entire paradise also change accordingly. The pink building of the Supreme Court becomes the new performance stage, and the boardroom becomes the "back stage" where new rules are formulated.

Turner's ritual theory points out that when an individual undergoes a major identity transformation (such as a child growing into an adult, or an ordinary person becoming a hero), he/she will experience three stages: "separation-liminality-reintegration". First, the individual breaks away from the original identity and enters the "liminal stage" full of ambiguity. At this stage, the old identity has been stripped away, while the new identity has not yet been established. The individual is in an uncertain state and often completes the transition through specific rituals. Finally, he/she integrates into the order with the new identity [7].

This theory is clearly reflected in the film *Barbie* in her transformation from a doll to a human being. Barbie's departure from the perfect paradise marks the beginning of "separation", breaking away from the established identity of a "perfect doll". The period of confusion after entering the real world is a typical "liminal stage"--she has already lost the old identity of "Paradise Barbie" but has not yet obtained the new identity of "human being", and is in a vague state of identity suspension.

This suspension precisely constitutes the core conflict of the film. The moment when she looks at the elderly woman with wrinkles and says "You are beautiful" is her "liminal ritual". For Barbie, who was once bound by the obsession with "perfection" and fell into identity anxiety due to the appearance of cellulite on her body, this sincere interaction that transcends the cognitive scope of a doll can replace the stylized links of traditional rituals. The reason lies in that, with its de-ritualized daily emotional connection, it accurately addresses the identity dilemma in the "liminal stage". It does not require a solemn ritual shell, but allows Barbie to break the cognition of "perfection" and complete the key transition from "doll-like cognition" to "human emotional awakening". This kind of transformation and adaptation of traditional rituals in modern narratives also achieves the core function of identity leap [8]. The act of walking towards the gynecological clinic marks the completion of "reintegration". Although there is no magnificent ritual, this most simple action proclaims the establishment of a new identity, just like a silent but solemn "coming-of-age ceremony", symbolizing the final transformation from a doll to an independent human being. It perfectly conforms to the core logic of "transition rituals shaping new identities" in Turner's theory.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity holds that gender is not an inherent and fixed essence, but a social norm constructed through repeated "performative" behaviors such as words, deeds, and gestures. The so-called "masculinity" and "femininity" are all illusions formed by people constantly imitating and repeating behavior patterns that meet social expectations. Once this kind of performance is broken or exaggerated, its constructive nature will be exposed [9].

The film *Barbie* presents this theory in a particularly vivid way. After coming into contact with the patriarchal concept in the real world, Ken begins to exaggerate and perform the "masculinity" he understands: wearing cowboy clothes, striking a strong posture, and even organizing absurd "equestrian performances". These over-the-top performances instead expose the falsity of the so-called masculinity. In contrast, Barbie's transformation is more natural and authentic: from the initial mechanical movements to the later smooth and natural walking, the changes in her body language show the process of a person breaking away from the constraints of established roles and finding her true self, which confirms the core logic of "gender performativity can be deconstructed and reshaped" in Butler's theory.

These three theories together reveal an important fact: through ideological expression (such as Gloria's speech), physical movements (such as walking in the clinic), and the deconstruction of gender roles (such as Ken's funny performance), Barbie has successfully achieved the core function of traditional musicals in a non-musical way. This innovation not only expands the possibilities of film genres but also makes us realize that true growth and transformation do not require gorgeous musical packaging, but lie in the courage to face our true selves and the real world.

4. Structural regeneration: transplantation of musical DNA in the four narrative lines

The creative transformation of the narrative structure of Hollywood musicals in *Barbie* is manifested as a systematic reconstruction of the core functions of the genre. The film realizes the transformation and adaptation of the four unique narrative mechanisms inherent to musicals--emotional expression, plot progression, visual spectacle, and conflict resolution--through non-musical audio-visual strategies: ritualized collective movements replace musical lyrical segments, symbolic sound design substitutes musical rhythm, ideological performances reshape the dramatic climax, and bodily practices undertake the function of redemption. This transformation process is specifically presented as a three-stage progressive narrative progression: the collapse of the rule system in Barbieland, the reconstruction of identity cognition in the real world, and the life-awakening ritual completed through the act of walking in the gynecological clinic. During this process, the four narrative lines

(centered on Barbie, Gloria, Ken, and Sasha) form a sophisticated interaction, fully reproducing the core of the five-act structure of musicals--"utopia-crisis-low point-climax-new order".

In the initial utopian stage, the Barbie-centered narrative line presents a consumerist ideal through the morning ritual in the pink paradise. In the drone's overhead shots, the mechanically synchronized bodies of the dolls form a neat geometric matrix. While this reproduces the visual form of the opening group dance in *Singin' in the Rain*, the emptiness of its emotional resonance precisely reveals the performative falsity of consumer society. This type of ritualized collective movement merely retains the outer shell of group dances in musicals, while stripping away their spiritual core of conveying emotional connection [10]. Constitutional provisions act as invisible rules governing the spatial order; the weightless state of the floating breakfast and the empty water cups further serve as physical manifestations of "false abundance" under institutional control. When the Sasha-centered narrative line triggers the crisis, the proclamation of "plastic doll" elicits a physiological reaction in Barbie's facial pores, captured in a close-up shot. The fragmentation of this bodily symbol instantly shatters the perfect illusion: the narrative efficacy of this crisis scene forms an intertextual relationship with the classic design in *Singin' in the Rain*, where "audio-visual disjunction" disrupts the aesthetic order of silent films. Both expose the fragility of the existing rule system through "formal rupture"--the former directly points to the rejection of critical discourse by consumerist rules, while the latter deconstructs the visual hegemony of the silent film era, jointly delivering an impact on the established narrative paradigm.

Ken's exploration of the real world in his narrative line drives the narrative to its low point. The gloomy street scenes illustrate his misinterpretation of patriarchal logic, reducing power to conquest on horseback. This misinterpretation reaches its climax in the beach power-seizure battle in Barbieland: the Kens wear cheap plastic equestrian gear and cowboy clothes, and stage absurd equestrian imitations using toy horse water guns. The ridiculous props themselves mock masculinity. After a low-angle shot creates a momentary illusion of authority, the camera quickly shifts to an overhead and eye-level perspective, exposing the chaos and childishness of their actions, reducing the power seizure to a visual farce and deconstructing the imitation of patriarchy. Ken's profound cognitive dissonance, caused by his misconceptions and failures, unexpectedly fuels the awakening momentum of Barbie and Gloria.

This momentum propels the Gloria-centered narrative line, elevating her speech into an ideological climax. Circular tracking shots or stable medium close-ups place her at the visual center, simulating the focus on a stage. Ritualistic lighting creates a solemn atmosphere; the content of her speech, which analyzes the predicament of women and the essence of Barbie, is transformed through audio-visual design into a powerful and inspiring ideological expression, replacing the emotional release of a musical climax.

Barbie's final journey to the gynecological clinic is a symbolic act of her active choice to embrace full humanity and claim autonomy over her body. In the horizontal tracking shot, her walking is accompanied by the increasingly clear sound of flat shoes tapping the ground. This solid rhythm stands in contrast to the illusory tiptoeing and floating in Barbieland, declaring her acceptance of her authentic body. Her eye-level gaze at her own reflection in the mirror subverts the upward-gazing paradigm used in shaping musical idols, and through this calm gaze, she deconstructs her identity as a "perfect doll".

The significance of this choice extends far beyond an individual transformation: paying attention to reproductive and sexual health is not only her acknowledgment of the essence of life as a human being but also points to a form of bodily emancipation that transcends gender boundaries. It breaks free from the single-gender framework, extending bodily autonomy to diverse gender and sexual

orientation groups, and anchors the ultimate meaning of "becoming human" in each individual's autonomous control and cherishing of their own body--forming the most solid foundation for the new order [11].

The four narrative lines complement each other, and through the creative transformation of the core functions of different subgenres of musicals, they realize the transformation and adaptation of subgenre DNA, jointly achieving the innovation of the genre paradigm: the Barbie line deconstructs the narrative core of the "myth of talent" in inspirational musicals by challenging rule-based cognition; the Gloria line replaces the emotional release function of "arias" in middle-aged musicals with ideological speeches; the Ken line subverts the genre trait of "boisterous humor" in slapstick musicals through absurd physical performances; the Sasha line reconstructs the logical fulcrum of "confrontational expression" in youth hip-hop musicals through intersubjective bodily co-dance. The gamified rule-based field serves as the narrative framework: the rules of Barbieland construct a container for conflicts, collisions with reality catalyze cognitive transformation, and bodily practices deliver the new order.

When Barbie pushes open the door of the clinic, the steady tapping sound of her walking in the corridor, though lacking the dramatic tension of the knife dance in *West Side Story*, completes a contemporary interpretation of redemption through the rhythm of the authentic body. Barbie's confused expression when Sasha's proclamation shatters the illusion, the ideological torch ignited by Gloria's speech, and the mundane sound of Barbie's footsteps measuring the corridor--all together declare that the essence of musicals has finally been reborn in the gaze at the authentic existence of humanity.

5. Conclusion

Barbie borrows the narrative framework of classic musicals while endowing it with a brand-new bodily expression. It strictly adheres to the five-act structure of "utopia-crisis-low point-climax-rebirth": the perfect morning ritual in the pink paradise corresponds to the grand opening dance; the proclamation of "plastic doll" creates a Singin' in the Rain-style crisis; Ken's absurd beach equestrian farce serves as the ridiculous low point; Gloria's speech functions as the ideological solo climax; and the walk to the clinic stands as the ultimate rebirth ritual--with only one modification: musical and dance elements are replaced by modern rituals.

The revolutionary nature of this transformation and adaptation lies in its elevation of the body to the role of "new lyrics". The shift of Ken's cowboy outfit to a jazz suit is like a "liberation anthem for masculinity" composed with buttons; the gradually clear sound of Barbie's flat shoes tapping the ground is a "rhythm of freedom" more powerful than tap dance; and the wordless embrace between Sasha and her mother replaces the reconciliatory duet. These "silent musical numbers" convey an equality manifesto that transcends the limits of lyrical text through the synergy of visual and auditory elements.

Ultimately, the film carves out a contemporary home for the tradition of musicals: when the sound of footsteps echoes in the clinic corridor, ordinary paces are elevated to an existential solo dance. Barbie proves that as long as the soul of "elevating life through rituals" is preserved, the starlight of Broadway will never fade--it merely merges into the broader light of humanity.

Feminism has never been about striving to transform a patriarchal society into a matriarchal one, nor about advocating for women to become the "stronger sex" while reducing men to the "weaker sex". Instead, feminism aspires to enable women to break free from the male-dominated discourse system, discover their independent selves, and establish their own discourse power.

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