

Barbie: More Than a Doll

Kathy Winings
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I grew up with Barbie. In fact, I not only had a Barbie doll, but also had Midge (Barbie's friend), Skipper (Barbie's little sister), Ken, and Alan (Ken's friend). I ended up with Barbie's sportscar and wardrobe cases. My mother helped fill the wardrobes with beautiful clothes that she designed and made for each of them.



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As Barbie was an important part of me, when the "Barbie" movie premiered last summer, I expected a film filled with clichés, trite dialogue and a simple plot-line about two iconic dolls. But after hearing some positive reviews and knowing the reputation of the director, Greta Gerwig, I decided it might be worth seeing. You can imagine my surprise when the movie was none of these things. In fact, it provides a creative context for insights on some of our current social challenges.

"Barbie" hit theaters running in July and is still going full speed with eight Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (Ryan Gosling) and Best Supporting Actress (America Ferrera), as well as several BAFTA nominations in the UK that include Leading Actress (Margot Robbie).

Audiences will find the movie is about more than two iconic dolls as it motivates them to ask some hard questions about key social themes we face in today's world.

The movie has two contexts -- Barbieland and the Real World. Barbieland is home for three groups: Barbies, Kens and Weird Barbies. This world is idyllic and carefree with the Barbies living in well-kept houses and the Kens living on the beach. Barbieland is a matriarchal society where the Kens live to support and serve the Barbies. The streets are clean. There is an air that Barbieland is a perfect place to live with no crime or illness, no children, or any Barbie and Ken older than 30. The Weird Barbies live apart from the others because they are different. Their difference is primarily physically based, with some missing limbs or other body parts or missing hair.

As a matriarchal society, all of the jobs and leadership positions are held by the Barbies. What I found particularly refreshing was the racial and ethnic diversity of the Barbies. Of course, all of the Barbies are a perfect size 2, with perfectly styled hair, perfect skin and well-applied make-up. The Kens are also physically fit, with perfect hair and physical features. The Barbies and Kens do recognize, however, that there is such a place called the "Real World." They don't visit the Real World nor do those living in the Real World visit Barbieland.

Overnight this peaceful Eden is disrupted for Barbie (Margot Robbie). After asking some serious philosophical questions about her existence one night, Barbie wakes up the next morning only to find that

life is askew. Things in her house are not working, her hair is messy, she has morning breath, and her clothes don't seem to be right. Nothing seems to work for her. In sharing this with the other Barbies, they suggest that she see Weird Barbie as she might be able to shed some light on what is wrong.

Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) tells Barbie that her problem is tied to her owner in the Real World. Her owner is probably feeling confused about her identity and purpose -- the same questions that Barbie is asking. Weird Barbie suggests that Barbie needs to find her owner in the Real World and speak with her. After leaving Weird Barbie's house, as Barbie debates in her mind about undertaking such a trip, a new and devastating symptom shows up: Barbie becomes flat-footed: the iconic high-arched foot becomes flat, making it hard for her to walk. This prompts Barbie to go to the Real World to find her owner.

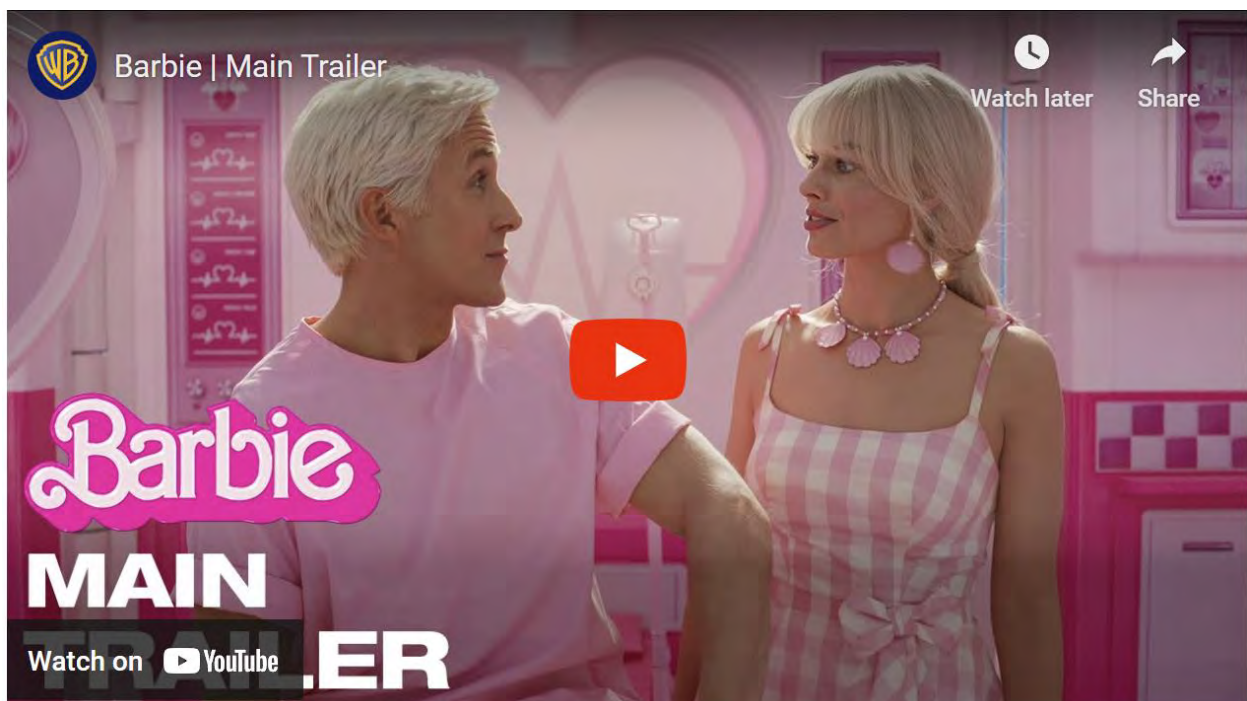
While Barbie has decided to go alone, after setting out on her journey, she discovers she has a stowaway - Ken. Reluctantly, she allows him to come with her. Their landing point in the Real World is Venice Beach, near Los Angeles. Life in Venice Beach is eye-opening for both Barbie and Ken. The one difference that stands out for both of them concerns the dynamic between men and women. While Barbie's experience is disconcerting and confusing, the experience is enlightening and inspiring for Ken.

Barbie's confusion continues when she meets a group of young teen girls. One of the girls, Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), criticizes Barbie as a poor image for the modern woman because it is a sexist one that encourages an unrealistic beauty standard. After further conversation, Barbie learns from Sasha that she used to have a Barbie doll but had put it away, but recently, her mother, Gloria, found it and decided to bring it out of storage and work the doll. Barbie then begins to wonder if Sasha and Gloria are her owners.

Ken, on the other hand, has an eye-opening experience as to life in a more patriarchal society. He witnesses men as medical professionals, professors, and leading businesses and government. This visit to the Real World is so impactful for Ken that he goes back to Barbieland to discuss his insights with the Kens and to re-organize life there.

Barbie's disappointing experience continues with her second critical encounter in the Real World. She meets the board members of the Mattel Corporation, her toymaker. However, listening to Barbie, the Mattel leadership decides she is dangerous for the future of Mattel and she needs to be captured, re-programmed and put back into the manufacturer's box.

Getting wind of this, Barbie is able to elude the Mattel executives, and in the process of escape, she meets the creator of Barbie, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman), telling her about her dilemma and questions. Ruth quietly shares with Barbie that her future is not set and encourages Barbie to think about her possibilities.



The official trailer for "Barbie" (courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures).

The Barbieland that Barbie returns to has changed. Ken has convinced the Kens that it is a "man's" world so the Kens set to assume leadership of Barbieland, taking over the homes formerly owned by the Barbies, and have indoctrinated the Barbies to serve the Kens. Barbie is shocked over the dramatic changes. Yet, the change challenges Barbie to reflect on all that she has witnessed and learned from the Real World with the end result of recognizing that neither system is healthy. This leads her to talk with Ken to share her budding insights that results in the two of them apologizing to each other and promising to encourage a more dynamic life in Barbieland.

Greta Gerwig's genius as director and screenwriter comes to the fore in the way she has chosen to question our assumptions about gender, purpose, identity, and difference. The combination of subtle images, iconic clichés and comedy enables her to initiate a conversation that allows the audience to think and ask the harder questions that often are not raised through more direct images. I particularly found her creativity in addressing the questions of gender, diversity and identity.

Gerwig sets up the gender dynamic from the beginning of the film. At first, it appears the direction of this conversation is going to be cliché and predictable. Instead of framing the conversation as men versus women, the use of iconic and comedic images allows the audience to question without being confronted or hit over the top of their head. In *Barbieland*, after the women and men experience matriarchal and patriarchal leadership, they begin to question the value of the either/or gender paradigm. Using the Mattel board as a further mirror of the gender dynamic is also good use of the cinemagraphic image instead of the dialogical method to encourage reflection.

The concept of diversity in its multiple forms was also creatively addressed throughout the movie. Gerwig again chose the power of the cinemagraphic image to highlight the diversity challenges. As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." *Barbieland* presents a community of Barbies from a wide range of cultures and ethnicities.

However, what is unique for this movie is the presence of those labeled "Weird Barbie." These Barbies and Kens are not the picture of perfection. Each one in this community is to be pitied, feared and generally avoided because they are not perfect but different. I applaud Gerwig's effort to raise the issue of perfection/imperfection as we experience Western society seemingly striving constantly for the ideal.

A final theme addressed in the "Barbie" film is also relevant for us today. Her journey is about who she is apart from conventional expectations and also about discovering her purpose, our most essential question in life. Having worked extensively with youth and young adults, I have learned that if there is one common theme within them, it is the search for personal identity and purpose. Early in the film it becomes clear that Barbie is no longer content with simply going along in life. Her experience in the Real World serves to strengthen her resolve to find the answers to her question.

I was particularly impressed with the ending of the movie. Gerwig resists the Hollywood temptation for a fairy tale ending in which Barbie and Ken ride off into the sunset together. Instead, we see both of them reflecting on what they have experienced and learned, allowing that wisdom to guide them as they go their separate ways into the future.

Spoiler alert: Instead of remaining in *Barbieland* and continuing to engage everyone in conversations on change, Barbie decides to return to the Real World, where Gloria and her daughter Sasha support her as she redefines her life in the human community. We leave Barbie as she takes her first step there by going to her first job interview -- another brilliant idea by Gerwig, turning the tables completely on the Barbie stereotype.

While I went into the theater expecting to see a movie with only clichés and iconic Barbie/Ken moments, I walked out thinking about the images I saw and the questions they inspired in me. This is why I believe "Barbie" is nominated for Best Picture at the 2024 Oscars.

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"Barbie" (rated PG-13): Running time: 114 minutes. Directed by: Greta Gerwig; written by: Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach. Main cast: Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, America Ferrera, Kate McKinnon, Issa Rae, Rhea Perlman, Will Ferrell, and Helen Mirren. See IMDb for full details. Available on Max with a subscription, or for rent or purchase from major streaming services such as Apple TV, Amazon Prime Video, and YouTube.

Photo at top: A movie still from "Barbie" (courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures).