

‘*Barbie* and the Question of Subjectivity’

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Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film, *Barbie*, ends when its main character, the Barbie doll known as Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie), decides to become a human being. The film dramatizes this as an encounter between the doll and the ghostly reincarnation of the inventor of Barbie, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman). ‘I wanna be part of the people that make meaning,’ Barbie says, ‘not the thing that’s made.... I wanna do the imagining,’ she continues, ‘I don’t wanna be the idea.’ She then asks for permission from Ruth to become human, but Ruth tells her she doesn’t need permission. ‘So being human’s not something I need to ask for?’ asks Barbie. ‘It’s something I just discover I am?’ And so it happens: Barbie becomes a human being.

There are some more significant details about this ending to which I will return, but I want to assert that this is one of the things that Gerwig’s film is about: it poses to us the question of what it is to be a human being. Another way of stating the question would be to ask, what does it mean to be a *subject* rather than an *object* or *thing*? And what are the consequences for a being who ‘does the imagining’ rather than being just ‘an idea’ produced by someone (or something) else? Significantly, these questions also pertain to feminism, for *Barbie*’s themes foreground the ways in which women can be – or *are* or *are not* – subjects rather than objects; that is, of the ways in which women can create their own world (or worlds) such that it is determined by themselves rather than by men. And the film makes a lot of the fact – let us call it a *fact* – that the world is

determined by and large by men, and that it involves systems, rules, customs and ways of being that favour men and disadvantage women to an extent that makes the distinction between subjects and objects not entirely clear for women. Are real women more like dolls than human beings? Is the human aspiration to be like Barbie actually a desire to become an object rather than a subject? And if that is the case, what would it mean to be an object and not a subject? And more pertinently therefore, if women are objects – dolls, ideas – then how do they become human subjects?

In what follows, I will try to trace *Barbie's* answer to the question of what it means to be a human subject, especially one who is a woman. One line *Barbie* follows is that subjects may think or believe they are subjects, but this belief may in fact be something akin to a dream. Such subjects might merely be acting and thinking in ways that are 'programmed'. This notion of programming and then of a subsequent deprogramming seems to me to be central to the film's conceptions of feminism, but also to its conception of what it means to be a human subject.

To summarise the film's action is no easy thing. *Barbie* packs a lot into its one hour and fifty-four minutes – its storytelling moves at breakneck speed – so my summarising will leave out a good deal. What I have to say here will relate to the main theme I have found in the film: the theme of human subjectivity. Concentrating on this theme means overlooking a range of other important issues raised by the film, especially those fostered by the film's humour. *Barbie* may well be categorized first and foremost as a comedy film, and I will confess that it is a film that makes me laugh a lot! I cannot deal with that humour here, so my summary of and approach to the film may come across as being a little too serious. Nevertheless, amid the comedy there is no doubt in my mind that *Barbie* raises issues it wants its audiences to take seriously.

In the film, Barbie lives in Barbie Land, as do all the other Barbies, along with

all of the Kens too. Ken and Barbie are based on a line of toys developed by American toy company Mattel. The Barbie doll was first introduced in 1959, while Ken followed – as Barbie’s partner – in 1961. They are often described as the two most popular dolls in the world.¹ There are a range of different types of Barbies and Kens, and these different types are represented in the film, though each of them is called ‘Barbie’ and ‘Ken’. Barbie – Stereotypical Barbie, the film’s main character – describes every day in Barbie Land as a perfect day. Ken – the main Ken is played by Ryan Gosling – is in love with Barbie, but she is not quite so enthusiastic about him. It is from the tension in the romance between Ken and Barbie that the conflicts which will define the film’s plot emerge. Gender tension is fiercely evident here insofar as the film reverses what can be said to be the ‘typical’ trope in which a woman measures her life and worth in terms of the man she loves and marries. Invoking Laura Mulvey, we might call this a standard response to the ‘male gaze’: a woman styles herself in order to attract that gaze and measures herself accordingly (Mulvey 1989). In *Barbie*, by contrast, it is Ken who desires to make himself attractive to Barbie. The film’s opening voiceover (voiced by Helen Mirren) assures us that ‘Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him.’ Later in the film Ken will say to Barbie, ‘I only exist within the warmth of your gaze.’

This romantic tension turns out to be the least of Barbie’s problems. She wakes up one morning to discover she has flat feet – the design of the Barbie doll necessitates high heeled shoes – and also that the water in her shower is cold. Furthermore, she burns the waffle in her toaster, she finds cellulite appearing on her thighs, and she falls from the top floor of her house.² As if that weren’t already enough, during the previous evening’s party (there is a party every night!) she had suddenly been struck by thoughts of death. Barbie begins to reflect on all this and states that, even though she’s not

supposed to think about causality, she is certainly wondering why all these things are happening.

The other Barbies recommend that she goes to see 'Weird Barbie' (Kate McKinnon). This Barbie has a tendency to do the splits and is covered in bizarre clothing and colours that are not at all standard for Barbie dolls. It is explained that this happened to Weird Barbie because someone played with her 'too hard', and inserts provide flashbacks of a child playing too hard with a Barbie doll, cutting her hair, painting her face and generally bending her out of shape. We cut back to the present so that Weird Barbie can deliver her diagnosis: the girl who is playing with Stereotypical Barbie must be sad, and that sadness is crossing over to and interfering with Stereotypical Barbie; it is filling her with negative thoughts and feelings. Weird Barbie assures us that this is not supposed to happen. The result is that a rift has been opened up between Barbie Land and the real world. How can this rift be mended? The only way to deal with it, apparently, is for Barbie to go out of Barbie Land and into the real world. She must find the sad girl who is playing with her and find a solution – in other words, she must cure the girl of her sadness.

For audiences, all of this requires substantial amounts of suspension of disbelief. We have to believe – or imagine – that dolls can walk and talk, but also that the behaviours of real people in the real, non-doll, world can have effects in the doll world of Barbie Land. One way to see this is to declare that *Barbie* is following a logic of play, with such a logic designating that when children (or anyone) play with toys, their imaginative worlds are awakened, and those imaginative worlds will very likely be related to their true or real worlds (see Winnicott 1971). Thus, the sadness inferred to the girl who is playing with Stereotypical Barbie is something that is true or real for this girl, even if it is being played out in her imagination.

These are propositions or connections of which I am rather fond when thinking about films and cinema. It is something I have called ‘the reality of film’. What I essentially mean by this is that we use films, as we do play, to encounter and work through ‘real world’ issues and adventures. The gist of my argument is that (as I once wrote) ‘films do not re-present anything. Instead, they create things; they create possibilities, situations and events’ (Rushton 2011, 4). What I mean to stress by saying this is that films do not offer *escapes* from reality; they offer us ways of *intersecting* and *negotiating* with reality. And so too with play, as psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott observed many times, for play occurs in a space between the lies between the subject and external reality, so that while playing, as Winnicott claimed, ‘the child or adult is free to be creative’ (Winnicott 1971, 51).

To a large degree, I think this is what *Barbie* is doing by setting up a ‘real world’ versus ‘Barbie Land’ dichotomy in terms of play. Playing with a Barbie doll offers an imaginative articulation of real world scenarios and situations. Which is to say that playing with dolls can have real world effects – the sad girl’s playing with dolls is an articulation of ‘real’ sadness, even as it is also a pretend mode of sadness. And yet, cannot much the same thing be said of films? That is, that films offer imaginative articulations of real world scenarios and situations? We may well be watching a film that exhibits pretend, fictional sadness to us, but such an exhibition may also be a ‘real’ articulation of what sadness is or can be. These sorts of propositions or themes are at stake for *Barbie* – that it is offering a commentary on what play is, yes, but also of what cinema is or can be. *Barbie* has no qualms about demonstrating various modes of cinematic reflexivity – it makes such gestures obvious from its opening homage to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001* – so that in commenting on play, *Barbie* is also commenting on the power of film and its imaginative and creative possibilities.

I might be tempted to state that *Barbie*, and films more generally, operate in a state of play. Indeed, Serge Tisseron has expressed this relationship between play and cinema exceptionally well.

In playing, every child chooses to let himself [*sic*] be invaded by intense feelings arising from situations that he knows full well are fictional. In this way he familiarises himself with these feelings, tames them and masters them. In other words, he gradually puts in place a capacity to isolate, check and, just as important, displace the feelings he has in real situations, where he cannot master them, onto playing situations, where he can. The adult cinema-goer does exactly the same. There is no difference in the feelings experienced, but in this case they are displaced onto the fictional situations playing out on the screen. In this way the viewer can give himself over to the experience without having to consider what would happen if he were in a real-life situation. (Tisseron 2013, 130.)

Play and Utopia

The child at play, as well as the spectator at the movies, can engage in a back and forth between the real and fictional worlds as a way of negotiating the terrain between these worlds. That terrain can be called *transitional*, as Winnicott famously designated it by way of transitional spaces and objects (see Winnicott 1971, 1-25). This space – a space *Barbie* explores in terms of a rift between a real world and an imagined, fictional one – is a space explored by a great many films, perhaps *all* films. It is a space explored especially in films of the musical genre. As a prime example, take the ‘Broadway

Melody' sequence near the conclusion of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). It is a moment of imaginative play in which one of the film's main characters, Don Lamont (Gene Kelly), imagines a grand song and dance routine that will enable the characters to complete the film-within-a film they are working on, *The Dancing Cavalier*. In the sequence we see what Don is imagining, but we also see it as a cinematic projection, as though the sequence is itself bridging the rift between what is being imagined inside Don's head and a real, external reality. And *Singin' in the Rain* knows it is doing this, for the studio head, 'R. F.' (Millard Mitchell), to whom Don is describing-imagining the sequence states, 'I can't quite visualise it, I'll have to see it on film first' – precisely like the film sequence we have just seen! Musicals know all about this kind of ruse, of the final song and dance routine that ties together loose elements of the plot, so that – to take another excellent example – the 'Dancer in the Dark' sequence from Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1954), while being fictional and non-diegetic as such, nevertheless delivers to us the uniting of the film's main couple – played by Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire – and the success of the show they have been rehearsing for much of the film. The imagined-fictional-song-and-dance world *outside* the reality of the diegesis nevertheless delivers a real conclusion for *inside* the film's diegetic world. Both of these films therefore engage in an imagined-fictional play so that what is imagined has real-world effects in the films' real diegetic worlds.

Film scholars will recognise a range of these sorts of gestures at work in what is known as the utopian function of musicals, most famously rendered in Richard Dyer's claim that musicals provide a *feeling of utopia* (Dyer 2002). This utopian function might be rendered nowhere more effectively than in another Minnelli masterpiece, *Brigadoon* (1954). There, the film's main character, Tommy Albright (again played by Gene Kelly), while travelling in a remote region of Scotland, stumbles upon the secret nether world

of Brigadoon. At the film's conclusion, Tommy decides to leave behind the real world of Manhattan where he has been living: his job is humdrum; his leisure time is too hectic; and he realises his fiancée is really not what he wants, especially by comparison with the wondrous Fiona Campbell (Cyd Charisse again) with whom he has fallen in love while in Brigadoon. Tommy effectively departs from the real world so as to live out his remaining years in the pastoral utopia of Brigadoon. And it is here that he is destined to live happily ever after. *Brigadoon* is thus premised on a rift between the real world of Manhattan and the utopian vision of Brigadoon. The destiny of its main character is one that follows a path from the real world – which is corrupted and unfulfilling – to the utopian fantasy-myth world of Brigadoon where we expect he will find everlasting fulfilment.³

Barbie's plot is predicated on a similar rift between the utopia of Barbie Land and the real world, a real world designated as Los Angeles, or even more specifically as the Century City district of that city. *Barbie* reverses the path taken by most musicals, especially one like *Brigadoon*, for, instead of trying to get to utopia, *Barbie* actually begins in the utopia of Barbie Land, and its main character, Stereotypical Barbie, will leave this utopia so as to enter the real world.

First of all, we need to ask, what is at stake for the traditional mode of going from the real world to utopia? A classic musical will typically end with the uniting of a heterosexual couple, often in a mythical and/or utopian mode. *Singin' in the Rain* reaches its conclusion when Don and Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) are united – and kiss – beneath a billboard promoting the very film we are now watching (*Singin' in the Rain*) in a mythic-utopian realm – though the film on the billboard stars Lockwood and Selden rather than Kelly and Reynolds. *Grease* (1977), to take another example, features the film's central romantic couple Danny and Sandy (John Travolta and Olivia

Newton-John) flying into the air in a motor car that takes them out of this world and into a mythic-utopian ending, all to the lyrics of ‘we’ll always be together’.⁴ And there are countless examples of what Thomas Schatz identifies as the traditional ending of a Hollywood musical.

Ultimately, the union of the musical couple is significant beyond its resolution of the immediate love story. The genre’s array of formal and cultural contradictions ... are resolved forever through the climactic show which projects their ideal merger into the infinite expanse of mythic time. (Schatz 1981, 199-200.)

The ending of a classic musical, in other words, shows us how happiness and fulfilment are achieved by taking the action out of this world and into a mythic, utopian one.

Another important ingredient is the affirmation of community. The formation of or aspiration for utopia carries with it a hoped-for society that will ease all tensions and troubles, a community of infinite good. Dyer claims, for example, that it is the musical’s appeal to community – ‘all together in one place, communal interests, collective activity’ (Dyer 2002, 26) – that enables the characters in those films to transcend the difficulties, challenges and fragmentations of their lives.

Barbie reverses all this. (I am not necessarily designating *Barbie* a musical, though it clearly borrows tropes from the genre and contains several dazzling music and dance routines.) As a starting point, instead of bringing the romantic couple together, it is the *disuniting* of the couple, Barbie and Ken, that sets the film’s dystopian functioning into action. One thing to immediately notice here is a sense of the dismantling of community: Barbie must face her problems on her own, more or less, so a sense of individual subjectivity is prioritised over the interests of the community from

which Barbie must flee in order to find fulfilment. She leaves Barbie Land first of her all to find the causes of her sadness, but she will also leave Barbie Land at the end of the film when she decides to become a human being. To become a subject, the film implies, one must venture out of one's community. I am not setting out to be critical of the film's moves here. Rather, I am keen to unpack what the film is trying to say about subjectivity today.

On Subjectivity

The best contemporary writer on these issues is Robert B. Pippin. I rely especially on the introductory remarks from his 2005 book on *The Persistence of Subjectivity*. The question of subjectivity, for Pippin, pertains to a range of issues, but generally asks after, as he puts it, 'the conditions under which one could be said "to actually *lead* a life," wherein one's deeds and practices are and are experienced as one's own, due to one' (Pippin 2005, 10). To some degree, it is this sort of aspiration – to *lead* a life – that pushes Barbie to change her life as it is – 'a great day every day' – in order that she might find some sort of origin of her thoughts and actions. Why is she feeling sad? Why is she having thoughts of death? These are the sorts of questions to which Barbie is trying to find answers. She begins to think that her own experiences might not really be her own. She is no longer sure that her deeds and actions – let alone her thoughts – are her own. Indeed, the film makes it clear that her thoughts and feelings are not her own. Rather, they are the thoughts and feelings of the girl who has been, in one way or another, transferring these thoughts and feelings to Barbie. As the plot unfolds, we discover that it is not a girl, Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), who is playing with Barbie,

for Sasha believes she has outgrown playing with dolls. It is Sasha's mother, Gloria (America Ferrera) who has been playing with Stereotypical Barbie.⁵

Of course, Stereotypical Barbie is a doll (and, additionally, a character in a movie!), so we should not expect her to have her own thoughts and feelings. The only thoughts and feelings she can have, it seems, are those that are projected onto or into her by the child or person playing with her. This is a theme *Barbie* explores in more general terms: how do I know if my thoughts and feelings are really mine? Might those thoughts and feelings be ones that are somehow implanted in me by someone or something else? By ideology? By an 'evil demon', as Descartes might suggest? By some unconscious force? By patriarchy? All of these discourses are facilitated by *Barbie's* mixing of human and doll – or more pertinently, of *woman* and *doll*; reference to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is surely intended, a point to which I shall return.

Part way through the film, when *Barbie* most fervently tries to get to grips with feminism, it is suggested that all of the Barbies have been programmed or brainwashed. They appear to have been brainwashed by something the film loosely calls 'patriarchy'. All of this is a consequence of Stereotypical Barbie's journey into the real world. She discovers that the real world is worse than she could ever have imagined. Where she believed the real world would be somewhat like Barbie Land – that women would be in power and living fulfilling lives – she finds the opposite: a world where men are very much in charge and where women lack confidence and are beset by anxieties and frustrations. Ken, who manages to sneak into the real world with Barbie, is emboldened by the power he sees men exerting in the real world. He then transports this patriarchal ideology back to Barbie Land. Later, when Stereotypical Barbie returns to Barbie Land, she discovers that the Kens have taken over, put in place their patriarchal ideology, and that the Barbies have now become adoring female servants to the men. Barbie Land is in

fact now Ken Land. And the Barbies also claim to be enjoying this: they love serving ‘brewski beers’ to their Kens, are delighted that they no longer have to use their brains, while the former President of Barbie Land (Issa Rae) claims that serving brewski beers is ‘much better than being President!’

Coming to self-awareness

It turns out that the only Barbies to have escaped the brainwashing are Stereotypical Barbie (she was in the real world when the brainwashing happened) and Weird Barbie (we can take her designation as *weird* as being equivalent to *feminist*: she has the nous to have avoided patriarchal ideology). The problem for them is to work out how the brainwashed Barbies can be ‘deprogrammed’. This is achieved by what can best be described as a process of coming to self-awareness. The Barbie credited as Writer Barbie (Alexandra Shipp), for example, had previously written a book, but the brainwashing effect of the Ken takeover has caused her to forget this. She remembers – she ‘snaps out of it’ – when she hears Gloria deliver a charged speech of feminist complaint. This speech is one of *Barbie*’s key feminist statements and a genuine high point of the film: we switch out of comedy or musical mode in order to enter a realm of forthright political advocacy. And it works for Writer Barbie who states that she had previously felt as though she were dreaming but is now awake. Stereotypical Barbie delivers her summation of the situation and the process that has occurred (again one of the film’s high points): ‘By giving voice to the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under the patriarchy you robbed it of its power’. In short, once women are made aware of the ways in which they are entrapped by patriarchal ideology, they will be set

free. In order for women to be able to change their minds, to ‘snap out of it’, they have to be brought to the understanding that what they thought was true or real, or ‘the way things are’, is not so. Rather, what *is* true is that women are subordinate to and subordinated by men in ways that restrict their lives enormously. Identifying this truth, so the Barbies tell us, robs this truth of its power.

That is the strategy the film’s protagonists then follow: one by one, all of the Barbies are deprogrammed in a kind of medical or psychiatric (or psychoanalytic?) procedure whereby their brainwashing can be lifted and their self-awareness – or perhaps their self-consciousness or, as an American tradition of thought derived from Ralph Waldo Emerson would put it, their *self-reliance* – can be achieved (Emerson 2001). All of this is highly problematic, and I think *Barbie* knows it. We have all known about the issues and challenges of feminism at least since the 1960s, so we also know that just making people – and women – aware of it has not been enough to change things. But all the same, perhaps this is still the best we can all hope for: that humans – women, but also men – will discover their own capacities for self-awareness and self-reliance away from the long shadows of ideological distortion, especially, for feminism, those ideologies designated as patriarchal. The quest is one of subjectivity: to achieve self-awareness is pretty much what it means to be a subject. Robert Pippin, in ways that I find convincing, says as much:

The core of the notion [of subjectivity] requires a point in the development and maturation of an individual when it becomes reasonable to attribute responsibility for the future course of that development primarily to the individual herself. This is presumed reasonable because of such a subject’s capacity for ‘reflection’, the capacity unique as far as we know to humans, for

every single individual to detach herself (at least in principle) from her ongoing commitments and to be able to ‘reattach’ her ordinary commitments (or not) on the basis of some deliberation about whether she ought to do so. (Pippin 2005, 15.)

If we translate Pippin’s appeal to subjective reflection to *Barbie*, then it follows that serving a brewski beer to a man is non-reflective, a kind of dreaming, and thus non-subjective (or a-subjective), whereas writing a book is reflective and self-determined in a way that could be called subjective: the reflective act of a subject; an act performed by someone who knows what she is doing because she has the capacity to stand outside that act in order to judge it as something that is worth doing; an act that is self-willed and self-motivated.

It might be easy to write such things – to declare that to be a subject one must act in ways that are properly reflective – but determining precisely which acts are or are not reflective is no easy task. How does anyone know for sure that serving brewski beers to a man is an act that must be performed in a non-reflective dream state, one that is ideologically determined by some sort of patriarchal mesmerism? Perhaps such acts really can be reflective, fulfilling ones. And yet, we have to admit that, at some level, a very significant level, such acts will also be socially determined and thus can never be purely subjective. If I am trying to establish a place for myself in the society in which I live, then I will very likely want some sort of social affirmation of the acts I perform: I will want to perform acts my society deems good and worthwhile. If my society tells me that serving brewski beers to a man is a good and worthwhile activity, then my performance of such acts will very likely deliver a fair degree of subjective, and reflective, satisfaction and fulfilment for me.

And yet, the genuine challenge for a subject is to in some way to manage to stand outside those pressures of social conformity. For an act to count as that of a subject, it must be determined *by me as mine*, and thus be free of any appeal to social customs or pressures. There have been any number of ways to try to conceive of how this could be possible, from Descartes's *Cogito*, to Lacan's directive to not give way on one's desire or, in to again point to an American context, Emerson's promotion of self-reliance over and against conformity. Indeed, Emerson declared at one point that 'popularity is for dolls' (see Matousek 2023, 69). Barbie dolls certainly might pander to the worst of supposedly feminine ideals whereby impressing others with one's looks, commodities, outfits and dream homes – pandering, as it were, to the male gaze – delivers the utmost in popularity and conformity. Perhaps this could be called a desire to be an *object* rather than a *subject*. *Barbie* certainly knows this, as is made evident by Sasha's responses to Stereotypical Barbie on first meeting her. She berates her, telling her 'You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented ... You represent everything wrong with our culture: sexualised capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals,' and that Barbie 'destroyed girls' innate sense of worth'. I think we can take these as statements that affirm the ways in which the 'popularity of dolls' erases the quest for subjectivity: self-worth is erased and social conformity is the only game in town.

The film, and Stereotypical Barbie, work towards transcending or escaping the tendency towards conformity. *Barbie* tries to find a determination of subjectivity that would somehow be freed from conformity so that, instead, such a subject might genuinely be self-reliant. Robert Pippin, again inquiring into the stakes of subjectivity, asks the kinds of questions that we have been exploring in relation to *Barbie*. He asks, "*Whose* ideas could be "yours" but not "your own"? Who else would know what you

want but *you*? How *could* they not be yours, how *could* you not know in a way you come to distrust?’ (Pippin 2005, 21). How can I have ideas that can be mine, Pippin seems to be asking, and yet at the same time those thoughts can be ones that seem to have been generated elsewhere, by ‘society’ or ‘patriarchy’ – that is, by conformity: the desire to think and act in ways that will be acceptable and supported by my fellow human beings. And then, if I begin to suspect that *my* ideas are, in fact, *not my own*, how do I come to such a determination? How do I *know* that this is, or could be, the case?

Thoughts that are mine (or are they?)

I think this is where *Barbie* ends up. Michael Wood, reviewing the film in the *London Review of Books*, shuddered with disdain: ‘At the end [*Barbie*] offers a well-meaning but rather dogged sermon on how we all, denizens of whatever kind of world, need to learn to be ourselves’ (Wood 2023, 20). Well, yes, but Wood misses Barbie’s key point, precisely that *we never can be ourselves*. To be ourselves may well be an aspiration or goal, but it is one that can never be achieved in any real sense. This does not then mean that ‘being ourselves’ is futile or worthless or meaningless. Rather, it means that being ourselves is an ongoing task. And this is what Stereotypical Barbie comes to realise.

Earlier in the film, after she had returned to Barbie Land to find the Kens in charge, Barbie had turned on Gloria and accused her of messing up the perfection of Barbie Land with all her ‘complicated human thoughts and feelings.’ Barbie declares that she had never wanted anything to change: she wanted things to stay just the way they were. Gloria rebukes her saying, ‘Oh honey, that’s life. It’s *all* change.’ Barbie’s

response is, 'That's terrible!' She then lies down and tries to ignore everything in the hope that, eventually, things will simply go back to normal.

Later, near the film's end, when Barbie Land has in fact returned to normal, more or less, the question is asked by Sasha of what will now happen to Barbie. The fictional CEO of the Mattel toy company, played by Will Ferrell in one of the film's sub-plots, tries to insist that Barbie and Ken will end up together, happily ever after. But Barbie is adamant: she is not in love with Ken. She adds that she's not sure where she belongs any more, and states that she thinks she might not even be Barbie any more. Ruth Handler – the ghost of the inventor of Barbie – enters the frame here again and addresses Barbie's desire to become a human being. Ruth tells her that 'Humans only have one ending,' and that 'Being a human can be pretty uncomfortable.' She continues: 'Humans make things up, like patriarchy ... and Barbie ... just to deal with how uncomfortable it is.' Barbie will eventually reply to all this with her contention that she does not need to ask to be human; that 'it's something I just discover I am.'

Pippin wants to defend the tradition of Western thought, especially the thought of Kant and Hegel, that took questions of the subject seriously. He does so against the twentieth-century critiques of that trajectory – Freud, Heidegger, Adorno and others. Pippin does not do all this with the aim of defining some sort of perfectible or even consistent model of subjectivity. On the contrary, any account of subjectivity can only ever be contingent and temporary; all subjectivity will be historically grounded and variable. Even worse, as Pippin will go on to argue in several books – including some books on films and cinema – that our knowledge and understanding of our own subjectivity will often be hopelessly inadequate or just plain wrong. We often think we know ourselves, and yet we will continue to act in ways that are contrary to that seeming knowledge, to the point where our actions may baffle or trick us, or leave us

devoid of understanding.⁶

Subjectivity might therefore be characterised as more of an attitude or orientation than a state or fixed set of traits. As Pippin puts it, commenting mostly on John McDowell's *Mind and World* (McDowell 1996), 'it is our nature to orient *ourselves* in a world by exercising, perfecting, and critically revising our unique capacity for reasoning, for justifying claims about the world and for explaining and justifying our actions to each other' (2005, 188). In short, we find our place in the world by repeatedly *trying to find our place* in the world. The very fact that we *try to find* our place is enough. It is enough that we can critically revise, try to explain the why and how of the world – to accept change; to 'do the making'; to inquire into why or how something is happening. And Pippin will go on to argue, against McDowell, that there is in fact nothing natural about such things. Subjectivity is *not natural*. It is historical or cultural. The human capacity for reflective thought and action – a human's being's 'second nature' – has nothing to do with capital 'N' Nature – or 'first nature'. Rather, Pippin will claim that these activities are ones that are historically and socially grounded. They do not come from 'me'. They come from 'us'.

'[S]econd nature' just means '*deeply* habitual', a historically achieved result (not naturally achieved, in any sense of 'due to nature'), the observance of which eventually becomes largely unreflective. A culture (*Bildung*) in this sense, while it is something we must have the requisite natural, enabling capacities to build and sustain, *is only* something we build and sustain. 'Subjectivism', then, directing us as it does toward the historical dissatisfactions and tensions responsible for the institutional change we effect, seems unproblematic enough and to be directing us properly, toward history, not nature, as the domain where

accounts of human practices are to be based. (Pippin 2005, 203.)

Humans, we could say, make things like Barbie and patriarchy, and none of these things could be said to be natural. They are historical and cultural. What this additionally means is that my thoughts and actions – *all* of them? Perhaps ... – come from history and culture, not from nature.

Much of the difficulty that comes with being a human subject who might be self-aware and self-reliant, what makes it uncomfortable, is that pretty much all of that selfhood originates *outside the subject*: it comes to us from our history and our culture. *Barbie* tries to make this point explicitly insofar as Stereotypical Barbie's thoughts of sadness and death are in fact thoughts derived from Gloria: they are Gloria's thoughts, even if they are also thoughts that Barbie is herself having. And *Barbie* is dramatizing those childhood maturational processes whereby a child will begin to differentiate its inner world from an outer world so that the child's own thoughts and feelings can begin to be in some sense the child's own. The ways in which a Barbie doll can function as a transitional object – an object that facilitates the child's negotiation between its inner world and the external world; still, in our culture, a negotiation that predominantly takes place between a child and the child's mother (as it does too for *Barbie* between Sasha and Gloria) – is surely central to the effects Gerwig's film is trying to pursue.

Capitalist issues

If *Barbie* can be said to be distinctive in its insistence on the sanctity of the individual over and against any claim to community or society, then this is a distinction

it shares with several films that take up the stakes of the utopian dimensions of the classic musical. As I argued above, the union of the heterosexual couple opens the mythic pathway to utopia that typically seals the ending of the classic musical, but *Barbie* does all in its power to counter that trope. Apparently Gerwig was to some extent inspired by Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), but I think the connections with two particular films, *Funny Girl* (1968) and *La La Land* (2016), might be just as prescient. *Funny Girl* is an important revisionist musical, based on the life of Fanny Brice – played by Barbra Streisand in her first screen role – in which the conditions of capitalist modernity prove too corrosive to support a married, heterosexual couple. Needless to say this was a hit film – the highest grossing film in the US in 1968 – and it chronicles the success of a woman entertainer away from, and in contrast to, the failures of the man she loves, played by Omar Sharif. One could easily call this a feminist tale of a woman's triumph, of individualist, capitalist success set against the tensions, limitations and dissolutions of heterosexual marriage.

Many of these tensions are replayed in various ways in *La La Land*, whereby a woman and a man find that their best roads to success are ones that navigated alone: a heterosexual relationship is deemed incompatible with entertainment success, and thus with capitalist success. In the film, Mia (Emma Stone) decides she must separate herself from Sebastian (Ryan Gosling, the same actor who plays Ken in *Barbie*) in order to succeed. As Erika Balsom quipped in *Sight & Sound*: '*La La Land* delivers what is ultimately a no-nonsense message of individualist drive. Professional success is what counts, no matter how you achieve it and no matter if a few hearts are broken along the way' (Balsom 2017, 79).

Barbie continues in this vein: to become a successful subject is something that must be achieved alone, away from Ken and away from the community Barbie has

previously known. It might be too much of a stretch, but I want to suggest that what unfolds here chimes in various ways with what has come to be known as *identity politics*. Such discourses now seem to have become ones in which the quest for a pure identity – one that can be self-defined beyond so-called normal or normalizing categories – has become the main terrain of contemporary cultural politics. This quest seems to be something like: ‘If I can be sure my identity is defined, symbolized and recognized correctly, only then I will have achieved a pure sense of self-awareness or self-reliance, a true state of “I am”’. To say that such a quest goes hand-in-hand with the goals of capitalist individualism might be overstating the point, but the aims of identity politics seem to me to be in no way anti-capitalist, as Eric Hobsbawm noted many years ago (1996).

Wolfgang Streeck has noted this kind of problem of identity politics more recently in terms that I find both challenging and enlightening.

The public sphere of capitalist democracies today tends to be moralised in a way that obstructs the formation of collective interests, which are replaced by safe symbolic spaces for self-defined rights-baring minorities. Radical politics becomes reduced to struggles, often adjudicated by the courts, by ever smaller groups for control over their symbolic representation. Instead of coalition-building and majority-formation, postmodern politics of this type gives rise to social fragmentation. (Streeck 2022, 12.(LRB, p. 12.)

Barbie is trying to show us something like this sort of social fragmentation that emerges as a consequence of identity politics.

Gender Performativity

And yet, *Barbie* also makes that social fragmentation an asset. In *Barbie*, identity is never settled. To this degree, the film stands as an affirmation of Pippin's claims that, when it comes to subjectivity, those traits of subjectivity will always be historically and culturally variable. On this score, Pippin – and *Barbie* – comes very close to the claims made by Judith Butler in relation to identity and subjectivity, especially in her book on *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler argues that whatever is in me that I call 'mine' can never be wholly mine because there are historical, social and cultural formations that precede me and form me in ways that cannot distinctly be mine, even if they are nevertheless still part of 'me' (see Butler 2005, 78). What *Barbie* proposes, it seems to me, is that any self cannot be self-generating and that any self will always remain somewhat unknown to itself. 'The opacity of the subject', Butler writes, 'may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge' (ibid., 20). And a little later she will state, with Hegel in mind, that 'I am, as it were, always other to myself, and there is no final moment in which my return to myself takes place' (ibid., 27).

All I want to point to here is that the question of subjectivity is always unsettled. The quest for a pure subject, and the quest for a pure feminine or feminist subject is an unattainable quest, so when critics of *Barbie* accuse the film of not being feminist enough or of having the wrong kind of feminism, they are approaching the question of feminism from the wrong angle.⁷ They are seeking a pure feminism, and there is no such thing. *Barbie* ends up at a point where it is not quite sure what feminism is. And that is a good thing. Instead, the film opens the way to exploring the possibilities of

what feminism can become.

The film's ending, for example, has come in for criticism on feminist grounds. At the film's very end (prior to the credits, which in themselves offer substantial food for thought), Stereotypical Barbie's first act as a human being is to visit her gynaecologist. The film's critics took this a sure sign that the film is adhering to an 'anatomy is destiny' trope: to properly be a woman one must have a vagina – and the film has by this point gotten good mileage out of the fact that neither Ken or Barbie have genitals.⁸ And yet, it doesn't seem to me to be out of place to state that to be human – to be a human subject – is to be sexed, so as a first step towards being a human, Barbie must do that. (If one follows a hard psychoanalytic line, it is indeed sexuality that makes us humans.) The film also makes this apportioning of sexuality a fabrication: we must presume Barbie is going to have a made vagina, not a 'natural' one. Anatomy, from such a perspective, would not be considered natural at all. Like all other distinctly human practices, it is historical and cultural.

Self-Reliance

I have tried to argue for a range of points in this article. First of all, I have tried to state that activities like playing with dolls or watching films can open up imaginative possibilities, that they can provide us with openings onto what might be possible or not possible in the real world, and *Barbie* to some degree offers a series of meditations on these imaginative possibilities. Second, I have claimed that *Barbie* reverses the traditional trajectory of films in the musical genre for, instead of taking characters on a journey which sees them venture out of the real world and into a realm where utopian

feelings are experienced and expressed, Gerwig's film begins in the utopia of Barbie Land and then takes its characters – Stereotypical Barbie and Ken – on a journey into the real world. Finally, the more extensive (and admittedly difficult) point I have tried to make pertains to what I have called Barbie's quest for human subjectivity. I have stressed that the journey towards subjectivity is historical and cultural, not natural, and that any attainment of subjectivity will only ever be provisional and thus will be ongoing, a matter of *becoming* rather than *being*. To that degree, then ending of *Barbie* should strike us as being something of a beginning rather than an ending. There is in the film's ending very much a sense in which Stereotypical Barbie has cut her ties with her doll life and is beginning a life that might properly be called human.

All of this brings to mind the way that Stanley Cavell characterizes 'melodramas of the unknown woman', as he calls a series of Hollywood films from the 1930s and 40s he examines in his 1996 book, *Contesting Tears*. With Cavell in mind, I think I want to say that Barbie begins the film as *unknown to herself*, and to that extent she is an unknown woman. As the film progresses she begins to discover degrees of self-knowledge that point her in the direction of human subjectivity. And I think it is fair to see her decision at the end of the film to go out into the real world, to discover what it means to be a human being, as in some way echoing the decision of Nora Helmer, at the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, to leave her husband, to go out into the world to be educated, and to be a human being rather than a 'doll'. Nora, in Ibsen's play, makes the transition from stating to her husband that, 'Here, I have been your doll-wife,' to the point where she makes the stern declaration, 'I am first and foremost a human being' (see Ibsen 1965, 226, 228).⁹

One of Cavell's main themes in his discussion of the 'unknown woman' melodramas is to enquire into what Emerson means by self-reliance. In summing up

what he believes the unknown woman melodramas do, Cavell writes that

The Emersonianism of the films I have written about as genres depict human beings as on a kind of journey ..., a journey from what [Emerson] means by conformity to what he means by self-reliance; which comes to saying (so I have claimed) a journey, or path, or step, from haunting the world to existing in it; ... call it the power to think for oneself, to judge the world, to acquire – as Nora puts it at the end of *A Doll's House* – one's own experience of the world. (Cavell 1996, 220.)

Needless to say I believe such experiences are at stake at the end of *Barbie* when Stereotypical Barbie – now renaming herself as Barbara Handler – goes out into the world to leave the Barbie Land of dolls to become a human being. It may well be of significance that another film released in 2023, a film called *Priscilla*, a film which, like *Barbie*, is directed by a woman, Sofia Coppola, uncovers a somewhat similar gesture, that of a woman trapped like a doll who merely haunts the world, but who at the end of the film finds the courage to leave the house where she has been trapped – the house is called Graceland and is owned by Elvis Presley; the woman trapped there is Priscilla Presley – to go out into the world to discover who she can become. To discover oneself, to discover the world and their experience of the world, away from the concerns and entrapments of men, remains a key theme for women and feminism nearly 150 years after Ibsen wrote his famous play.

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¹ See the entry for Barbie on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbie>, accessed 19 June, 2024.

² The film assures us that these activities are 'pretend' activities: there is, in fact, no water in the shower; Barbie cannot eat food; and falling from the top floor of her house is a mistake only because Barbie usually floats to the ground, as though being handled by a child who will, when playing, gently do such a thing to a Barbie doll.

³ Gilles Deleuze characterizes a certain set of musicals, especially those directed by Vincente Minnelli, as involving a journey from one world to another. See Deleuze 1989, 60. Cf Rushton 2012.

⁴ *Barbie* includes a short clip from *Grease*.

⁵ I might have written a whole other paper on aspects of maternal melodrama and mother-daughter relationships in *Barbie*, especially as exemplified by play and transitional objects.

⁶ See, for example, Pippin's on *The Searchers* (in 2010, 102-40), *The Lady from Shanghai* (in 2012(b), 50-73), on *Vertigo* (2017), and on the Dardenne brothers' *The Son* (in 2020, 231-56), and on Hegel (in 2008).

⁷ La Porte and Cavusoglu (2023), for example, criticise *Barbie*'s 'faux feminism'.

⁸ Again, La Porte and Cavusoglu (2023) are critical of this aspect of the film.

⁹ I have relied to some degree on Toril Moi's work on *A Doll's House* Moi 2006, 223-247.