

Karen Garthe

VALLEY OF THE DOLL

I remember seeing an old doll in the hands of children at a manor house on a remote Russian estate. It had come down through the generations, and all the members of the family bore a resemblance to this doll.

Rilke

In the beginning, there were only baby dolls to play mommy with and give tea to. In the beginning of the movie Barbie, little girls with their dollies are staged exactly like the chimps cavorting in a desert in the beginning of 2001, A Space Odyssey. And, just the same, they are witness to accelerated evolution when (also to Strauss's Thus Spake Zarathustra) a monumental Barbie rises totemic in the dust. Swimsuit Barbie looms and one of the little girls pets her sleek calf in awe. In a heartbeat, then, all bludgeon their baby dollies to smithereens.

A voiceover claims that Barbie was the first adult doll but that's not true. Barbie is Mattel's unerotic version of a far more voluptuous German porn doll named Lilli. In her day, Lilli dangled from key chains and swung on rearview mirrors, a boy toy, indeed. Years before Barbie, I had a Miss Revlon doll and later, Little Miss Revlon, both of whom were beautifully coiffured, smartly dressed "adult" dolls with earrings and high heels. I was too old for Barbie, and when I first saw her in my younger sister's hands, my instinct was to throw her (Barbie) like a javelin, feet first. Doing so, I'd have possibly caused another "Weird Barbie" a sorely abused doll...or doll torn apart to find its soul. In the movie, Weird Barbie is a newcomer to the franchise who's played to wry wacky perfection by Kate MacKinnon. Weird Barbie is the go-to gal whenever mythic Barbie trips over her own fantastic, when through sun spots or a warp in the matrix, she fails to live her best day every day. Or when she has shockingly un-fun thoughts – like, say, thoughts of death. Then, it's time to consult Weird Barbie whose ugliness and exile have endowed her with extra-Barbieland sagacity.

Barbie is a romp, a coy, cis romp down to the ground. It's the perfect blockbuster breakout for our time – what Busby Berkeley spectaculars and Fred and Ginger rhapsodies were to depression and post-depression era movie goers.

Margot Robbie is adorably guileless as Barbie, so easy on the eyes even in the shrill pink glory, the Walmart Olympus of her dreamland.

She dresses to the nines, dances to the moon, and she's no ditz. The movie is fun, its shenanigans best not examined too closely. Barbie's glamour-like-a-hammer is a respite from fires, floods, landslides animal extinctions, brutalized migrants, boiling oceans, mass shootings, spawn-of-Satan politics and ubiquitous everywhere meanness. She's total immersion in the commerce of prosperity and joy. Living her best day every day, she's a fireworks chrysanthemum spectacular – as painless and oblivious as twilight sleep. The movie is a juggernaut of Here Comes Everybody Barbies, here comes President Barbie, Physicist Barbie, Doctor Barbie, the Supreme Court Barbies (who alas, under Kendom are transformed into ersatz Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders), *Pulitzer prize-winning* Barbie and, quite necessarily, the armada of Plain Citizen Barbies.

Margot Robbie's the averaged-out Stereotypical Barbie. She is the leader of the pack singing and dancing every night is Girl's Night whipped to a glorious frenzy. When mid-song in the rain down of happiness and joy she suddenly exclaims *and what about dying*, the skull grins at the banquet. All action freezes. But movie magic means there's no need to split hairs, to ponder how actual dying might come in, since Barbie is sans biological function. Her morning orange juice glass is empty and her drinking it is a mimed imitation of life. Her perfect toast is untouched. When at one point, she says *I don't have a vagina and he (Ken) doesn't have a penis*, how in the world can death possibly arrive? But Stereotypical Barbie has found herself fitfully asleep on a heart-shaped bed, baffled by sad thoughts. And when she tosses off her shiny foil blanket and slips into a pink and white-checked crinoline dress to cheerily greet another best day, she's oddly out of sorts. Frolicking on the beach (every day's a day at the beach) the heel of her foot suddenly violates it's stay. From its inexorable high-heel mold, Barbie's heels hit the ground for the first time ever in her 64-year existence so she must – with fear and trepidation – consult Weird Barbie, the wise. Weird Barbie suspects that somewhere in Reality, there's a little girl who's so forlorn and unhappy that playing with her Barbie doll doesn't help one bit. She advises her to leave Barbieland and journey to Reality in order to find this sad little girl because only by showing up in person, by manifesting in the real world can the spell be broken. Only then, will her heels ratchet back up, bad dreams and thoughts of death abate. The little girl will be saved by her toy and vice versa. Weird Barbie presents Stereotypical Barbie a choice: in her one hand a poised high heel, and her other, a Middle Earth Birkenstock.

All Kens are Kens. No Ken is more than Ken – there is no Supreme Court Ken, no Dr. Ken, no Ken Vice Pres to Barbie's Pres. Kens are ciphers

or worse. In Barbieland's eternal beach party, all Kens vie hopelessly for her attention, but they nuzzle, nudge and preen to no avail. Even without genitalia to neutralize or remove, Barbies' boy toys are emasculated. They are pinkly, smilingly, and ruthlessly superfluous. Bryan Gosling's Ken, desperately smitten with Stereotypical Barbie, says *I only exist within the warmth of your gaze* and moons unrequitedly. To call the Barbie movie "Anti-Patriarchy" is cartoon fluff, a game of topsy-turvy inversion. None of the Kens has a dreamhouse and the Barbies don't even know where they sleep. Maybe they sleep on the beach? The Barbies never give it a thought. Gosling accompanies Robbie to Reality (Venice Beach in the Country of California) against her will (*you'll only get in the way*) but when they arrive, he winds up feeling doubly superfluous.

Barbie sends him off alone to go about her business and he wanders Century City, sees Rocky II posters and imposing uniformed policemen on horseback. He goes to the library and finds books all about Patriarchy and because he's just in the way in Reality, he returns to Barbieland alone. And when he gets there he stages a coup. With cowboy posturing, brewskies and videos of galloping stallions all over (*horses are just men expanders*) he presses the Barbies under his thumb. He turns the Supreme Court into the Dallas Cowgirls. After all, it's awful to feel you exist only in somebody else's gaze...yet is that not the predicament of all dolls? And, while you're at it, if you're going to make it new, you may as well demolish the old, just like in the beginning when the girls vanquish their baby dolls.

Barbie shines her pink cowgirl into a school cafeteria and sees the tween of her fitful dreams holding court. She strides confidently over but is emphatically warned-off by a girl who says *don't talk to Sasha, she'll crush you*, but she sidles up anyway. *Hi! I'm Barbie!!* And even though she doesn't have an old one, Sasha rips her a new one: *You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented. You set the feminist movement back 50 years ... your rampant consumerism, YOU'RE A FASCIST!!!* Sasha makes Barbie cry real tears, yet another malfunction in fairyland.

What Sasha says is true...or at least part true. Barbie has made women feel bad about themselves since making her first appearance at a New York toy fair in 1959. In a way. Still, she was just the hard plastic mold of an existing vision of feminine pulchritude. Invented by a woman, she's Mattel's most triumphal brand, a svelte blond or brunette babe cast in stone. Later, came the cute boyfriend, the dreamy house, a sporty pink car and any career or persona you wanted (easy with each new outfit). But if Barbie was yet another dark zephyr to make girls feel like they'd never measure up, she was still a doll. And even though Mattel scripted the

life out of her, a doll means fantasy and imagination. A doll is company. Sometimes dolls are the only ones we can talk to, they dream us and we dream them. We endow them with being or recognize the innate being they already have.

And boys play with Barbie, too.

Ken renames Barbieland, Kendom. Swaggering, elbows out like George Carlin's manly man, he installs saloon doors on the front of what was once Barbie's dreamhouse and renames it his *mojo dojo casa house*. Back in LA, Barbie discovers that her true doppelganger is not the cruel, blunt Sasha, but Sasha's mostly lonely mom, a lifelong Barbie devotee who just happens to be secretary to the CEO of Mattel. Mom (who seems not to have any other name) survives the boring hours as gatekeeper to the kingdom, by sketching Barbie in new outfits, dark thoughts circling her head.

The Mattel CEO has been tipped off that a Barbie has escaped Barbieland in the very same breath that she sprints into the Mattel tower for sanctuary (from Reality). Barbie takes the elevator to the top, to the boardroom where the Mattel's Masters of the Universe are anxiously plotting to put her back to where she belongs. She walks innocently into their arms and they say *just get back in the box...go on, just get back in the box*. And she does for a second, muttering *I'm having a Proustian flashback*. But the vibe is bad so Barbie runs away. She runs through the Mattel tower, suits on her heels. She tries different doors in a post-apocalyptic corridor from hell, and when one yields, finds herself in a misty retro kitchen where an old woman sits at the table reading. Barbie has found her Dumbledor, her inventor and wisdom crone who will bless her with gentle understanding, and sage advice, as well as coax her through the symptoms of incipient humanness which she seems to yearn for – tears, fears, feelings. She points Barbie to the stairs and when Barbie exits the building, Sasha's mom has pulled up *just get in the car!!!* and they speed away, the three of them, Sasha, mom and Barbie. They return to Barbieland renamed Kendom, and of course engineer a brilliant counter-coup, de-programming the brain-washed Barbies, bamboozling the hapless Kens, and re-pinking their world.

With burgeoning humanity, Barbie tells Ken she's sorry she took him for granted. Ken says he didn't really like being the boss of Kendom anyway, but once again explains, pitifully, how he feels that he only exists within the warmth of her gaze, which prompts her to say like the best self-realization and the best self-help, *you have to figure out who you are without me* which Ken promptly and miraculously does. Shouting *Ken's Me! Ken's Me!* and wearing a *Kenough* sweat-shirt, Ken's self-realization is instantaneous and complete. And Barbie becomes human. Wearing Birkenstocks, she finally attains her Oz – a gynecologist.

Paradise enow.

Barbie is not a kid's movie though there's plenty to satisfy in the preternaturally artificial landscape: sparkly clothes, the pretty, pretty, pretty cosmology of joyful music and dancing. Stereotypical Barbie's a beauty, and so is Ken, superfluous or no. The Citizen Barbies of the land are diversified (there's even Chubby Barbie) and the Kens are appropriately diversified, too. Still, most of the numerous jokes and puns are way too sophisticated or tongue-in-cheek for children, and most of the embedded references (lots) will whiz over their heads. The movie's basic female vs male gender war is either nostalgic or retro to the present day when gender identities seem as multiple as Hindu deities.

For everyone, though, Barbie the Movie is brilliant. And fun as a romp through FAO Swartz when you can have anything you want – or dessert at Serendipity when you can have it all. There's no need to know a single Barbie is made out of more than three cups of oil or that hundreds of her are sold per minute, to consider the polypropylene or polyvinyl chloride that construct her and her pink cosmos; no need to project forward how, for the most part, Barbie dolls wind up on landfills, scattered like trees after Christmas with their thousands of kin, to rest in perpetuity with the Styrofoam mold your new smart TV came couched in, alongside your discarded gallon jugs and the unquantifiable, innumerable rest. There's no need to trace your buttered popcorn to back to our genetically modified Corn Nation. Just sit back and wonder at this joystick of a blockbuster, masterminded by a clever and savvy director who has made herself and everybody in it millionaires at least – and *Why not?* Let them eat cake and play with Barbie, a dream doll with hundreds of outfits, hundreds of opportunities to spin around in the phone booth like Clark Kent and spring forth with a dazzling super persona. Or maybe you must make Barbie's outfits yourself and you can only imagine, invent what her dreamhouse (your dreamhouse) might be. She could be the companion of a child without attention or care, a child with way too much harsh reality in their life. Barbie could belong to a rich kid whose minus parenting means that every moment of every day is programmed with tutors, teachers, playdates, etc., and she's the one friend they can tell their troubles and their secrets to, and who they get to sleep with at night. Maybe, like for Moonie and her buddy in Sean Baker's film, *The Florida Project* (2017), Barbie means a last mad dash to the Magic Kingdom.

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