

Barbie Smites the Patriarchy

I was hoping that the movie would show Barbie rising up out of the collective unconscious to declare herself a super-hero to the country that gave the world super-heroes. It wasn't quite like that, but many elements were there, in embryo or as allusions. Overall, the movie does comment on political topics of America today.

We are a long way from where conscious revolutionary culture is helping to form and direct the consciousness of a new class of people. But the Barbie Movie begins to push in that direction. The target audience are not Baby Boomers. The movie addresses some serious political issues that concern the newer generations, the majority of whom recognize that the so-called "American Dream" is bullshit.

Millennials and the following generations, loosely called Gen X and Gen Z deeply grasp that temp jobs and skyrocketing rents just won't get it. They are increasingly clear that capitalism will savage them as it is savaging the planet. These generations are well aware of school mass shootings, escalating climate crisis, killer cops and now the Supreme Court Dobbs anti-abortion decision that removes women's rights to control their own body. They know the issues that affect them.

How well the movie's political message address some of the contentious political issues of the day is a different question than that it generally does try to address them.

It is no coincidence that this movie comes after anti-abortion laws and anti-LGBTQ+ laws are proliferating across the country. It is no accident that the teens of conservative America are flocking to see the movie along with Trans and Queer folk. Both sides have been taking TikToks and selfies of themselves to promote the movie as a form of performance politics.

My take, after seeing the movie, is that it is a fair attempt to explicitly address several political issues that directly counter the fascist policies and laws that are being put in place today. It is also outrageous, fantastical, surreal and full of song and dance.

The movie certainly shows all facets of the Barbie saga that began in 1959. Barbie after all is simply an idea, and therefore, we are told, she is eternal. Barbie historically reflects the white bimbo standards of beauty that preach the subjection of women to male patriarchy and supremacy. She also has become a beloved cultural icon that today reflects resistance. Young girls have often destroyed their Barbies, cutting their hair and setting them on fire. All of these contradictions appear in the film.

Here is a brief outline of the plot to illustrate how the movie deals with some of the bigger issues.

The movie begins with the first Barbie, who is “the stereotypical perfect Barbie”, who lives in a perfect timeless pink world where every woman is a Barbie and is called Barbie. There’s Black Barbie, Barbie the President, the astronaut, the scientist, the doctor, crippled Barbie, fat Barbie, Weird Barbie, on and on. Barbies run the world. There is a bill board picture of the Supreme Court in Barbie World. They all are women who wear white bikinis, pose and smile.

Barbie in the real world, of course, was deified by global capitalism as it reached the point where mega-corporations could sell in every market. So she has taken many forms. The Barbies all love each other.

The protagonist is the first Barbie, who’s “friend” is Ken. Like Barbie, he is sort of “the first” Ken. And all the men in this perfect world are called “Ken”. The Kens are a bunch of doofus Bros who only hang out on the beach and sport fashion. The Barbies know the Kens are 2nd class losers. They lead them around by the nose. The Kens know it too. They just can’t get too excited to do anything about it. Lots of gushing and sarcasm here.

The film raises all sorts of gender issues and stereotypes in numerous antic ways. Gender issues are thoroughly critiqued in scene after scene. One of the explicit gender-blurring moments of the film comes early on as we see all the Kens strutting on the beach. One says something like “I can beach you off!”, which leads to “I can beach YOU off!”, which engenders more threats about “beaching you off”. My grand-daughters, 9 and 6, who I saw the film with, did not get the double entendre.

As the plot thickens, perfect Barbie begins to have an existential crisis as she is questioning her own mortality, notices that her feet have gone flat, and she now has cellulite. After getting advice from the Weird Barbie, Barbie travels with Ken to the real world to find the child playing with her Barbie doll, who she suspects is the angsty middle-schooler Sasha, but actually she has to find Sasha's mother Gloria. After a while they become a Crew.

Of course the Real World is Venice in LA, not Miami Beach! As the two walk down the street, all the men start howling demeaning comments about Barbie's perfect body and Ken's rather gay apparel. They can't figure out what's going on. Some construction workers begin the group grope with words, and Barbie tells them off. She retorts that neither she nor Ken have genitals. "I don't care!" says a leering hard hat.

Barbie and Ken keep getting arrested because they don't know you have to pay for things in the real world!

Ken is struggling hard to think 'cuz something is bothering him. Finally he gets it, "This is a patriarchy! Men Rule!" So he decides to go back to Barbie World and institute patriarchy.

Meanwhile Barbie is looking for her human soul-mate and winds up in a middle school. She approaches 3 13 year old girls, who are doing their homework at the lunch table. "How do I look? I'm perfect!", she smiles.

Sasha, an important character, considers this as lunatic who dresses like Barbie and then cusses her out in detail for supporting male patriarchy (oh so true!) and finally calls her a fascist. This is a big political speech.

Barbie then gets snatched by Mattel corporate security and brought before the Board of Directors of the corporation – dumbass male supremacists all. They thoroughly lampoon many forms of demeaning women, and wind-up chasing Barbie back to Barbie land.

But something's different now. The Bros have taken over and installed "Patriarchy". They're still just as dumb and shallow, but now they run things, drink brewskis, put up Playboy pictures and generally throw their garbage around. No problem, because all the Barbies now LOVE serving

men! Supreme Court members are now all young buff dudes and tomorrow Congress will vote to make Barbie World into the “Kendom”.

This is a pretty fair representation of January 6 and the role of the Supreme Court in pushing fascism in the US today.

Barbie goes through many changes and finally develops human emotions. As she transforms, she and her crew decide to put a stop to Patriarchy. So Barbie needs political power!

Barbie delivers a pretty decent statement about how women deserve equal rights and this patriarchy BS has gotta' go. I may have missed it, but I do not believe Barbie takes issues as far as women have the right to control their bodies. At this point, with all the jokes about “Car mechanic Barbie, etc”, Barbie is wearing a white dress. Someone in the movie calls out something like, “Don't become the White Savior Barbie!”

The crew distracts various Kens, while others in pink jump suits, drag off individual Barbie sand tell them the truth about Patriarchy. More solid political commentary. Then the Barbies blink their eyes and dramatically wake up into consciousness. Now she understands! Pretty soon all the Barbies are liberated. Here the movie dramatizes the concept of “Wokeness”, without calling it that, but most definitely giving respect to this process that is under fascist attack today.

Then the Barbies take over and reestablish Barbie World. The Kens didn't like being in charge anyway – it was too much like work.

But the first Ken has an issue with Barbie, “Is every night still girls party night? I mean, don't we get to play at least a little bit?” The now worldly Barbie agrees and says that all the Kens in Barbie World will have the same level of rights as women do in the real world. Interesting denouement.

Unfortunately, the end of the movie somewhat erases this message. Barbie has human emotions but is not yet complete, after all, she still doesn't have genitals. Ruth Handler, who invented Barbie, is a character in the movie, takes Barbie's hands, spouts wisdom, and then, in a steal from Pinocchio, makes Barbie into a Real Girl.

Last scene: Barbie goes into an office. “How can I help you?” “I’m here to see my gynecologist.”

Harhar – kind of a let-down.

So now the movie is out. It’s a big blockbuster. Barbie is certainly rising to counter the ideas of patriarchy, which is fundamental to the White Supremist Christian Nationalism behind the very open and very coordinated fascist attack to abolish government as we know it.

As the new school year unfolds, it will be fascinating to observe whether the Barbie Movie becomes included in classroom curricula across the country, and especially, in Republican dominated states. Taking on patriarchy, demanding equal rights, reveling in gender issues, dealing with the political power to make changes, outing January 6 and the Supreme Court, supporting individuals to “wake up” – how well does dressing these issues in pink make them palatable?

The great 1964 movie “Dr Strangelove” was a political spoof about militarism and nuclear war on a similar level. It changed the popular thinking of America.

Barbie is still evolving. She may yet become a super hero in the popular mind.

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