

Barbie Pathologies: It's All About a Doll

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As the ancient Greeks reminded us, bone cold definitions as starting points are essential in any discussion. One current discussion, insignificant to posterity but amusing for advertisers and the presently bored, is the ludicrous reactions to a plastic doll rendered into celluloid form. And as a doll, it can be no other. Mattel's Barbie has become, courtesy of Greta Gerwig, a talking point so silly it deserves to be treated trivially. But money, advertising, and Mattel, won't allow that.

Commentators, whatever their ilk, cannot help themselves. Jourdain Searles, evidently struggling to earn a crust or two, [asks two banal questions](#). This first: "In a cinematic landscape drowning in IP, would a live-action film about the Barbie doll, Mattel's flagship toy, be held up as proof of the continued commodification of cinema as an artform?" The second is not much of an improvement: "And in a more progressive cultural landscape, could a woman-directed film about Barbie dolls be feminist?" Not necessarily.

The *New York Times* does not disappoint in [its](#) silliness. "Can a doll with an ingratiating smile, impossible curves and boobs ready for liftoff be a feminist icon?" No, it cannot, but stating something so embarrassingly asinine is very much in character with this field.

From the conservative, domestic, home stove huggers, this is distinctly not on. Ben Shapiro of the *Daily Wire* [lamented](#) the unironic use of "the word 'patriarchy' more than 10 times." Toby Young in *The Spectator* [moaned](#) that, "The film is a gender studies seminar disguised

as a summer blockbuster". Kyle Smith, formerly a *National Review* critic, [echoed](#) the grievance in the *Wall Street Journal*. "As bubbly as the film appears, its script is like a grumpier-than-average women's studies seminar."

Young goes a bit deeper in opining that *Barbie* is an act of "self-flagellation – a way of doing penance for a sin of being associated with a brand that was insufficiently woke in the past." Don't be too white; don't be too thin. "This paean to female empowerment is a plea for forgiveness from the titans who run Mattel, but I suspect it will be another case of 'Go woke, go broke'."

On Sky News Australia, [one researcher](#) even thought it worthwhile her time, and everybody else's, to assume that a fictional character was terrifying in promoting "an anti-men agenda". The males are seen as "useless and unintelligent or villains". Whoopy Goldberg's riposte to such views comes to mind. "It's a movie about a doll!" [she exclaimed](#) on *The View*. Barbie lacked "genitalia, so there's no sex involved. Ken has no genitalia, so he can't – it's a doll movie!"

Hugging a somewhat different ground from the conservative side of the fence, the *National Review's* Jack Butler can be found [suggesting](#) that Barbie is a "highly sophisticated" film "and one that many conservatives are almost certainly getting wrong." It was "not really a movie about men. But it does not hate them."

Across the pond, the perennially randy Tory politician and disgraced former prime minister Boris Johnson [tells fellow conservatives](#) to calm their nerves when considering *Barbie*. Managing to turn his commentary on the film into one about global demographics and necessary fecundity, he finds the true meaning: "You want lots more little babies who will soon turn into doll-demanding kiddies. Mattel wants human reproduction!"

The right winger who gets the gong for the daftest commentary of all must surely be the Texan **Senator Ted Cruz**, who has [mounted his own crusade](#) against *Barbie* as a font of "Chinese communist propaganda" out to brainwash his two girls, largely because it purportedly sports a map that depicts a disputed dash-line used by the PRC to claim the South China Sea.

Those at Warner Bros. must have been giggling all over in stating that the line depicts "Barbie's make-believe journey from Barbie Land to the real world. It was not intended to make any type of statement." But then again, expect anything from a man who accused Big Bird of Sesame Street for promoting government propaganda, and Disney [for plotting](#) the eventual sexual union of Mickey Mouse and his pet dog Pluto.

From the feminist-liberationist side of things, we find a mirror of the conservative cantankerousness suggesting they might have a point, albeit a flimsy one. In *Refinery29*, we find Patricia Karounos [declaring](#) *Barbie* to be "the feminist movie you've been waiting for" while making the dotty remark that anyone (no, everyone) who had seen the advertising for the film knows that "Barbie is everything." There is a "feminist" monologue from America Ferrera that is also [praised](#) by such outlets as *The Daily Beast* for examining "the difficulties of womanhood".

The absurd nature of the whole doll business [reached a highwater mark](#) on Australia's ABC network in *Gruen*, a program dedicated to demystifying the world of advertising. On the panel, hardboiled advertising veterans dissect the entrails of their industry, including its

ruthless manipulations. For one of the panellists, Russel Howcroft, Barbie was something of a modern Joan of Arc, a figure who really ought to think deeply about who she will eventually marry. "She's just a toy, Russel!" came the mocking response from a fellow panellist.

Ultimately, the likes of Gerwig are having everybody on for the ride. You have all been had, most notably by the vast advertising complex that is Mattel. Whether you hate (or adore) the toy, dislike (or like) the commodity made flesh, or find the whole thing somehow repellent (or insightful), was always the point. The one group of individuals who will be counting their pennies, leaving aside the contracted actors, are the advertising agents, gurus, and witch doctors who told the world that a pinked-up doll somehow mattered in any significant way to anybody.

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