

# **Greta Gerwig's Barbie:**

## **A Study of How Political Culture Wars Influence Reception in the Mainstream**

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### Abstract

This study discusses *Barbie*, (2023) and how its divided reception has been influenced by the current polarizing political landscape in the US, since the intended audience for the movie was supposed to be people from the left. Even though this has happened to several movies in the last few years, most notably to *Ghostbusters*, (2016) and *Captain Marvel*, (2019), the specific outrage *Barbie* has received is due in part because of Covid-19, and how it has allowed for conservatives to gain more ground. What I argue in this study is therefore that the reception of *Barbie* is dependent on the spectators political views, since conservatives are prone to doing a deliberate misinterpretation of the movie. Consequently the reception was destined to play out in the way that it has, since conservative people feel that it is their duty to do an oppositional reading.

### Keywords

Barbie, reception studies, conservatism, feminism, patriarchy

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The overall reception

In a year that was plagued by strikes and diminishing returns for cinemas, one movie burned brighter than the rest and proved that a movie made by and for women could succeed, and succeed well. The overall reception was mostly positive where critics and audiences alike complemented its marvelous production design, feminist messaging and of course its many jokes. All's well that ends well, and with a 88% on Rotten Tomatoes it would seem that this movie was near universally liked. However, this is not the full story, for if you look on the right side of the political spectrum you will soon find that there are many people who seemed to construe a completely different meaning of the film, and ultimately think it to be dangerous propaganda.

To outline the overall reception of *Barbie*, (Gerwig, 2023), from non-conservative outlets I looked at some of the most well known newspapers and there it became clear that most of them thought that *Barbie* was, if not great, then at least a fun time. The Guardian claimed it was "a riotously entertaining candy-colored feminist fable that manages simultaneously to celebrate, satirize and deconstruct its happy-plastic subject", (Kermode, 2023), and the New Yorker called it a "thrilling experience" where Gerwig had managed to imbue the film with "artistic freedom and uninhibited creative passion", (Brody, 2023). Others are a bit less enthusiastic, such as Time that thought it was artistically beautiful but ultimately not that deep, (Zacharek, 2023), and the New York Times that thought it was fun and witty but that Gerwig's artistic ability ultimately felt a bit constrained by Barbie being owned by such a big corporation as Mattel, (Dargis, 2023). Then we of course have the previously mentioned Rotten Tomatoes rating that, while by no means is a fool proof way of deciding the consensus of a movie, at least indicate with its 88% fresh critics rating that most critics thought it was above average. This is also reflected in the "critics consensus" which is said to be that "Barbie is a visually dazzling comedy whose meta humor is smartly complemented by subversive storytelling", (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.). When looking at others that are coming from a more conservative viewpoint however, the consensus changes to something completely different with Ben Shapiro being at the forefront of that movement with statements such as that it is a movie "disguised" as propaganda, and that its jokes are exaggerated and portray a false reality, thus making it deeply unfunny, (Ben Shapiro, 2023).

### 1.3 Background

That certain movies appeal to different sides of the political spectrum is certainly not a new notion, but it does seem that certain movies garner more attention than others, for better or, more likely, for worse. Two movies that come to mind that got a similar treatment as *Barbie* in regards to the skewed reception is *Ghostbusters*, (2016) and *Captain Marvel*, (2019), since they received a lot of hate, mostly prior to their releases. In the case of *Captain Marvel*, Rotten Tomatoes even had to change its system due to an extreme surge in people pressing "not interested" and review bombing the movie before it had even been released, (Buckley, 2019). The common denominator for these three movies could be said to be that they all have female leads and in some shape or form have a feminist messaging, with *Barbie* being the one with the most noticeable feminist tone. While the people that dislike these films will assert that they in no way hate them simply because there are women involved, it is clear that this is one of the main reasons, not least in the case of *Ghostbusters* where the only real change from the original in regards to tone and how the story is structured lies in the fact that the men have been swapped out for women. By focusing on women and their experiences it seems that these movies have also gotten the word "woke" attached to them, which is an increasingly important term, not least in how it will play a role in the upcoming election, what with its connection to gender and race politics. The "wokeness" also makes these movies a property of the left, (according to conservatives at least), effectively dooming them from the start. That these movies are somewhat linked even in the eyes of conservatives themselves becomes clear when looking at a conservative YouTube video where it is said that Barbie is "the deformed mutated rage child of Captain Marvel, Ghostbusters 2016, and She Hulk", (The Critical Drinker, 2023, 0:45). For them it seems that these movies showcase a trend where things are continuously getting more and more political and that this is hitting a nerve is apparent when considering that the outrage is getting louder and more all-encompassing with each installment. In the case of *Ghostbusters* and *Captain Marvel* the main critique was rather one note where people found a key component to focus their hate on, specifically on the gender swap in *Ghostbusters* and on Brie Larson in *Captain Marvel*, but in *Barbie* the critique seemed to be a mix of these two, where both Gerwig and the overall story got equal attention. The reason for why the conversation around it seems to have been so wide ranging may be, among other things, the specific time that we live in, that is, in the time of Covid-19.

In her book *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*, Naomi Klein, (2023), speaks about the pandemic and how it created an environment where the alt-right movement found people who were already "in a generalized fear of getting seriously ill and possibly dying", (p.39), which made them

feel more inclined to hear conservative people out and most of all to hear easy solutions to problems. After all, it may make sense to oppose "wokeness" when you are already upset about a myriad of different decisions that politicians have made that are not beneficial to you, but that are necessary for other people. Combine this with how good conservative people are at packaging their ideas in an accessible way, and you have a political landscape that is looking completely different since people who had not been considering themselves conservative before the pandemic suddenly started listening in on those conversations. As Klein puts it "it is right-wing, often far right, political parties around the world that have managed to absorb the unruly passions and energy of diagonalism, folding its covid-era grievances into preexisting projects opposing 'wokeness' and drumming up fears of migrant 'invasions'", (p.98). She also speaks about how the different sides of the political spectrum mostly construct their agenda to be as different to the other side as possible, a phenomena that she further explains as "individuals not guided by legible principles or beliefs, but acting as members of groups playing yin to the other's yang - well versus weak; awake versus sheep; righteous versus depraved. Binaries where thinking once lived", (p.16). This creates a left and right that is so wholly different from each other that they do not want to touch anything the other is doing. This ultimately gives the right free play to discuss whatever they want without any real opposition in terms of actual counter arguments, rather the usual response from the left is to roll their eyes and point out that the right is spouting nonsense. This creates an atmosphere where people gravitate towards the right simply because it seems that they are the only ones talking about the things that they have come to believe are important.

#### 1.4 Research question

With all of this in mind, what will be discussed in this essay is how the anger that conservatives have shown towards *Barbie* is indicative of its position as a cultural product of the left, and how it is this position that has led them to misinterpret the film. I will also discuss how this outrage showcased that there was a real difference in how the film was received, which seems to by and large be explained by the different sides of the political spectrum, that is, if the critics were conservative or not. The key concepts and authors that will be used to explore this are Stuart Hall, and his thoughts on decoding and intended audiences, and Pierre Bourdieu, with his different forms of capital, specifically social and cultural ones. There will also be a brief discussion on gender, and how female characters receive more hate than male ones.

## 1.5 Key concepts

Stuart Hall, (1980), talks about the fact that built into the very foundation of media production there is an expected message to be taken away from it and that this is an extremely important part of consuming media, in fact, as he puts it "if no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'", (p.117). While the text where he speaks of this is about television, I feel that it is very applicable to movies as well since the production is so similar, specifically in that the message that the makers of a certain type of media decides on, is also decided by the intended audience, thus creating a loop like structure where the audience is both the source and receiver of said message. This structure then exposes what might happen if the source and receiver were to not be the same, as is the case when conservatives watch *Barbie*. The reason for why this clash might cause problems is that for the message to come across there has to be certain codes, or signs, that have to be decoded in the right way. Everything that you see in a movie is a combination of different signs that either has a denotative or connotative meaning. The denotative one is more literal, like when you hear the word pig you expect to see the animal, and the connotative one is more broad and has different meanings attached to it, like when the word pig is associated with policemen or sleazy men. Hall is careful however to clarify that these might change and there are few instances where something is only denotative or connotative, but rather often a mix of the two. The connotative meaning is the more interesting one though and Hall quotes Barthes as having said that they "have a close communication with culture, knowledge, history, and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the fragments of ideology", (p.123). How people understand the connotative meanings will in other words give an idea on who they are, and for example where they might fall on the political spectrum.

When a spectator misunderstands a movie, that is, when they are not able to decode in a sufficient manner, they are "not operating within the 'dominant' or 'preferred code'", (p.125). What this tells us is that there are limits to what can be understood about a movie, since otherwise anyone could make up random meanings without any real basis in the material that they have watched. There is always a connection between the choices of the producers and the meanings available to the audience, and this communication is not as free as some might think, but wholly constructed beforehand. This communication does not always work perfectly however, which is why Hall outlines three positions of viewership that one can be in, where the first is the one that is preferred by the producers and where the spectator decodes everything in exactly the manner they were

predetermined to do it in. The second one is "that of the negotiated code or position", (p.126), which is where the person watching understands, and agrees with, the preferred decoding, but sometimes chooses to disagree. In the third one the viewer also understands the preferred reading but chooses to "decode the message in a globally contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to revitalize the message within some alternative framework of reference", (p.127), something he also describes as operating within an "oppositional code", (p.127). While most producers want everyone to be in the first position and for the the message to be as transparent as possible I would like to add that there are instances where the maker of a certain type of media wants it to be purposefully confusing and vague, as to spark debate about what it all *actually* means, with filmmakers such as David Lynch, and, in some cases, Christopher Nolan coming to mind.

The other key concept that will be applied to the reception of *Barbie* is Pierre Bourdieu, (1986), and his text about forms of capital. Out of the three he describes, economic, cultural and social capital, it is the social and cultural that will be most relevant to my discussion here. What social capital means is to belong to a certain group where the foundation lies in recognizing that you are in a group together. Even if the point of belonging and becoming a member to this group is not consciously to gain something, the ultimate point is exactly that in that the thing that constructs the group is the investments made from its members, which will be usable to each individual in some shape or form. Further, "exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, re-produces the group", (p.287). In other words, to behave in a way that is deemed socially acceptable by the specific group that you are a part of, is what makes that group continue and grow. What is and what is not socially acceptable is also something that is up to each member to uphold, this does not necessarily mean that there are not any leeway in regards to the rules, but that the limits are continuously tested by the members themselves, and that expulsion from the group is then decided by the group itself.

Cultural capital, on the other hand, is heavily dependent on education and having the time to fully immerse yourself into acquiring it and considering that financial stability makes it easier to be in school longer, it is therefore also heavily dependent on economic capital. Your family is also very important when looking at cultural capital, since it is in many ways hereditary, meaning that the cultural capital previously acquired by your family is very likely to be something that you also



learn. To simply possess objects that are meaningful to cultural capital is not the same as being able to use them, which is why Bourdieu distinguishes between the objectified state, and the embodied state, where the objectified is owning objects, and the embodied is having the knowledge on how to use them, which is something that takes time and commitment to acquire and cannot be gifted away. Further, while having cultural capital is heavily dependent on one's upbringing and overall ability, this is disguised enough that it is often "predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence", (p.283).

## 1.6 Perimeters

The reception to this movie belongs to a very specific moment in time, not only in how the pandemic has altered the political landscape but also in that it became a cultural moment alongside Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, (2023). These two movies happened to open on the same day, and as a result people started talking about going to see them as a double feature, resulting in that the reception of *Barbie* became inextricably linked to that of *Oppenheimer*. The focus on the feminine aspect, (or lack thereof), of it may have been so overblown then, simply because its counterpart was a 3 hour long serious historic drama. What's more the conversation around both of these movies were undoubtedly boosted by the double feature situation and thus made it impossible to ignore either of them, (especially after the distributors caught wind of this idea and doubled down on it), which creates an aspect where the reception of *Barbie* was so inflated simply because the people who had only planned on seeing *Oppenheimer* was unable to escape being exposed to *Barbie* as well.

## 1.7 Summary of Barbie

The movie takes place in two different worlds, "Barbieland" and "The real world". Our introduction to Barbieland showcase a pink marvel where every night is girls night and there are different Barbies for every occasion, such as President Barbie, Nobel Prize winner Barbie, and the main character Stereotypical Barbie, played by Margot Robbie, (henceforth named only Barbie). The Kens mostly hang around to get attention from the Barbies and have less clear jobs, such as Barbie's boyfriend Ken, played by Ryan Gosling, whose job is simply "beach". When Barbie starts having troubling thoughts of death her once perfect life starts to malfunction and she has to go talk to "Weird Barbie", who explains that these malfunctions stem from how unhappy the girl that is playing with her in the real world is, and that this had lead to a "rip in the continuum that is the membrane between Barbieland and the Real World", (21:05), which can only be fixed by Barbie

going there and making things right. Ken manages to sneakily join her on her journey and together they go to the real world, where they discover that things are not the same as in Barbieland, but rather a total reversal as to who holds the power. Ken borrows a book on the patriarchy and returns to Barbieland alone to tell the others about it and Barbie finds out that the one playing with her was not the girl she has been having visions of, but rather the girl's mother. After a scuffle with the CEO of Mattel, Barbie and mother-daughter duo Gloria and Sasha escapes back to Barbieland where they discover that Ken has implanted the patriarchal change and turned it into Kendom, with a complementary brainwash of all of the Barbies to boot. Barbie, along with Gloria, Sasha and Weird Barbie take back the power by reminding the other Barbies of the faults of the patriarchy and then stop the constitutional vote the Kens were to have to make Barbieland into Kendom permanently. Barbie then proceeds to have a talk with the creator of Barbie, Ruth, (who keeps an office as a ghost in the Mattel headquarters), and decides that she wants to be human.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 The conservative reception

As previously mentioned one of the main conservative people that have spoken out about *Barbie* is Ben Shapiro, a known conservative who is the founder of Daily Wire, a news site that states that it "does not claim to be without bias", (Daily Wire, n.d). He is also the host of the podcast "The Ben Shapiro Show" as well as a recurring columnist of for example Creators syndicate and Newsweek. Originally a lawyer, he seems to have always been interested in politics and has written several books, such as "*Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth*" and "*Primetime Propaganda: The True Hollywood Story of How the Left Took Over Your TV*". With his support of a ban of abortion and his views on transgender people being mentally ill, (among other things), his main audience cannot be said to be anything but conservative, ("Ben Shapiro", 2024). On his Youtube channel he made a 43 minute long video where he went through the movie's many faults. He begins the video by ceremoniously setting fire to two Barbies which perfectly encapsulate the amount of emotion this movie stirred, and then goes on by saying that the producers "dragged" him to see it, thus making it clear from the get go that he did not willingly go to see this movie. He then wastes no breath in immediately claiming that it "is a flaming piece of dog shit, piled atop an entire dumpster on fire, piled atop a landfill full of dog shit", and concluding with that "it's one of the worst movies [he's] ever seen", (0:56). The whole video is as mentioned 43 minutes, but with its many repetitions it can be summarized by a few main points. One of the biggest is that the movie is

”made for no one”, since it does a poor job at catering to the intended audience, that is moms and their 8-year olds, (a statement that he backs up with the fact that the previews before the movie were movies aimed at children). Because the movie is so crude and sexual he feels bad for the parents who took their kids and ultimately scarred them for life and concludes that his main problem is the fact that Gerwig took a known kids doll and made it into a hateful feminist movie. The second main point is how it is propaganda, and how it proudly states that men and women should be kept separate at all times, since men are awful and women hate men, which is a point he returns to constantly. He also believes that many scenes with jokes about how women are treated by men are false, such as how women are catcalled or how men behave on dates, and even goes so far as to claim that the patriarchy cannot possibly be so bad, on account of that the director is a female and that there are a lot of different female actors in it. Mentioned every now and then throughout the review is also the fact that the movie hates Barbie, simply because it portrays her in such an awful way, which is mostly Gerwig’s and Baumbach’s fault since they wrote the movie. He dislikes almost every single joke, even the ones he can admit are funny are somehow wrong for *this* movie and this, along with the cynical take on Barbie, prompts him to call Gerwig and Baumbach ”smug and self satisfied”, (2:56), as well as ”idiots who think they are smart”, (17:40). In a rare case of clarity he claims that the only reason it has such a good Rotten Tomatoes score is because it matches the reviewers leftist politics, which is not necessarily a wrong assessment, (as we will see later), but somewhat misses its mark anyway since he cannot fathom that the reason *he* hates the movie to an unnecessary degree is because of *his* politics, (Ben Shapiro, 2023).

When looking at another review on the site ”Worth it or Woke”, you can see that many of the points that Ben brings up show up here as well. Again it is mentioned that Gerwig hates Barbie and that the argument of women having less power than men is untrue because of all of the famous people in this movie. The arguments are so similar in fact, that the person writing this must have watched Ben’s review first. Where this one doubles down even more however, is in the fact that Barbie the character is mean, especially towards her ”boyfriend” Ken, since she is ”dismissive of his emotional needs”. This reviewer also thinks that the movie lacks a plot and that it is only concerned with showing as many ”woke” Barbies as possible, where one such Barbie is the one that is ”morbidly obese and wouldn’t be pretty even if she lost the weight Barbie” and another is ”distractingly obviously a tranny dude Barbie”. The site uses a scale from 0 to 100% where each movie gets a score depending on a variety of categories such as cinematography and performance, (not just wokeness which one would have assumed). In *Barbie’s* case it got a zero on non-wokeness of

course but around 70 on performance and cinematography, concluding in a final score of 38%, (compare it to *Oppenheimer's* 79% and you get a sense of the type of movies that site seems to like and what constitutes as a good score), (Worth it or Woke, n.d.). Another article that clearly shows the dissent regarding this movie comes from National Review, which claims that "Barbie symbolizes a culture that devalues childhood and goodness". It takes the beginning sequence where the girls smash their dolls as literally meaning that they never want to be mothers, and does in fact continue to take most jokes literally and completely misunderstand others, such as seemingly thinking that the joke Barbie makes about not being a fascist since she does not "control the railways or the flow of commerce", (43:12), is about some real life parallel to female politicians. It also claims that Gerwig destroys womens' dreams about femininity and concludes that kids will be bored by it, thereby making it a poor film for them, (White, 2023).

## 2.2. The conservative reception in contrast to a formal analysis

What really stands out when reading these reviews is the fact that they all claim that this is a kids movie, even though that claim has no basis in any real promotion made for the movie. The only argument that could be made in its favour is the fact that the movie's main character is Barbie, a known kids toy, but when you look into literally anything else about the movie it becomes clear that it was never intended to be for kids. The argument that Shapiro uses, that the previews were kids films, does not really hold up since that is presumably decided by the cinemas themselves and they might have been under the misguided illusion that it was primarily a kids movie too. You only need to go so far as to the trailer to get an idea about the tone of the movie however, and in that is the joke about Barbie's thoughts of death as well as when a stranger slaps her on the ass, (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023). The official rating it got in the US was also PG13, which succinctly shows that it is not intended for young kids to watch since parents "are urged to be cautious [because] some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers", (Motion Picture Association, n.d.). Another clue as to how this may not be a kids movie of course lies in who the director is, Gerwig is known for making movies with a feminist undertone and while they often focus on adolescents they are decisively aimed at adults. The co-writer together with her is also her husband Noah Baumbach, who is a well established and beloved "indie" filmmaker who has also never made any movies geared toward young kids. To try and make the claim that this is mainly a kids movie is then a thinly veiled attempt at demonizing it for "destroying our youths", something that is actually mentioned in the comment section on Worth it or Woke when one commentator says that "leftists

are grooming children by having sexual jokes” in this movie. By constantly claiming that it is a movie for kids the hope is probably also that adults will be dissuaded from seeing it.

The other main argument, that it is propaganda, and bad propaganda at that, is in some ways not based on what the movie is saying at all, since it was quickly recognized as a leftist movie and therefore deemed propaganda from the get go. It does seem that Shapiro at least tries to point out what he believes to be propaganda when he claims that the movie is saying that all men and women should be kept separate, followed by that it is also saying that matriarchy is amazing and that the Barbies reclaim power in the end by hating men. In the simplest of terms it of course seems to be that the conservatives believe it is propaganda because it is pointing out the faults of the patriarchy, which they seem to not think exists at all, (or at least not in the way that ”the left” is saying it is). That the mere idea of the patriarchy is foreign to them is especially obvious when considering the fact that both Ben Shapiro and Worth it or Woke claimed that the criticisms about patriarchy in the movie are false because of the famous people in it. This is an absurd comment on many levels but the main reason why it does not hold up is the fact that all women are affected by the patriarchy, even the minor percentage of them that have managed to become actors and directors. Though the scope may differ, one only has to count the number of female directors who even gets the chance to make a movie of this size and budget as well as the fact that the Metoo movement in many ways had its start in Hollywood. When you look at what actually happens in *Barbie* on a formal level however, the point of the movie is not that men and women should be kept separate, but rather that each individual should get to choose who they spend time with, and that your life is not premeditated by what you thought your purpose was. Barbie, like so many women in the real world, was stuck in thinking that she had one definitive purpose in her life, which in her case was to be stereotypical Barbie, which also came with the predisposed notion that she was supposed to be Ken’s girlfriend. Likewise, Ken thought that his purpose was to always be around Barbie since he only ever really existed as an accessory to her, something that becomes clear early in the movie when it is stated that: ”Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him”, (8:00), as well as a line on the poster that states ”she’s everything, he’s just Ken”, (The Movie Database, n.d). During the movie Barbie learns that the seemingly perfect life she has lead is not perfect enough for her anymore, what with her newfound human emotions, and the conclusion of her going her separate way from Ken is not a way to say that that this is the right way for everyone, but rather that they were not living to their full extent when constrained by the expectations being put on them. That there are other options available is shown when another Ken

states that "I don't even care about being Ken anymore, I just miss my friend Barbie", (1:36:25), and so he is allowed to simply be his Barbie's friend. That the movie is saying that "matriarchy is amazing" is also not completely accurate since it clearly shows that the ones benefiting from that are the Barbies, not the Kens. While the order is restored in the end and the Barbies once more hold most of the power the Kens are allowed a few minor seats in their congress, as well as now being recognized as having feelings that does not revolve around the Barbies and this, along with the congressional seats, show that the Barbies understand that a full on matriarchy is not the way to go. The part about how much power the Ken's hold in their congress is also followed by a tongue in cheek joke about how they will have as much power in Barbieland as women have in the real world which shows that Gerwig understands how the power dynamic is still unequal in Barbieland. I would argue however that it is supposed to be unequal, this is not the real world after all, but a fantasy world where things are supposed to be reversed. One of the main jokes of the movie is that no one thinks about the Kens, (in Barbieland or in the real world), so to not have a matriarchy would not fit the real life parallel that joke is trying to make. The real point of the film could therefore be to show the contrasts between matriarchies and patriarchies and how they disadvantage both men and women in that it puts unfair expectations on them both, (regardless of who is in power).

When looking at the criticisms that conservatives have, many of them center around Barbie herself. While this is not particularly strange, the movie has her name after all, it is noteworthy that Ken gets significantly more sympathy for his actions. While they can acknowledge that Ken is not always a nice person, the reason for his actions often seem to be that Barbie does not treat him well, which is apparent in for example the review from Worth it or Woke when it mentioned that she is "dismissive of his emotional needs". It could be said that most of the Barbies are quite dismissive of the Kens, it is after all stated that they are rather superfluous, but that this is a conscious effort on their part does not seem to be the case, especially because they do not know anything outside of the world they live in, and in their world "every night is girls night". When Barbie has traveled outside of Barbieland and has garnered a more broad understanding of the world she is the one that displays concern over his well being, even though as Gloria points out: "he took your house, he brainwashed your friends, he wants to control the government", (1:21:05). When she ultimately says sorry to him for not being there for him, (and noteworthily does not get one in return), she is actually being more lenient with him than he maybe deserves. Along with this is also the discussion regarding the real life actors playing the characters, since Ryan Gosling seems to get universal praise, whereas Margot

Robbie is looked down on in a myriad of ways, most notably in how she is not pretty enough to play Barbie. For example, the top comment on Worth it or Woke is: "shouldn't Barbie have breasts? Robbie has an attractive face, but she's flat as a table..." and in National Review it is noted that "tough-blond Robbie lacks slim, doll-like fragility...[and her] lewd manic stare is too scary for Barbie".

The reason for this disproportionate hate may be because flawed female characters are not necessarily as common as male ones, since women are more often than not reduced to being stuck in gendered roles where they are not seen as individuals, (Lotz, 2014). The hate that Barbie gets then probably stems in some form from the expectations being put on her to behave as "a woman should". When talking about Skylar White in *Breaking Bad*, Holladay and Click, (2019), discusses the fact that the reason she got so much more hate than her counterpart Walter White is because of how people felt that she was not a good enough wife to Walt, and how audiences expressed feelings about her "that were negatively evaluative of how her moral complexity interacted with her femininity", (p.159). Barbie is certainly a more complicated character than Ken, in the beginning she is more nuanced simply because more attention to details are appointed to the Barbies, and in the end she has of course gained even more complexity by her journey in the real world. This does hinder her ability to be what she is "supposed" to be however, namely a girlfriend to Ken. What's more, *she* holds all of the power in their relationship, (even in the end when Ken is seemingly "on top of the world"), thus displaying a power dynamic that is unusual in a patriarchal society and that may make conservatives uncomfortable. The comments on how she is mean towards Ken may be a sign of how they believe that she is holding him back, which could be a real life parallel to their own fear of not being in control in their relationships. That they feel like a Barbie movie should cater to traditional ideas about femininity is especially evident in National Review when the reviewer claims that Gerwig destroys dreams about femininity. What exactly this femininity means for him becomes strikingly clear when he states that

Gerwig's artifice defies the special feeling that females might know — the fulfilling, personal escape into free femininity, childbearing, family, homemaking, and romance that should be the essence of a Barbie movie. She ignores the childhood fantasy in which kids dream of being wives, moms, teachers, nurses, etc. — roles essential to the world.

What is noteworthy in this quote is that he not only has a predisposed notion of what femininity should be, but also what a *Barbie* movie should be, which is quite strange when he so clearly expects the movie to be made for women. This thought process is evident in all of the conservative reviews and exposes something very crucial when looking at the reception for this movie, that is, the inherent strangeness in that a movie made by and for women has managed to garner so much hate from men specifically. To point out actual flaws in the actual film is one thing, but the overt focus on how Robbie looked and how the women in the film behaved showcase that the most important thing was not the movie itself, but rather how the women in it failed to conform to how a woman should look and act according to conservatives. In the above quote it is quite obvious that he believes that a woman's main role is to be a mother which might explain why all of the conservative reviews I have focused on so disliked the joke in the beginning about how it is not always fun to be a mother, they almost seem offended by the mere suggestion that having a child can be a difficult experience. Connected to this is the commentary of the trans actress Hari Nef, who undoubtedly does not qualify as a "real woman" to them. Worth it or woke made the claim that she was "distractingly obviously a tranny dude", and Ben Shapiro stated that "one of the barbies is trans barbie, and this is treated totally normally as though this is a female barbie with a voice again deeper than my own", (10:46), as well as an offhand comment that Ken is being victimized when he later on in the movie is hitting on this Barbie. With these statements they want to make absolutely clear that it is obvious that she is trans, even though this is not anything that the movie in any way chooses to disclose. This "controversy" is clearly something that conservative people have made a conscious effort to look up themselves then, and even though Shapiro tries to claim that the mere inclusion of a trans person is a political message, it is a message that *they* themselves put on the movie. I have no doubt in my mind that if the information of her being trans was not public they would have never known that she was, which is probably something profoundly scary for them and causes them to be so excessive when they are talking about how "obvious" it was.

Another main thing conservative people seem to have gotten hung up on is the fact that the movie itself hates Barbie. There is a real contrast here to what other reviews from non-conservatives claimed since many of them complained of the fact that the movie did not seem to dislike Barbie enough, but rather played it safe to placate Mattel. According to Shapiro, Barbie is portrayed as a "fascist emblem" and that one of the movie's ultimate messages is that the Barbies are bad for the world, which makes the take on Barbie rather cynical in his mind. Now, as stated previously, the movie takes place in two separate worlds where the Barbies in their world believe that they have



solved every feminist issue, simply because they have never been in the real world and seen how it actually is, which is not played as them having malicious intent in their beliefs however, but rather that they are simply naive. The scene that many conservatives point to as "proof" of how bad Barbie is and how much Gerwig hates her, is when Sasha sets out to "destroy her" and among other things call her a fascist and something that has "set the feminist movement back 50 years", (40:55). I will give credit where credit is due, in this scene these are actual criticisms of Barbie, but that it would prove that the movie hates her is simply not accurate. In some ways this scene is included to satisfy all of those that would say that Gerwig is not critical enough, and in others it simply exists to show how cynical and unwelcoming Sasha is. That Sasha mere hours after this incident chooses to go to Barbieland and then persuades her mother to stay and help the Barbies is a clear indication that she, and the movie, has chosen to disregard those criticisms and instead focus on what other positive things Barbie can be. That Barbie herself is sometimes pointing out her own faults is also not an example of how the movie hates her, but rather how she is growing to dislike herself by being exposed to the patriarchy. Every single one of these criticisms then clearly shows that there has been a misinterpretation and a divided reception of *Barbie*, which will now be discussed in relation to the messaging of the movie and cultural/social capital.

### 2.3 Analyzing the reception with the help of Hall and Bourdieu

When applying Hall and his three different forms of viewership to the reception of *Barbie* you can see clear parallels to the first and third positions of viewership. The first position is clearly where the majority of the critics fell since they found the movie funny and the messaging to be apt, and it is in the third positions that one can see parallels to the conservatives, since they mostly decided to construe completely different meanings of the movie, which were born out of an alternative framework, their political beliefs. In the words of Hall the people in the third position first *detotalize* the message, something that for example Shapiro does when he claims that the movie's message is that men and women should be kept separate and that all of the women in this movie hates men, the *revitalized* argument that is construed from this is then that the movie is propaganda, which is an argument that is wholly born out of the alternative framework of conservatism. Since feminism meshes so poorly with their political agenda it is not strange that the whole idea of it gets boiled down to one simple line - that it is all about women hating men. For people that see themselves as feminists, or at least understand the basic tenets of it, the scenes are read differently, when the Barbies are taking back Barbieland for example it is understood that this is not so much about them hating the Kens, but rather that they are using the patriarchy against itself. I am sure that

conservative people do on some level understand that this is what the movie is trying to do but they choose to not do a formal analysis of the film and instead repeat a few key arguments that are then repeated by all of them, that it is a kids movie, that it is propaganda etc. This is especially obvious when considering that there were some story elements that were not only misunderstood but completely missed by them, which shows that they did not really pay attention to the film. Shapiro for example complains of the fact that the movie makes no sense, but then proceeds to use scenes that have real clear explanations, such as why Barbie is being chased by Mattel, (the CEO clearly states that it would have dire consequences if a Barbie is loose in the world, and there are mentions that this has happened before with Skipper with a less than desirable outcome). Another example pertains to the scene where Gloria states that the reason the Barbies were so easily brainwashed by Ken is because they had no defense against patriarchy, like the indigenous and smallpox. Worth it or woke then takes this as being about women in the real world, that "patriarchy is for women what smallpox was to the indigenous", which is simply not what that line was referring to since Gloria specifically says this in their discussion on why the Barbies did not have any objections to Ken's changes. This complete disregard for the text of the movie further proves that the point of the review is not to understand the movie, but to complain of it in ways that fit their political agenda. To be in the third position of viewership not only includes the desire to change the meaning of the film, but also that there is an inherent understanding of what the actual messaging of the movie is, after all, to detotalize something means that there is an understanding of what you are changing. That this is true for Shapiro at least is clear when he states that he in the beginning of the movie imagined that the ultimate message would be that Barbie and Ken would see each other as equals, but ultimately concludes that this is wrong because order is restored in Barbieland. This is of course a wrong assessment but it reveals that he has the ability to consider other messages, not only that women hate men. The contrast of conservatives choosing the same takeaways is especially clear when looking at reviews from non-conservatives since there was a variety of opinions and thoughts there, it felt like reading different reviews, rather than just different versions of the same one.

This homogeneity in the reviews could also be explained with Bourdieu's social capital in mind, since the reason being for the very similar language is because they are constructing these reviews with a specific set of rules in mind. These rules are the very foundation of the social group that they belong to and so to be conservative and come out and say that *Barbie* is a good movie would be a definite break in what their core beliefs are, and would probably result in a reevaluation if that person even belongs in that group. The limits in this case is quite clear then, liking a movie that so clearly

promotes itself as being feminist is simply not compatible with someone that defines themselves as being conservative. This evaluation that happens to all members also happens to different forms of media which is quite clear in one of the sites used for reviews, Worth it or Woke, whose name implies that there is an evaluation to be had where each new movie has to be tested. The name also provides a clear preferred outcome, either it is a "worthwhile movie" or it is "woke" and thus not worth your time. As mentioned previously there are several factors that decide what score the movie gets, but the site is very clear in that the "non-wokeness" score is the most important one, the other categories ultimately seem quite arbitrary and there is no explanation as to how the score is decided. Direction gets a 40% for example even if the reviewer repeatedly claims that the movie is messy and that Gerwig is narcissistic, (among other things). The utter lack of explanation further exemplifies how the wokeness factor is the most important for the site since it is presumably mostly used by conservatives and is a criteria that they are interested in. These people are not representing themselves and their own opinions then, but rather the opinions of "a group of conservatives". They might try to slide in a few comments about the production design or the script, to try and make it sound like they are doing an actual critical reading of the film, but it is obvious that they lack the intention and knowledge to do that in a sufficient manner, which brings us into cultural capital.

Anyone could watch a movie, but not everyone can analyze it in a productive manner. So one side of cultural capital's relevance to the reception of *Barbie* lies in the actual reviewing of the movie, does the person know enough about film as a science to review it accurately? The other, and perhaps more crucial to my discussion, lies in the cultural capital needed to properly understand the film. While the inherent message of the film probably does not escape anyone, small details would probably be difficult for conservatives to understand. On the previously mentioned "critics consensus" on Rotten Tomatoes there was a mention of "meta humor", which in itself implies that there had to be some understanding on what the jokes in the movie were referencing that made them "meta". The cultural capital needed in order to understand this belongs quite naturally to people on the left, especially many of the feminist jokes since feminism is something that those people are already well versed in which is of course very connected to Stuart Hall's thoughts of decoding and what category of viewership you belong to. To be in the first position where you decode every message in a preferred way means that you have the cultural capital needed in order to do so and is an inherently flattering position to be in, since the thing you are watching seems to reward you with how well you understand it. This might explain then why it seems to have been such an infuriating watch for conservatives, it was not a flattering experience for them since they either did not

understand the jokes, recognized them as wholly contrary to what they believe or as a joke at their expense.

So there is a clear recipient that is written into the text of the movie who is supposed to be the ideal viewer. This is interesting when considering the fact that Shapiro was so hellbent on insisting that this movie was "made for no one". This is of course a decidedly untrue statement but does touch upon a very crucial thing when looking at the reception, which is who this movie is actually for. As mentioned this is supposed to be a movie for women, and perhaps especially for people on the left side of the political spectrum, something that becomes especially apparent when looking at the jokes, but also when taking into consideration that the director of the movie is Greta Gerwig, a by all accounts liberal woman. The reason for why this is important lies in the fact that the jokes told, and the story overall, has a different meaning depending on who the recipient is. The catcall scene for example, which for the conservative reviewers felt over the top and uncalled for, (Worth it or Woke went so far as to claim that "you can tell that the person who wrote the construction worker cat-call scene has never once been cat-called"), is for women watching totally reasonable since it is something that has actually happened to them. Another scene that may feel exaggerated, and of course it is supposed to be that to some extent, is when Ken suggest that Barbie can be his "long term, long distance, low commitment, causal girlfriend", (1:00:43), a joke that works really well because many women have been in very similar situations where men try to commit as little as possible, but that might just feel like a joke told specifically for the context of this movie for men watching and not something that has a connection to their "real lives". There are of course countless examples of jokes that really cater to the left, one that is especially obvious is when Sasha is seeing Barbie being taken away by Mattel and says that it is good that they arrested "that nut job" followed by her changing her mind and saying "reality-challenged woman" instead, (44:24). This is a joke about how ridiculous certain terms can sound when everything needs to be stated in a politically correct way and would perhaps only make sense to someone who tries to be mindful when they speak. For conservatives this would probably not read as a joke at all but rather how they feel that people on the left really talk.

So the left are catered to understand this movie in a myriad of ways, most notably in how they are the intended audience and how they inherently possess the cultural capital needed to understand the movie. Another dimension to this understanding comes in the form of cultural capitals transformation into symbolic capital, since it becomes disguised enough to the point where it is

simply recognized as competence. This could potentially create another element of discontent with the conservatives since it then becomes a case of left leaning people simply being "smart" enough to understand the movie and the conservatives are thus transformed into someone that are too dumb to understand it. As mentioned previously many of the reviews from non-conservatives found the movie to be quite safe in its depiction of Barbie and did not think that the feminism was especially difficult to understand which becomes even more obvious when considering that many people called the feminism in the movie feminism 101, meaning that it was very basic and surface level. I do not think that Gerwig intended for the feminism to be particularly difficult, but instead opted for something that the intended audience would recognize and that would perhaps serve as a starting point for people who were not as well versed. To already have this knowledge is indicative of a good education however, (or at least that your family has had that), and there are other instances that show how the viewing experience will be improved by this. One joke for example reference the French writer Marcel Proust, with Barbie claiming that she is having a "Proustian flashback", (47:42), when she steps into her box at the Mattel's headquarters, which reference how he used to write about having "involuntary flashes of memories", (Starner, 2023). Others are a bit less obscure but nonetheless require the audience to have some kind of knowledge of pop-culture history, such as the opening scene that is an almost exact replica of the scene "Dawn of man" in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (1968), but with children instead of apes. While this is a popular film it is known to be a bit pretentious, (as are most Kubrick films), which adds a dimension of pleasing the "film buffs". Again, the movie is watchable without understanding these references but if you do understand them it becomes a constant affirming experience. The constant nods to how patriarchy disadvantages women is also a comforting experience for women especially since it makes them feel less alone. In one review from "Roger Ebert" the reviewer claimed that when watching the scene where Gloria is talking about the contradictory nature of being a woman under the patriarchy "the middle aged-mom in me was nodding throughout in agreement, feeling seen and understood, as if this person knew me and was speaking directly to me", (Lemire, 2023). In much the same way that conservatives belong to a social group of other conservatives, it could be said that women belong to a group of other women when watching this movie, and this belonging allow for a viewing experience that makes them feel seen, (which is a far cry from the statement from National Review that said that Gerwig destroys "dreams about femininity"). While there are certainly conservative, and non conservative, women who did not like this movie, the vast majority of backlash has come from men. While I have discussed how this in part comes from them wanting to decide how women should act, it is also indicative of how they cannot understand the commentary

about being a woman because they are not women and therefore lack a true understanding of what that means in this world. When that understanding is missing it might feel as if the scene that the previously mentioned female reviewer liked so much IS propaganda, and the scenes following ARE bashing men unnecessarily.

### **3. Conclusion**

#### 3.1 The future is looking... woke

The reception to *Barbie* has clearly been deeply divided down the different sides of the political spectrum, which without a doubt is due in part because the intended audience for the movie was supposed to be left-leaning people. This dissonance has shown that the inherent understanding of the movie that most people had was because of choices made at the production level. Further, to be a part of the intended audience means to possess the cultural capital needed, which in some ways becomes disguised enough to be recognized as real competence. This push and pull between understanding or not understanding the movie results in conservative people being aggravated simply because it implies that they are stupid. Combine this with a movie that displays its feminism quite overtly and you have a film that meshes so poorly with a conservative agenda, that it becomes a political message to them. While liking or not liking a movie is inherently very subjective it has become clear that the conservative reception to *Barbie* was in many ways predisposed and unable to result in anything other than outrage, in much the same way as it was predisposed to be found funny by left-leaning people.

Even though the different parts of viewerships are in many ways decided beforehand there is still a choice to be had for the viewer that is not in the first position. To be in the second position for example, means that you do not agree with everything being said, but that you allow for a negotiation to happen. Hall describes that an essential part of viewership, and an inherently political part, is when people who are usually in the negotiated position switch to that of an oppositional reading. That this is a choice that most conservatives made is in many ways decided by the political polarization in the US right now, they may feel like they have no choice but to do an oppositional reading because *Barbie* so clearly positions itself as a product of the left, and the left is their "enemy". That this movie is known to be a progressive film inside of Hollywood as well is shown in the fact that it has gotten several nominations at the Golden Globes, including in the Best Motion Picture category as well as in Best Director and Best Screenplay, (Golden Globe Awards, n.d). The

reason why this proves its progressiveness comes from the fact that the Globes have been heavily criticized in recent years for being too stuck in their ways, for example in the way they seem to favor white men, (Romano, 2024), and that *Barbie* is nominated in almost every single category may be a sign that they are trying hard to compensate for those criticisms.

Since we now again stand before the possibility of Trump once more becoming president this way of thinking about movies is probably not something that will become less common, but rather a staple in mainstream reception. The possibility of a conservative president is one thing, the possibility of re-electing a president that is teetering so close to the alt-right movement is another entirely and is evidently proof of how mainstream these views are becoming. The Shapiro video became quite widespread but I do not believe that most people truly understand how many different articles there are that are dedicated to tearing down this movie. While the natural response of the left is of course to roll their eyes and call conservative people stupid, the fact of the matter is that conservatives feel just as entitled to hating this movie as the left feel in defending it. In a society where everything is becoming more and more divided I feel that there is a high probability that the line of what is and is not a "woke" movie will become more and more blurred, resulting in that these kinds of cultural wars will become more of a rule than an exception.

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Attachments

