

## Redreaming the Doll House: Escaping Panopticon of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*

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### *Abstract*

*This paper assesses how Greta Gerwig's Barbie provides a multi-layered critique of gender and power dynamics to enable continuous re-examination and societal change in the real world. It analyses the relationship between power and knowledge to assess how the visit of Barbie and Ken into a real (patriarchal) world alter the structure of panoptics in the Barbie world. The paper undertakes a critical analysis of the movie and purviews its cultural dynamics, specifically with an emphasis on gender performances and gender roles. In addition, Juliet Mitchell's feminist analysis of the characters and their behavioural patterns under the lens of psychoanalysis is studied to interpret the gender roles and the significance of their enactment in the movie. The intersection of these approaches helps in contextualising the power-dynamics of complex gender representation in the given text within broader socio-cultural frameworks.*

**Keywords:** Barbie, Panopticon, Foucault, Gender, Feminism, Patriarchy

### **Introduction**

Pull up to that dream house.

Got gate, heels down.

How much do you like this?

Welcome to my bedroom.

Hallway, go down Stairs.

Got permission.

Ava Max, *Not Your Barbie Girl* (2020)

When Mattel released the first Barbie dreamhouse in 1962, it was rare for a woman to own her house. It did not only become the most coveted toyhouse of the time but also symbolised the feminist aspirations and changing identity of women at the time. In the following 62 years, this toyhouse has transitioned from a simple fold-out studio with cardboard furniture to a three-storeyed home with a pool, elevator and elaborate light and sound features as seen in the reimagining of Greta Gerwig's movie, *Barbie* (2023). Gerwig, an American screenwriter and director, is particularly known for her coming-of-age feminist films that force the audience to critically engage with the gendered fabric of their immediate surroundings. In *Barbie*, rather than relying heavily on Computer-Generated Images (CGI) like many

contemporary blockbusters, Gerwig aimed to craft a more tactile visual experience—what she termed as “authentic artificiality” (Provost). She wanted Barbie Land to feel physically present and tangible, as if every element could be touched, while still maintaining a distinctly unreal, stylised aesthetic. Gerwig successfully achieves the “authentic artificiality” she envisioned, crafting a world that feels tactile and physically accessible. Yet, within this hyper-visible space, her reimagining of the Barbie house reveals a curious fixation with the conspicuous lack of private space. There are no doors or windows, and everyone can intervene the most private spaces in the Barbie house. As a result, the “authentic artificiality” that invites the audience to feel that everything is within reach also functions to deprive Barbie of her privacy, even when she is ostensibly in her private space.

In this context, the film’s deliberate lack of private space emerges as a crucial site for exploring identity formation and gendered subjectivity. The hyper-visible, open-plan design of Barbie Land exposes Barbie to a continuous panoptical gaze that mirrors broader patriarchal surveillance structures. Paradoxically, it is within this absence of privacy that Barbie begins to question the performative nature of her existence and seek a more authentic self beyond the boundaries of her socially constructed role. Through this tension, the film enacts what Juliet Mitchell identifies as the internalisation of external structures, wherein Barbie’s journey toward self-discovery is catalysed by the very spatial and social constraints imposed upon her. As such, the denial of private space becomes both a symbol of systemic control and a site of feminist awakening.

### **Optics of the Panoptics**

The Barbie house can be seen as a panopticon where “each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible” as the visibility itself becomes a “trap” (Foucault 200). Using Jeremy Bentham’s architectural figure of disciplinary power, Michel Foucault explains how the panopticon, features a central tower surrounded by peripheric cells, enabling constant surveillance of occupants without their knowledge. Similarly, there’s lack of any private space in the Barbie houses as a result of which every Barbie is under a constant gaze. This allows for a “normalising gaze” that imposes certain norms to make Barbie(s) accepted as normal in the Barbie world (Foucault 184). A critical analysis of Gerwig’s reimagining through the lens of Foucault’s panopticon fosters a clearer understanding of the power dynamics prescient in the Barbie world in the beginning of the movie and how these dynamics shift towards the end. The architecture of Barbieland features whimsical and pastel-coloured buildings with exaggerated proportions and intricate detailing showcasing a blend of modernist and fantastical touches. The portrayal of Barbie’s house is not “of spectacle, but of surveillance” where the actors are “neither in the amphitheater, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine” (Foucault 217). Each Barbie house is detailed differently, yet each house is three-storeyed painted with the same bright pink colour with similarly coordinated wardrobes, light and sound features, intricate kitchenettes and toyetic cars parked in manicured lawns. Just like their houses, the Barbies represented in the movie, irrespective of their diverse achievements, are identical in their behavioural and corporeal patterns. They have the same name, they drink and eat the same foods, wake up at the same time, have the same idea of fun, wear similar clothes and heels. The panoptic nature of the Barbie world is evident in the gaze within which all Barbies have to abide by certain rules of living, looking and behaving.

All the Barbies do not only act as the prisoners in the panopticon but also as the surveillants who keep an eye on each other to enable a normalising gaze within which they operate within the defined behavioural, cultural and social patterns. Foucault uses the term “normalising gaze” to refer to surveillance as a tool of imposing certain norms, to make individuals act in a way that is accepted by society as “normal” (184). Foucault’s idea of disciplinary normalisation implies the difficulty as well as the dire consequences of the attempt to deviate from established norms, an idea that is dramatised in the eversame lives of Barbies in the Barbie land. The Barbies living in this Barbie world consider it to be a perfect utopia that has solved all the real-world problem. However, this ennui of a dreamy Barbie world is altered with the supernatural intervention of irrepressible thoughts of a real woman, Gloria that eventually shift the power dynamics within this panopticon. A feminist resistance to the panopticon of surveillance and propaganda is shaped by a state of existential crisis where Barbie learns, unlearns and relearns about the real-world problems.

### **Beyond the Gaze**

Notably, the stereotypical Barbie begins her journey of self-awareness after the alteration in her physical appearance as she develops cellulite and flat foot. This corporeal deviation from the normative Barbie aesthetic serves as a catalyst for her existential questioning and signals the breakdown of the hyper-feminised, commodified identity she embodies. Moreover, it also highlights the fixation of physical beauty in the Barbie world. Despite the diverse achievements in fields of journalism, academia, judiciary, business, etc., the desirable position of Barbie in the Barbie land is largely because of her enviable body: “No matter what their other accomplishments, women need to exhibit the “right” body in order to appear fully successful” (Rogers 116). When other Barbies find out about the stereotypical Barbie’s disfigurement, they advise the stereotypical barbie to go see the Weird Barbie—an outcast who exists on the margins of Barbie land.

The House of Weird Barbie is located away from the other Barbie Houses, surrounded by trees and elevated to a height that needs a staircase to reach. This spatial dislocation reinforces her symbolic status as both other and oracle, suggesting that alternative modes of identity and consciousness lie beyond the normative structures of Barbie society. Her house is weird, bizarre and topsy turvy, diametrically opposite to the well-structured regular Barbie houses in the rest of the Barbie land. However, the bizarre structure of her house allows plenty of private spaces to hide. Additionally, the secluded placement of her house gives Weird Barbie the autonomy and privacy that other Barbies lack. Even though Weird barbie is an outcast, her elevated position gives her a vantage point and implies a position of privilege from where she can see things that other Barbies can’t.

Despite being disfigured, “weird” and unconventional herself, the movie portrays Weird Barbie as someone who helps other Barbies to operate within the cultural and social norms. Ironically, the Weird Barbie who does not fit within the normalising gaze herself helps other Barbies operate within the disciplinary apparatus of a panopticon. Foucault describes the panopticon as “the perfect disciplinary apparatus,” as its scheme of discipline makes disobedience impossible (173). Any deviation, as in case of Weird Barbie, is punished and invisibilised. In this way, there is no external surveillant. Instead, the Barbies become surveillant for each other ensuring they abide by the normalised behaviour and actions. The location of Weird Barbie’s house on

the margins of this panoptic and the disenfranchised status of Weird Barbie can be seen as an anecdote in the panopticon of Barbie land to instil fear in other Barbies from defying the fixed code of behavioural and social conduct.

There are two ways to understand the position of Weird Barbie in the panopticon of Barbie land. Firstly, the character of Weird Barbie can be interpreted as a surveillant within a panopticon, ensuring the preservation of its structure from any potential disruption by advising the other Barbies to operate within the existing framework of social, cultural and behavioural patterns. The strategic placement of her house at an elevated position affords her a unique vantage point unparalleled by any other Barbie within Barbie land. This positioning suggests her camouflaged central presence rather than marginality, indicative of her function in maintaining hierarchical order within this panoptical framework. Secondly, Weird Barbie can alternatively be viewed as an enlightened Barbie who has liberated herself from the confines of the panopticon. The placement of her house amidst the grove of trees implies her withdrawal from the normative gaze and thus the panopticon itself. In “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis”, Juliet Mitchell prescribes only two ways to escape a panopticon: death or madness (389). Weird Barbie is successful in escaping the surveillance of the panopticon, as specified in this case, by choosing madness.

In her interactions with other Barbies, Weird Barbie assumes a position of power who solves their problems by enlightening them about the things that she knows of. In a symbolic scene in the movie, Weird Barbie asks the Stereotypical Barbie to choose between high heels or Birkenstocks. While the high heels represent an illusionary life within the panopticon of Barbie land, Birkenstocks signify an escape from it to gain the truth about the universe. When the stereotypical Barbie chooses the high heels, Weird Barbie tells her that she only gave her options to give her a sense of control. Her only choice is to know the truth. Foucault’s analysis of panopticon structure suggests that power is not simply wielded by identifiable authorities but is dispersed through social practices with the subtle normalisation of attitudes that the inhabitants seemingly do not wish to change, not because they can’t but because they are conditioned to think that there is no other option. Similarly, the stereotypical Barbie is conditioned in the Barbie world where she doesn’t want to step out and learn the truth about the real world. Her only motivation to listen to Weird Barbie is to get rid of cellulite and flat foot so she can be a part of the panopticon again.

The journey of self-realisation and knowledge actually begins for the stereotypical Barbie after she crosses the portal of the Barbie world and reaches the real world where she learns about the deeply rooted gender disparity and finds out that that the idea of female imagination of Barbie is in fact regulated by a group of men in black coats. She displays the first sign of disobedience by trying to run away when the office bearers of Mattel are trying to put her in the box. Here, she displays the first sign to resist the ‘normalising gaze’ of who she is supposed to be and how she has to behave in the Barbie house under constant surveillance. Since she is able to portray a sign of disobedience, she is no more a prisoner and/or surveillant of the panopticon. This small act of disobedience eventually becomes a means to reclaim autonomy and evade surveillance for the stereotypical Barbie.

### **Feminist Sisterhood and Fall of Kendom**

A significant theme explored in Gerwig’s reimagining of Barbie is that of feminist sisterhood.

There are instances of female camaraderie portrayed through characters of Weird Barbie who helps other Barbies with their problems, Ruth Handler, who assists Stereotypical Barbie in making an autonomous choice, and Gloria, who not only supports Stereotypical Barbie's transformation but also mobilises the other Barbies to reclaim agency within Barbie Land. These interactions illustrate the potential of female friendship and mutual support as catalysts for personal and collective empowerment. However, the narrative does not construct an essentialist or unified feminist movement capable of fully dismantling patriarchal structures in either Barbie Land or the real world. Instead, it gestures toward a more nuanced understanding of feminist struggle that recognises the multiple, intersecting dimensions of oppression and the complexity of gender disparity within varied socio-cultural contexts.

Within the narrative framework, the character of Ken assumes a significant role in the film's portrayal. Ken, often ignored in Barbie's world, becomes an important character as he ventures into the real world where he sees men occupying positions of authority. This exposure prompts Ken's return to Barbie land with aspirations to transform it into 'Kendom'. His conceptualisation of power structures, however, becomes fixated on the symbolism of horses, influenced by his observation of California policemen riding stallions. This allegory illustrates Ken's misconstrued understanding of power dynamics prevalent in the real world.

Ken's misinterpretation reflects broader societal challenges where feminism encounters misunderstanding and resistance from those perceiving feminist discourse as a threat to established social structure. A comparison between Barbie's land and Kendom reveals stark contrasts. Barbie confronts Ken's attempts to undermine the achievements of Barbies, emphasising the persistence of gender-based disparagement despite Ken's misguided effort: "The Kens are not simply seeking to assert their place within the people of Barbie Land; they are attempting to become dominant" (Houghton et al. 3). Within Kendom, Barbies are subjected to overt forms of subjugation, reduced to serving the needs and desires of the Kens and systematically stripped of their autonomy. In the Barbie land, the only affliction that Ken faces is that of being ignored by Barbie. Barbie land is about sisterhood while Kendom is about subjugation of Barbie. This transition perpetuates an alternative form of panoptic control, outlining that the previous existing structure of Barbie land was similar in its structure to control Barbies and their lives.

This reconfiguration starkly contrasts with the earlier version of Barbie Land, where the primary affliction experienced by Ken is his marginalisation and emotional neglect. While Barbie Land initially appears to be a utopia of sisterhood and female empowerment, its inversion into Kendom reveals underlying structures of power and control that govern both versions of this imagined world. The transition from Barbie Land to Kendom thus exposes a shift not from freedom to domination, but from one form of panoptic regulation to another. In this light, the original Barbie Land is revealed to possess its own mechanisms of surveillance and behavioural regulation, suggesting that both systems—however differently gendered—function through the disciplining of individual subjectivities within rigidly defined social roles. Likewise, the notion that women in the real world, like Ken, can expeditiously dismantle patriarchal structures is unrealistic, as such transformations require sustained effort over time.

### **Reception in Media**

Gerwig's *Barbie* has firmly established itself as a landmark in contemporary cinema, not only

for its record-breaking box office performance but also for its layered exploration of gender, identity and societal norms. It sparked wide-ranging discourse, with critical reception spanning from enthusiastic praise to measured critique, thereby sparking conversations about gender surveillance and reshaping gender identity through mainstream storytelling. Numerous critics celebrate *Barbie* for its feminist vision and bold commentary. Eliana Dockterman and Cady Lang describe the film as a “satire of a toy company’s capitalist ambitions” and “a searing indictment of the current fraught state of gender relations,” while still managing to be an entertaining spectacle.

Through Barbie’s and Ken’s journeys in and out of Barbieland, Gerwig employs humor, nostalgia and vivid visuals to critique patriarchal norms and question the commodification of femininity. McCabe and Oldfather (2023) reinforce this view, calling the film “[a] commentary on everything from Barbie’s representation of independent female adulthood to her unrealistic, idealised body proportions [that]... makes a movie as layered and paradoxical as the reputation of the doll itself.” They highlight how the film, while colourful and comedic, does not shy away from the emotional and psychological contradictions of womanhood. Gloria’s impassioned monologue about the pressures on modern women resonated with audiences and became emblematic of the film’s broader message that “life as a real woman is significantly more difficult but resolutely more worthwhile than ‘life in plastic’” (McCabe and Oldfather). Angela Dwyer’s media analysis further confirms the film’s positive reception globally, noting that the film showed “overwhelmingly successful results with minimal criticism where it might be expected and instead positive coverage around ‘female empowerment’”. The minimal backlash, despite the film’s strong feminist themes, signals a cultural readiness to embrace stories that challenge outdated gender dynamics.

However, the film’s feminist framework has not gone without critique. Lara Tinawi (2023) points out a potentially regressive aspect in how the narrative handles Barbie and Ken’s reconciliation. She argues that “Barbie reclaims her house and Barbie Land” but still “apologises and comforts Ken, who wronged her, while he does not apologise for anything he has done.” This double standard, Tinawi suggests, reveals how the film may inadvertently perpetuate the very gender dynamics it seeks to critique—extending grace to male characters while not holding them accountable. Others have noted that while *Barbie* tackles gender roles with sophistication, it sometimes lacks intersectional depth. The film primarily centres white, cisgender female perspectives, leaving broader feminist concerns, such as race, class and LGBTQ+ identity, largely unexplored. Some viewers also perceived its portrayal of men as overly simplistic or caricatured, suggesting that its gender commentary could have benefited from more nuance.

Despite critiques, *Barbie*’s greatest achievement lies in its cultural impact and its challenge to gender representation in commercial cinema. It reclaims traditionally “feminine” aesthetics of pink as legitimate vehicles for serious discourse, reimagining how femininity can be portrayed in mass media. By positioning Barbie not as a one-dimensional doll but as a vehicle for self-exploration, Gerwig shifts the narrative around gender identity, suggesting that being a woman includes contradiction, struggle and strength. Moreover, by showing Ken’s journey as one driven by insecurity and his eventual realisation that he is “Kenough,” the film expands its commentary to male identity as well. While imperfect, this dual focus has helped reframe mainstream conversations about how both femininity and masculinity are constructed and experienced. Gerwig’s *Barbie* may not resolve all the complexities of feminist and gender

discourse, but its critical reception confirms its role as a transformative cultural text. While it is lauded for its empowering message and emotional resonance, it also faces valid criticism for its occasional narrative compromises. Still, it stands as a milestone in contemporary cinema that reshapes how gender identity can be explored and expressed in a blockbuster format.

### **(Un)becoming Barbie: A Pathway to Self-Discovery**

As Luce Irigaray asserts in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, woman “remains the unthought of our thought”, indicating how deeply entrenched symbolic systems in Western discourse position women as absent or unknowable (74). In Gerwig’s *Barbie*, this symbolic exclusion is challenged through a visual and narrative re-entry of the feminine into spaces of power, meaning and critique. The movie’s success lies in becoming the caricature of real world through Barbie land, thereby raising concerns about its narrow panopticon structure. By incorporating characters like Barbie, Weird Barbie, Ken, Gloria, Ruth from various cultural backgrounds within an array of dreamy Barbie world and reality, the film offers a platform for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. Just like Barbie, any woman in real world is under a constant surveillance normalising how she should look, what she should do and how she should conduct herself. The final decision of Barbie to leave Barbie land symbolises her escape from the panopticon where she constantly needs validation from others. In this way, Barbie embodies hope for the women in the real world to escape the ‘normalising gaze’ and reclaim their agency in making choices for their lives.

As customers, we had only ever seen the Barbie houses from the outside, displayed on store shelves. Gerwig’s *Barbie* invites us inside, offering a view from within Barbie’s world. This shift in perspective opens the door to deeper questions about agency and self-determination. After Barbie returns to Barbieland, she initially gives up, choosing to wait passively for another Barbie in a leadership role to break free from the Kendom-induced hypnosis and take action. Eventually, Barbie is humanised as she reaches, her lowest state, physically and emotionally. She gives up, mirroring the experience of many women in general who think it’s not possible to change the real-world patriarchal structure. It’s Gloria, without any supernatural capabilities, who brings all the supernatural barbies to senses so they can build a better world by reclaiming the Barbie land. It highlights that women’s resilience and strength come from their determination and willpower, not from any magical or extraordinary powers. Breaking down entrenched systems of oppression, like patriarchy, doesn’t require supernatural abilities; it requires courage, persistence and collective resistance. This symbolises that real, meaningful change is possible through everyday acts of bravery and solidarity, emphasising that ordinary people can challenge and transform even deeply rooted social structures. Gerwig makes the unreal dreamscape of Barbie land as real as possible to direct the audience’s attention towards the fundamental weaknesses faced by people of different gender in the real world.

When Barbie visits the real world to fix her physical imperfections, she meets an old woman with wrinkled skin and short height. When Barbie compliments her for her beauty, she replies with “I know”. The scene portrays that the real beauty is about accepting who you are which eventually leads Barbie to accept her flat foot and choose Birkenstocks and a human life in the final scene. Just like Weird Barbie chooses madness to escape the panopticon, the stereotypical Barbie chooses death. After her transition to human life, the movie also doesn’t show any house in which she is living. This privacy allowed to her further showcases the escape of Barbie from

the panopticon as she chooses death and becomes a human. In the final scene, Barbie decides to wear a pair of pink Birkenstocks as she escapes the panopticon of Barbie land. It accentuates the complexity and transitional nature of human world, emphasising that building a better world is not about making a perfect world but doing better in whichever way one can.

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