

Justice Beyond The Dreamhouse: An Ecofeminist Analysis of The 2023 Barbie Movie

Morgan Page

University of Washington Tacoma, morgap3@uw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Page, Morgan () "Justice Beyond The Dreamhouse: An Ecofeminist Analysis of The 2023 Barbie Movie," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol8/iss1/3>

This Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching and Learning Center at UW Tacoma Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship by an authorized editor of UW Tacoma Digital Commons. For more information, please contact taclibdc@uw.edu.

Justice Beyond The Dreamhouse: An Ecofeminist Analysis of The 2023 Barbie Movie

Cover Page Footnote

Adams, C. & Gruen, L. (2014). Introduction. In *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth*, pp. 1–5. Best, S., & Marcus, S. (2009). Surface reading: An introduction. *Representations*, 108(1), 1-21. King, Y. (1995). Engendering a peaceful planet: Ecology, economy, and ecofeminism in contemporary context. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 23(3/4), 15–21. Langston, K. (2023, August 28). 'Barbie Just Made \$1 Billion at the Box Office – Here Are the 52 Other Films That Hit the Milestone. People. people.com La Porte, Amy and Cavusoglu, Lena (2023). "Faux Feminism in a Capitalistic Fever Dream: A Review of Greta Gerwig's Barbie (2023)," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 8: No. 2, Article 6. DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2023-08-02-06 Sturgeon, N. (2009). *Environmentalism in Popular Culture. The Politics of the Natural in U.S. History and Popular Culture* (pp.17–49). The University of Arizona Press. Verdon, J. (2023, October 25). Barbie Movie Boosted Mattel's Sales, But Investors Held Their Applause. *Forbes*. www.forbes.com

Abstract

This paper delves into analyzing the 2023 *Barbie* film through an ecofeminist lens and symptomatic reading, revealing significant shortcomings in its treatment of environmental concerns and feminist discourse. Through a critical examination, it becomes evident that the film fails to address environmental issues beyond Barbie's plastic-dominated world—neglecting broader ecological implications. Furthermore, the use of feminist topics within the narrative appears superficial, serving as mere plot points rather than catalysts for meaningful dialogue and highlighting how the film, despite its cinematic nature, operates as an extended toy commercial, commodifying feminist ideals for profit rather than engaging in genuine discourse. This paper concludes that the film perpetuates societal norms of patriarchal and capitalistic systems, wherein both the mistreatment of women and the disregard for the environment are deemed natural. By shedding light on these issues, this analysis underscores the importance of challenging narratives and advocating for more inclusive and environmentally conscious storytelling in contemporary media.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, symptomatic reading, patriarchy, capitalism, environment, feminism*

Justice Beyond the Dreamhouse: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the 2023 Barbie Movie

Buy Barbie! She is the bold, pink icon, masterfully blending feminism with marketing savvy while leaving a trail of plastic pollution. She is a doll that does it all: accessories sold separately. *Barbie* has consumed the media as the 2023 film directed by Greta Gerwig is breaking box office records of \$1.3 billion (Langston, 2023) while simultaneously evoking discussion around women's liberation. However, behind the thick plastic, real concerns regarding this movie's success are also rising. With Mattel being the creator of Barbie, the company has seen a revenue boost of \$125 million from the sales of dolls, merchandise, and the film's earnings (Verdon, 2023). Alongside the movie's commentary on patriarchy and gender roles, Barbie's overall brand—which is distinguished throughout the movie—re-establishes how Mattel uses the *Barbie* movie and brand to continue profiting, prioritizing capitalist gains and leading to a lack of concern regarding the dolls' environmental impact and Barbie's place within feminist discourse.

It is no secret that this iconic star has contributed to the consumption system. Applying an ecofeminist critique to the film and brand allows for further insight into the intersectionality of the environment and women's suffrage. An understanding of the relationship between women and the environment allows for a broader outlook on issues regarding inequity, misogyny, and capitalist structures. A symptomatic reading of the film is also required for an analysis using an ecofeminist perspective, as the film disregards discussion around the physical environment and uses feminist buzzwords and themes for quick banter, instead of exploring the theories of feminism and encouraging discussion. This results in marketable feminism designed to appeal to a broader audience without touching

on serious issues that might alienate potential customers. Furthermore, this research, which explores the theory of ecofeminism through symptomatic reading, acknowledges notable scholars such as Carol J. Adams, Lori Gruen, Ynestra King, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus—facilitating a deeper comprehension of the film *Barbie*.

The film *Barbie* catalyzes the Mattel brand while cultivating a persona around the iconic plastic doll. The film cannot be separated from the merchandise, as limited-edition items and dolls were produced before and after the film's release. However, a doll is not the only thing being sold. Mattel is also selling its idea of feminism. It separates itself from critique, as self-awareness plays a prevalent role within the film—as seen when Barbie, played by Margot Robbie, feels discouraged after she realizes the effects Barbie has had on both women and the environment. However, this recognition by the character results in Barbie being disappointed in herself and failing to criticize the Mattel company. By creating a film that endorses this brand materially and morally, Mattel has created a commercial with a run time of one hour and fifty-four minutes. Encapsulating this idea, Barbie is not only a feminist icon but is also a socially aware brand and person. This personification of Barbie, which has transpired since the film's release, brings consequences as theories regarding feminism and the environment are dulled down or ignored to appear marketable.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach for *Barbie* Analysis

Ecofeminism

As a multifaceted theory, “ecofeminism addresses the various ways that sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism are informed by and support speciesism” (Adams& Gruen, 2014, p. 1). When analyzing the intersectionality of individuals,

it is essential to acknowledge how society treats the physical environment in parallel with women. Both undergo exploitation from the capitalistic and patriarchal society. This “theory exposes and opposes intersecting forces of oppression, showing how problematic it is when these issues are considered separate from one another” (Adams & Gruen, 2014, p. 1).

Analyzing media through an ecofeminist lens reveals the intricate connections between environmental issues and gender dynamics. This approach enables a more profound critique of media narratives like *Barbie*, exposing how they assign environmental responsibility to women while neglecting the intersection of women's mistreatment and environmental degradation.

Ecofeminism "involves making abstract connections concrete" (King, 1995, p. 17).

This framework draws clear lines between feminist and environmental concepts, revealing how intertwined they are. It successfully highlights the shared oppression of women and the environment, both of which are exploited by hegemonic patriarchal and capitalist structures. These systems not only exploit but also systematically silence both groups, further perpetuating their marginalization. However, it is also crucial to understand “that ecofeminism is not essentialist, as our understanding of the woman/nature connection is historical and specific, and corresponding symbolic representations are based on historically and culturally constructed understandings of women and nature” (King, 1995, p. 18). This perspective encourages a nuanced view, acknowledging that the connections between women and nature are shaped by historical and cultural contexts rather than being innate or universal truths.

Symptomatic Reading

When engaging in symptomatic reading, readers typically “focus on elements present in the text, as they construe them as symbolic of something latent or concealed” (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 3). This approach also “identifies absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, questioning what those absences mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the underlying questions that the text itself cannot articulate” (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 3). Applying a symptomatic reading enables a critical approach to media, revealing underlying messages and enhancing critical thinking. This method exposes power dynamics and promotes responsible storytelling. When applying this to the film *Barbie*, it becomes evident that environmental impact is overlooked despite the feminist discourse conjured from buzzwords and empty dialogue, as well as revealing ideological structures, such as patriarchy. *Barbie* glosses over conceptual text between characters to keep the brand alive and relevant.

Overview of the Film: *Barbie*

Character Analysis

In this film, key characters such as Stereotypical Barbie, Ken, and Gloria embody diverse aspects of race, age, gender, and class, resulting in dynamic clashes. Stereotypical Barbie, portrayed by Margot Robbie, epitomizes the White, thin, conventionally attractive, and affluent female archetype, holding a high status in the utopia of BarbieLand. Ken, played by Ryan Gosling, shares residency in BarbieLand but lacks Barbie's socioeconomic status while being portrayed as a bimbo. As a heteronormative, White, and conventionally attractive male, Ken embodies traditional masculine beauty standards and ideals throughout the narrative. Ken's incompetent actions throughout the film allow for his reign as leader of BarbieLand, accompanied by toxic masculinity, enabling the audience not to hold Ken

accountable, as the movie supports the idea that he simply did not know better.

In contrast, Gloria (America Ferrera) leads a middle-class life in Southern California, navigating challenges rooted in ethnicity and gender. A lot is placed on this character as she is the only Hispanic person working within Mattel, a predominantly White male environment, and a mother who operates alone, as her husband is shown only twice throughout the film. One quick scene of Gloria's husband shows him as clueless, unaware of the whereabouts of his wife and daughter. Unbothered, he gears his attention toward his phone as he attempts and fails to learn proficient Spanish, as his last scene within the film displays his broken Spanish. As the narrative unfolds, these characters meet each other, offering unique perspectives.

Narrative Examination

Settling into a pink plastic landscape, this film introduces two drastically different worlds, where Barbie and Gloria must prevent BarbieLand and reality from colliding. Barbie initiates the journey when she starts 'malfunctioning' in the female utopia, BarbieLand. The 'malfunction' appears to be Barbie having flat feet and cellulite, representing the rigid and traditional patriarchal standards regarding how women should operate and look. Although the film attempts to use imagery of Barbie's new flat feet and cellulite to comment on beauty standards within women, it fails to recognize that Barbie has contributed to such rigid beauty standards.

However, this act prompts a quest to the real world to find the girl playing with her and stop her conflicting emotions. Accompanied by Ken, they discover the stark contrast between BarbieLand and reality, where it seems the men hold power instead of the women,

which is the opposite of BarbieLand. Despite Mattel's attempts to return Barbie to her box, she escapes with Gloria and her daughter to BarbieLand, only to find Ken has enacted patriarchy and, in doing so, has brainwashed other Barbies into conforming to traditional female archetypes. In a moment of despair, Gloria delivers a monologue highlighting the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, ultimately inspiring the Barbies to overthrow the Kens. With Gloria's speech breaking the spell, the Barbies reclaim BarbieLand, and Mattel promotes Gloria, signaling a more equitable future. However, Barbie realizes her negative impact and feels unsure of herself and her role. This encourages her to become an actual human in the real world. The film concludes with a humorous remark, which serves as a callback to earlier in the film when Barbie explains they do not have full female anatomy. However, with her conversion into reality, the last scene shows Barbie walking in for a gynecology appointment, subtly conveying to its intended audience an empathy for women's everyday challenges.

Contextual Background

Barbie has sealed its place in history as the highest-grossing movie during its opening weekend, created by a female director (Langston, 2023). Under the direction of Greta Gerwig, the film serves as a critique of the patriarchal and capitalistic foundations upon which Hollywood is built, undoubtedly making significant waves. However, despite its acclaim, questions arise regarding the film's integrity as it also functions as a commercial for the Barbie brand. With Mattel serving as a producer, profiting from merchandise sales and extensive marketing campaigns, concerns arise regarding the environmental impact, both from the film itself and the legacy of Barbie's creation over the past decades. This dual role

of the film invites critical examination of its societal implications and ethical considerations.

Critical Analysis of Barbie:

Examining Gender Representation and Environmental Impact

Ecofeminist Theory

When viewed through an ecofeminist lens, Barbie reveals a notable lack of environmental awareness and fails to recognize its implications for women of all backgrounds. The film often feels more like a promotional tool, with Barbieland constructed from purchasable sets. The dolls' attire and set pieces are prominently featured throughout the movie, driving consumer demand to buy anything and everything Barbie. The lack of environmental discourse within the film highlights its active contribution to consumerism.

The narrative also explicitly addresses marketing strategies. Mattel's CEO within the film, played by Will Farrel, knows and enjoys the profits generated by new products such as 'Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa House' and Gloria's pitch for 'Ordinary Barbie.' This focus underscores Mattel's primary message: profit, not female empowerment. This profit-driven approach incentivizes rapid consumerism, which is detrimental to the planet. Despite marketing Barbie as a feminist icon, the film underscores the link between women's suffrage and consumption, revealing that the patriarchal, capitalist system only embraces feminism when it becomes profitable, ignoring the environmental damage caused along the way.

Within the film *Barbie*, it becomes essential to establish ecofeminist dualistic thinking to challenge the binaries displayed. As Adams and Gruen (2014) noted, "Ecofeminists identify dualistic thinking (that creates inferior others and upholds certain forms of privilege as in the human/animal, man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body dualism) as one of the

factors that undergird oppression and distort our relationships with the earth and other animals” (p. 3). From set design to the treatment of women, the film contrasts the artificial, controlled environment of BarbieLand with the complex reality of the natural world, symbolizing the nature/culture dualism. BarbieLand's plastic, consumerist utopia starkly opposes the chaotic, nuanced reality outside its borders. This contrast underscores how the film, despite its vibrant portrayal, neglects the environmental impact of its titular character's brand.

Furthermore, the film explores gender roles through Ken's patriarchal takeover of BarbieLand and the female characters' resistance, reflecting the man/woman binary. Ken's newfound sense of power in the real world and his eventual domination of BarbieLand highlight the ever-persistent underlying gender hierarchy. At the same time, the women of BarbieLand struggle to reclaim their space, which illustrates resistance against such oppressive structures. Additionally, by sidestepping the environmental consequences of the Barbie brand, the film perpetuates human/environment dualism, emphasizing society's disconnect between human actions and environmental repercussions. These elements together illustrate the ecofeminist critique of oppressive dualistic thinking, revealing the film's failure to engage deeply with the issues it superficially addresses.

Although ecofeminism critiques power structures such as patriarchy, it also examines the interconnectedness of issues regarding race, gender, sex, size, and class. Despite a diverse cast, the stereotypical Barbie and Ken remain front and center in the film. La Porte and Cavusoglu (2023) argued in their article that Barbie is a cultural and global icon whose impact continues to reinforce specific beauty standards. The film highlights this through the

character of Weird Barbie, who faces extreme ostracism due to her appearance and age. As La Porte and Cavusoglu noted, “Weird Barbie is labeled a social outcast and is a source of comic relief, raising questions about how society views people who have unique appearances or disabilities, particularly as a result of previous traumatic experiences. The stigmatization that these features make her 'weird' may perpetuate ableist discrimination and, further, the belief that those with typical appearances and abilities are superior” (p. 5). This portrayal underscores how the film, while attempting to promote diversity, still perpetuates traditional beauty ideals and marginalizes those who deviate from them, highlighting the persistent societal biases Barbie embodies.

Symptomatic Reading Method

This film neglects to address environmental concerns regarding the problematic history of Barbie plastic. Furthermore, it fails to acknowledge accountability concerning systemic structures while presenting a diluted version of feminist discourse. Throughout the film, matters concerning women and men are trivialized for comedic effect, overlooking broader societal issues. By presenting a marketable form of feminism that avoids challenging the status quo, the movie feels artificial and lacking compared to other feminist works. This marketable feminism includes the lack of acceptance and uses self-aware humor to avoid taking accountability. Mattel’s branding of Barbie has not only contributed to a neo-liberal capitalist system, but has also definitively lacked support for women’s liberation as *Barbie* pushes and endorses rigid beauty standards. Throughout the film, every character who could be held accountable is played as naive or ignorant of their role in contributing to these oppressive structures.

The portrayal of the film's male characters, notably Mattel's CEO, perpetuates a stereotype of incompetence, seemingly excusing their sexist behavior by suggesting they "do not know better." This narrative choice deflects blame from the company, which actively contributes to capitalist and patriarchal structures by selling dolls that sexualize women's bodies. As a result, the film's overarching message feels undermined, presenting a flat and compromised narrative. The writer, Greta Gerwig, faces limitations in addressing these complex issues within the constraints of the film's storyline.

Throughout the film, suggestions and themes regarding women's treatment and roles are consistently undermined by the insertion of humor. For instance, when Barbie and Ken enter reality early in the narrative, they encounter a shift in societal attitudes. While Barbie feels uncomfortable due to catcalling, Ken receives positive attention. However, this nuanced exploration is quickly brushed aside in a brief scene. Barbie's encounter with men objectifying her ends with a joke about her and Ken lacking genitalia, undermining the serious issue of sexual assault and reducing it to a binary of gender discrimination. Moreover, this approach raises questions about whether the film, while aiming to spark discussion, inadvertently reinforces gender stereotypes by prioritizing anatomical aspects over other facets of identity and agency (La Porte & Cavusoglu, 2023, p. 9). As La Porte and Cavusoglu suggested, this exclusionary narrative may alienate transgender individuals, highlighting another flaw in the film's attempt at feminism. By failing to engage in this nuanced conversation and merely mimicking feminist ideologies to a superficial extent, the film consistently misses the mark.

Feminism encompasses more than just the liberation of White women; it has

evolved, and Barbie struggles to keep pace as the main focus and primary goal of the film is to fix Stereotypical Barbie. White women, especially White, thin, and conventionally attractive women, have had more opportunities regarding equality. Because Stereotypical Barbie is the only character with the permission and ability to leave behind the sterile plastic environment, her rights are deemed more important than her counterparts who range from different body types and races. The more diverse Barbies must stay in BarbieLand— a plastic environment devoid of real pleasure, challenges, and life. This represents how White women have had more upward mobility and say in their rights and environment, while other women, who do not fit into this one specific box, face more challenges impacting their environment.

Politics of the Natural: Unveiling the Ideological and Theoretical

Significance in *Barbie*

Analysis

In Sturgeon's (2009) discourse, the phrase "the politics of the natural" suggests that labeling something as natural confers an influential status perceived as indisputable and factual. Sturgeon underscores that the terms nature and natural are often used interchangeably to denote what is normal or inevitable. According to the author, "calling something 'natural' places it in an arena of truth" (p. 19). When applied to the analysis of the *Barbie* film, this concept reveals how the notion of the natural reinforces traditional gender roles and beauty standards as inherent and unchangeable. Barbie and Ken embody stereotypical femininity and masculinity, respectively, presented as natural and unquestionable within the narrative.

The analytical findings from dissecting the *Barbie* film extend beyond cinematic critique. The film's portrayal of feminist issues and its lack of discussion surrounding Barbie's environmental damage feeds into a narrative that minimizes the importance of both environmental concerns and the treatment of women in society. Moreover, this analysis sheds light on the power structures inherent in Hollywood, where profit-driven motives often overshadow discourse on social inequalities. The film's portrayal of gender dynamics and its reluctance to confront real societal problems suggest a broader pattern within the entertainment industry, where discussions of inequality are commodified to generate profits while meaningful change remains elusive.

Conclusion

Beyond the blonde hair, big smile, and pink everything, there lies an inquiry: If Barbie perpetuates a superficial version of feminism, is it already too late for society? By ignoring Barbie's problematic history regarding both the environment and the feminist movement, the film leaves the discussion bleak, even as this so-called feminist media continues to gain attention and profit. These insights highlight the need to look beyond consumer culture and question the narratives consumed. True justice for women and the environment cannot emerge from a capitalist framework prioritizing profit over change. It is crucial to demand more from the media by seeking stories that challenge the status quo and inspire action. Only by pushing for narratives that meaningfully engage with gender and environmental justice can real progress be made.

When social change movements and theories begin to be commodified, neoliberal capitalism loses the integrity and impact of such critical theories, rebrands, and claims.

Amidst the marketable feminism found within *Barbie*, there also lies the reality of what can happen when corporations take hold of such movements as they continue to garner power. Capitalism and its prolonged effects destroy the environment, and commodifying one social movement to disregard other shows where the corporation's priorities stand. If *Barbie* served as a critique against Mattel, it would have made waves, as big-budget Hollywood movies rarely tackle such topics head-on. Instead, the movie acts as if it has solved all of women's problems by just throwing in a few buzzwords. An honest critique would have allowed further discussion and asked Mattel to take accountability. Instead, it continues to profit, disguising its motives in layers of thick pink plastic.

References

- Adams, C., & Gruen, L. (2014). Introduction. In C. Adams, & L. Gruen (Eds.) *Ecofeminism: Feminist intersections with other animals and the earth* (pp. 1–5). Bloomsbury.
- Best, S., & Marcus, S. (2009). Surface reading: An introduction. *Representations*, 108(1), 1-21.
- King, Y. (1995). Engendering a peaceful planet: Ecology, economy, and ecofeminism in contemporary context. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 23(3/4), 15–21.
- Langston, K. (2023, August 28). 'Barbie just made \$1 billion at the box office -- Here are the 52 other films that hit the milestone. *People*. people.com
- La Porte, A., & Cavusoglu, L. (2023). Faux feminism in a capitalistic fever dream: A review of Greta Gerwig's Barbie (2023). *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*, 8(2), Article 6. DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2023-08-02-06
- Sturgeon, N. (2009). *Environmentalism in popular culture. The politics of the natural in U.S. history and popular culture* (pp.17–49). The University of Arizona Press.
- Verdon, J. (2023, October 25). Barbie movie boosted Mattel's sales, but investors held their applause. *Forbes*. www.forbes.com

