



Review Essay: *Greta Gerwig's Barbie: Popular Culture, Cinema, and Gender*

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Abstract

This review assesses Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer's interdisciplinary collection on Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023), which sets film historians, feminist critics, music and star scholars, and political economists in open disagreement over whether the film critiques or merely absorbs corporate feminism. Reading the volume alongside recent feminist scholarship, we argue that its opposing positions are its principal strength, but that they are insufficiently tested against audiences, intersectional critique, and labor.

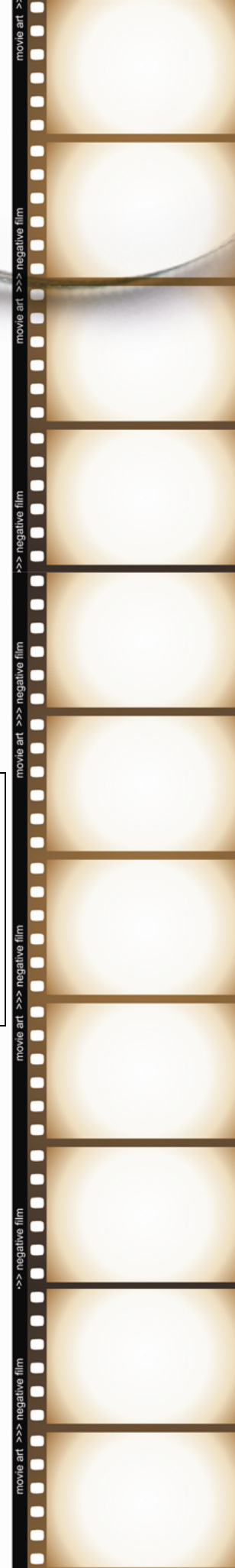
Keywords: Barbie; Greta Gerwig; popular feminism; corporate feminism; auteurism; reception studies; feminist film criticism; book review



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Murat Akser and Dikmen Yakalı

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023) sold itself on a promise of contradiction. Its trailer, which Radner's foreword quotes, told audiences that the film was for them whether they loved Barbie or hated her (p. xxi), and the box office suggests that millions accepted the invitation. *Greta Gerwig's Barbie: Popular Culture, Cinema, and Gender*, edited by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (2026), makes that double address its method. Fourteen chapters by scholars of film history, fashion, music, queer theory, star studies, political economy, and the environmental humanities are left to disagree, and the editors say as much: the volume draws together "the diversity of opinion" that the film produced (p. xxii). We commend this design. As Radner's foreword puts it, quoting Geneviève Sellier, "the issue is no longer the denunciation or the defense of feminism" but "a debate on the nature of the kind of feminism that the film illustrates" (p. xxii). That debate is what the collection stages. We read it in conversation with recent feminist scholarship on the film, namely Byrnes et al. (2025), Do (2025), Li (2025), Burke and Kon-Yu (2026), and Carr and Behari-Leak (2026), together with two studies by one of us (Yakalı, 2024a, 2024b). The comparison shows what the volume achieves and where its arguments are least tested against rival readings.

The book has four parts, a foreword, an introduction (pp. 1–17), a one-page afterword by Stringer, and two useful appendices: a biography and filmography of Gerwig by Alex Dickie with Frédéric Dichtel (pp. 237–242) and a three-act summary of the film (pp. 243–248). Radner opens in Dunedin, New Zealand, where, she reports, "Barbie is everywhere in our town" (p. 1), and she defines the film's subject as a neo-liberal feminism "caught between feminism and consumerism" (p. 3). The framing is hospitable, but it leaves adjudication to the reader. No chapter sets the contributors against one another, the chapters rarely refer to one another in their main text, and the afterword celebrates a body of criticism that "spans a wide multiplicity of styles, approaches, and perspectives" (p. 233) rather than

weighing it. An interdisciplinary project with opposing views earns its keep when the oppositions are made to speak; here the reader must stage the argument.

Part One sets the cultural moment. Thomas Schatz reads *Barbie* as an industrial event of the post-pandemic, streaming-era business, shaped by the Barbenheimer counterprogramming against Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (Nolan, 2023) (pp. 21–35). He relays Mattel executive Robbie Brenner's later claim that the Gerwig–Baumbach script went into production “without input or obstruction—or even notes—from Mattel or from Warner Bros.” (p. 28), a claim on which the film's authorial autonomy partly rests and which Part Four declines to take at face value. Patricia White traces the paradox back to Louisa May Alcott. She is wary of celebration: “In much of the championing of Barbie, feminism just means girl power” (p. 37). Yet she shows that female authorship makes women's desires and resistances affectively accessible while the culture industry “harnesses these desires to capital and empire” (p. 39). Gerwig's own line, “I'm doing the thing and subverting the thing” (p. 44), becomes for White an instance of Barthes's “inoculation.” Pamela Church Gibson and Alexandre Zamboni are harsher. For them a “highly lucrative fashion spectacle was allowed to masquerade as a ‘feminist film’” (p. 67), and Gloria's monologue is a “paean of middle-class despair” (p. 67). Their fashion and red-carpet history is rich, but the verdict in their title, “fake feminism,” sits uneasily beside the film's polysemy and its double address, which other chapters take seriously.

Part Two turns to Gerwig's authorship. Alex Dickie shows that the auteur functions as both an aesthetic idea and a brand, noting that the Cannes president praised her for “delivering arthouse blockbusters” (p. 84) before asking whether *Barbie* is “a maverick aberration” (p. 85) or a route others can follow. Claire Perkins reads the film's much-praised “smart” sensibility through irony and “post-indie” cinema, concluding that it offers “a smartly inclusive experience” that is “at once knowing and sincere” (p. 99). Suzanne Ferriss takes Gerwig's demand for an “authentically artificial” aesthetic (p. 101) as a theory of self-fashioning and ends on the idea that “a world that is fashioned can be refashioned” (p. 114). These are the volume's strongest chapters on form. They tend, however, to treat irony and artifice as skills the film possesses, while Part Four asks what those skills are for. Perkins's

own phrase, “openly commodifying transgressive ideas” (p. 99), could serve as the premise of Stringer’s polemic.

Part Three, “Identity,” is the most varied, and the place where conversation with recent scholarship is most productive. Sarah Sinwell reads the queer coding of *Weird Barbie*, Allan, and the discontinued Kens, yet concludes that the film “also participates in the same heteronormativity by equating Barbie with her genitalia and body parts” (p. 128). White’s observation that the final scene chooses a *Real World* with “binary sex as its implicit corollary” (p. 51) agrees. Burke and Kon-Yu (2026) read the same material in the opposite direction. Because Barbies and Kens lack genitals yet perform gender, the film for them exposes the essentialism of gender-critical feminism (pp. 1029–1030). The disagreement turns on whether the gynecologist joke affirms or merely names sexual difference, and a volume with no chapter on trans or non-binary spectatorship leaves their challenge unanswered. Amy Skjerseth and Dylan Young show that the soundtrack reproduces the film’s gender binary, with “What Was I Made For?” and “I’m Just Ken” pitted against each other in awards season (pp. 129–130), while the Indigo Girls’ “Closer to Fine” works as a “threshold song” (p. 142). Michael DeAngelis treats Ryan Gosling’s persona as “a prototype for a post-millennial masculinity” (p. 157). One of us (Yakalı, 2024a) argued that Ken is positioned as “the latest icon of postfeminist masculinity” (p. 1) and that the film locates the problem “not in the gender of those in power but in the patriarchal system itself” (p. 10). That reading complements DeAngelis but gives narrative function more weight than star image.

Melis Behlil and Ruken Doğu Erdede’s chapter on Turkey is the volume’s only reception study, and it is welcome in a book otherwise centered on Anglophone and French commentary. They show that *Oppenheimer* sold “24 percent more tickets” than *Barbie* in Turkey (p. 143) and connect the “Barbieist vs. Oppenheimerist” forum rhetoric, the videos that label feminists “Feminazis,” and the Istanbul Convention withdrawal to the “soft anti-gender actions” of the ruling Justice and Development Party (pp. 151–154). Their evidence, however, is a handful of critics, one forum thread, and three YouTube videos (p. 144). That reveals the public language of misogyny more reliably than the preferences of Turkish viewers, and how women in different Turkish cities and social milieus used the

film remains unseen. This echoes the call in Yakalı (2024b) for research that gauges the film's reception "across diverse segments of society" (p. 205). The same study argues that Barbie's trajectory from postfeminist icon to "feminist narrative" (p. 205) should be tested with audiences, which is precisely what the volume mostly does not do.

Part Four, "The Polemics of Barbie," is where the collection earns its subtitle. Sellier's verdict is withering: "Rarely has a film seemed to me so disjointed in terms of narrative, so incoherent in the construction of the adventures and characters, so contradictory in the execution of its announced message" (p. 184). She adds that the film's tribute to Ruth Handler "sweeps under the carpet a much less edifying story of plagiarism, illegal business practices, monstrous profits" (p. 184). Bruce Isaacs finds the film "condescending and vacuous" (p. 186) and reads Gloria's monologue as an "essentialist, unchanging, and dehistoricized 'truth'" (p. 191). The "Sí se puede" exchange (pp. 191–192) is his sharpest evidence, and his conclusion is memorable: "This is Barbie's spectacle of a politics rather than a politics" (p. 197). Isaacs admits that his view rests on one viewing, "without the depth of formal sustained analysis" (p. 186). The candor is disarming, but it exposes the chapter's weakness, since its force depends on first impressions that Perkins or Ferriss, reading the same scenes closely, might revise. Stringer builds the most systematic case. Barthes's "inoculation" lets her argue that feminist critique is staged so that it protects Mattel, and she grounds it materially: "Barbies are made in the very conditions of sexist oppression the fictional Barbies triumphantly overcome in *Barbie*" (p. 210). Seán Cubitt ends the book with plastic, kitsch, and a film that reveals "only a void" (p. 231), an exposure that begins "a reinvention of critique as entertainment" (p. 232).

Set beside the journal literature, the volume's polemic belongs to a wider argument. Byrnes et al. (2025) observe that in the film "Barbie's flaw is that she is too inclusive, too infinite, rather than too thin, too white or too exclusionary" (p. 764), a formulation that sharpens White's and Church Gibson's doubts about a universal femininity. Li (2025) names a mechanism close to Stringer's inoculation, "performative resistance," and concludes that "structural problems are increasingly obscured by their exposure" (p. 1519). Li's reading of *Weird Barbie* as a figure of disability to be repaired supplies what

the volume lacks: White's opening gesture to an "able-ist" celebration of femininity (p. 38) is not developed by any chapter. Burke and Kon-Yu (2026) hold the opposite line, that patriarchy is shown as "systemic rather than individual" (p. 1027) and that Barbies, Kens, humans, and Allan form a coalition, an argument that answers Sellier and Stringer on ground the volume leaves open. The disagreement matters because White concludes that Barbie's utopia resolves contradictions "in individual terms" (p. 50), whereas Burke and Kon-Yu see the final act as collective action.

Race is the second gap. Isaacs and, briefly, White are the volume's only sustained voices, while Do (2025) proposes "melancholy feminism," a feminism of "women's empowerment that disavows the grievability of Others" (p. 801), and finds that Gloria's "vague description of womanhood leaves much to be desired" (p. 800). Carr and Behari-Leak (2026), writing from South Africa, call the film "white, elite feminism that fails to be intersectional" (p. 1636), yet propose humor as a decolonial feminist resource, a resource missing from the volume's accounts of irony. Burke and Kon-Yu concede that "more attention could have been paid" to the intersection of racism and sexism, but maintain that racialized oppression lies "beyond the scope of Barbieland" (p. 1033). Stringer's attention to Mattel's factory workforce, "primarily made up of working-class women" (p. 210), shows how race, class, and labor can be brought into the argument. Elsewhere the Global South appears only through Turkey, and the Foreword's promise to look "beyond audiences located in the Global North" (p. xxii) is met once.

The collection is at its best when its oppositions reveal different levels of analysis: Schatz and Dickie explain the industry, White, Perkins, and Ferriss the feminist and aesthetic energies, Sinwell, Skjerseth and Young, DeAngelis, and Behlil and Erdede some heterogeneous meanings, and Sellier, Isaacs, Stringer, and Cubitt what those meanings may conceal. Its weaknesses are the thin editorial synthesis, the scarcity of audience evidence, and the uneven treatment of race, disability, trans identity, and labor, to which the recent literature points. For film and media studies, feminist cultural studies, and screen industries scholars, this is a valuable and provocative book. Teachers might pair White with Church Gibson and Zamboni, Perkins with Isaacs, and Stringer with Burke and Kon-Yu, because the book becomes most useful when read against itself. Its disagreements are not an obstacle to its

coherence; they are the strongest argument for why *Barbie* remains worth studying after the marketing spectacle has faded.

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