

Anish D'Souza

Dr. Bloesch

WGST 345

6 March 2025

Independent Film Analysis 1

Barbie (2023) is an imaginative and satirical take on gender roles, identity, and societal expectations. Directed by Greta Gerwig, the film follows Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) who lives the perfect life in Barbie Land where women have all the power. The Kens in Barbie Land are secondary characters and do not have any control or influence. The story takes a turn when Barbie begins having existential thoughts and experiencing physical imperfections, which force her to embark on a journey to the Real World with Ken (Ryan Gosling) to restore her perfect life.

The Real World, unlike Barbie Land, is a haven for patriarchy and misogyny where women are objectified and lack authority. Barbie goes through a journey of discovery while Ken has his own journey of enlightenment, in which he embraces the patriarchy. He returns to Barbie Land to implement his newfound ideals, turning it into a “Kendom” where Barbies are subjugated. Barbie meets Gloria (America Ferrera), who is contemplating her societal expectation in the Real World. Gloria, along with Barbie, travel to Barbie Land where Gloria reminds Barbie of her worth and inspires the other Barbies to reclaim their agency from the Kens.

Laura Mulvey, film theorist, examines how the use of the male gaze in traditional films reinforce patriarchal power structures, specifically through two concepts: voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. In conjecture with these concepts, the following paper will analyze two

specific scenes in *Barbie* that explore how the film embraces and subverts traditional portrayals of gender and objectification.

Voyeurism, defined by Mulvey, is the act of watching someone without their knowledge—as a method by which male characters assert control over female characters (Mulvey, 63). Mulvey states “the look is central to the pleasure of the dominant patriarchal order, which demands that the woman is the one to be looked at”, insinuating that Hollywood films harbor a power dynamic where men are active participants and women are passive objects (Mulvey, 65). *Barbie*, however, subverts this trope by making Barbie hyper-aware of being seen and critiquing how women are viewed and objectified in the Real World. In Barbie Land, the Barbies believe they exist in the Real World world as a symbol of entertainment and empowerment, but their separation from that world makes them unaware of harsh truths. When Barbie and Ken leave their world, they arrive in Los Angeles where Barbie roller-skates down the street in a skin-tight multicolored, neon leotard paired with pink spandex. In this scene, she immediately notices the intense stares and catcalls from men around her. Unlike in Barbie Land, where she was free to exist without fear of objectification, she feels vulnerable and uncomfortable in this environment. This scene disrupts the traditional voyeuristic framing in cinema. This is an intentional choice made by Gerwig to force the audience to feel and understand the discomfort of being watched. In this scene, a bystander yells at Barbie, “Give us a smile, blondie,” to which she looks confused and responds, “Why are these men looking at me?”. Ken immediately laughs and ignores her discomfort, “Yeah, they are also staring at me”. While Barbie feels self-conscious and unsettled by the attention, Ken interprets it as respect, stating that he feels admired “with no undertone of violence”. This scene perfectly encapsulates the gendered nuances of voyeurism. It highlights how men and women experience being watched differently

in society. In contrast to Barbie's discomfort with the unwanted male gaze, Ken embraces the attention, seeing it as a sign of respect rather than a threat. His experience lacks the underlying sense of vulnerability or control that Barbie feels, reinforcing how voyeurism often places women in a passive, objectified position, while men interpret visibility as empowerment. By contrasting their reactions in this particular scene, *Barbie* subverts Mulvey's traditional voyeuristic structures and instead critiques the real-world objectification of women by drawing attention to this unwanted gaze.

Fetishistic Scopophilia, defined by Mulvey, is the act of looking that transforms women into objects of idealized beauty, often through close-ups or exaggerated stylization, to counteract male anxieties about female power (Mulvey, 64). At first glance, the Barbies are aesthetically perfect, seemingly fitting Mulvey's mold. However, Gerwig subverts this trope by giving Barbie depth, existential crisis, and agency. One direct subversion occurs later in the film when Barbie cries, "I'm not pretty anymore... Stereotypical Barbie pretty". The film's narrator humorously breaks the fourth wall pointing out that Margot Robbie is not the ideal casting choice to deliver this line, highlighting the unrealistic beauty standards intertwined in films. There are numerous examples of how Gerwig uses fetishistic scopophilia as a narrative tool, especially following Ken's takeover of Barbie Land. During his performance of "I'm Just Ken", the audience is shown a shirtless Ken under dim lighting, singing about feeling unappreciated: "Doesn't seem to matter what I do / I'm always number two". Traditionally fetishistic scopophilia objectifies women, but here, a male character is displayed shirtless as he sings about his lack of a role. Unlike the Hollywood films Mulvey draws inspiration from, where women are silently objectified, Ken's lack of recognition takes center stage. Next, Ken is in his "Mojo Dojo Casa House" attire—fur coat with no shirt underneath, sunglasses, and headband—adopting a hyper-masculine persona.

He flexes his muscles and performs exaggerated masculine behaviors while completely immersing himself in the fantasy of patriarchy. The intentional choices with the costume, framing, and lighting transform Ken into an object of desire for Barbie and himself, as he becomes enamored with his own image. Instead of the female character being transformed into an object of male pleasure, Ken is the subject aestheticized and exaggerated. Barbie, however, is emotionally distant in this sequence, unimpressed by Ken's transformation—emphasizing that this male fantasy is self-serving and disconnected from reality. Although Ken views his act as empowering, his need for Barbie's attention and approval ultimately reveals his dependency on her validation. By embracing fetishistic scopophilia in a way that differs from Mulvey's definition, *Barbie* critiques how patriarchal systems encourage men to objectify not just women, but also themselves in pursuit of power.

In *Barbie*, Greta Gerwig embraces certain ideas of Laura Mulvey's concepts associated with the male gaze while simultaneously subverting them. Depicting the voyeuristic gaze's effects on Barbie in the Real World and reversing the traditional objectification roles through Ken's transformation, Gerwig challenges patriarchal structures and offers a more contemporary perspective on gender dynamics in film. *Barbie* not only deconstructs the male gaze but also empowers its audience to critically analyze how films shape our understanding of identity, power, and self-worth.

Bibliography

Mulvey, Laura. "5. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'". *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*,

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 58-69.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474473224-009>