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GUEST ESSAY

Barbie Has Never Been a Great Symbol, but She's an Excellent Mirror

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By Andi Zeisler
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The "Barbie" movie arrives today as the culmination of a nearly 15-year process that started when Universal Pictures acquired the rights to the character — which isn't an unusually long time in Hollywood, where scripts regularly languish in turnaround until a combination of big names and deep pockets brings them to life. But Barbie's film debut also comes in the context of a much longer and more tortuous journey with an existential question at its core: After all these years, does Barbie still matter? And if she does, then … why?

From the moment Barbara Millicent Roberts — Barbie — came on the scene in 1959, the doll was controversial. Male toy executives, conditioned to believe that little girls wanted to play with babies, were flummoxed by this representation of a fully grown woman. But little girls, as they do, understood. Barbie became a sensation. And then a lightning rod. Then a concern. For the past 64 years, Barbie has been at the center of countless debates about who women are, who they should be, how they look and what they want.

Barbie looms as simultaneously an unrealistically proportioned airhead and a striving Everywoman. Most of the time she can't utter a word, yet she's believed to speak for a critical mass of us. Perhaps that's why the "Barbie" movie that finally exists is the only one that could exist: one that acknowledges and embraces that weirdness under the vigilant gaze of a corporate chaperone. The trailer's tagline ("If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you.") is confirmation that Barbie is, in the most literal way, everyone's business.

I get it. At 6 years old, I was offered a choice between two dolls for my birthday: the Bionic Woman or Barbie. I didn't, in contemporary toy-representation parlance, see myself in Barbie; the Bionic Woman's brown hair and jumpsuit much more accurately mirrored my ponytail and hand-me-down corduroy overalls. Barbie, with her white-blond cascade of flosslike hair and a plunge-necked pink dress, was nothing like any woman I'd ever seen. Wasn't that the point?

I chose Barbie.

In my childhood, the doll was always there — perched on my dresser, toted along on car trips, surfing the waves of my bathtub on a tortoiseshell comb. She was more distant in my adulthood, as Barbie had become a subject of feminist concern. I followed many authors, artists, musicians and assorted culture jammers who were publicly working out their own Barbie issues in fascinating ways. Along the way, I realized this: Barbie is that childish thing none of us can put away, because as long as she's existed, she's never been a child. Rather, she's been an emblem, a scapegoat, a lightning rod, a target and, most of all, a mirror. However we feel about Barbie at a given moment says a lot more about us than it does about Barbie.

When the 1980s backlash against women's liberation bled into the '90s, psychologists started raising the alarm over a crisis in girls' confidence in best-selling books like "Reviving Ophelia." Anita Hill was explaining sexual harassment to the Senate Judiciary Committee, and women on college campuses were reporting an alarming incidence of sexual assaults. A new wave of feminism was cresting, and it was dragging Barbie under. There was the matter of her unnatural proportions, like a waist-to-hip ratio that could not exist in real life without sacrificing key internal organs. Later, it was her inescapable blondness and whiteness. Despite introductions of Black and Latina Barbies in 1980, along with special collections like the 1980s' Barbies of the World, everyone knew the real Barbie — the icon, the ur-Barbie, the one true Barbie — was a testament to the same Western beauty ideal inscribed into America's other institutions of ornamental femininity, from Hollywood to Miss America to Playboy.

As with every iteration of feminism, those of us in the third wave that rose in the '90s had to grapple with the missteps, misgivings and unfinished business of the previous generations. Barbie certainly wasn't the most important issue, but she was, after all, right there, nakedly and even proudly what we would come to term problematic. So we donned our hot-pink hair shirts.

Barbie's overlords were also being humbled. In 1992, Mattel introduced Teen Talk Barbie, which uttered, among other phrases, a chirpy "Math class is tough!" confirming that the historically trend-savvy brand was falling behind the times — and prompting criticism from the American Association of University Women. Mattel's litigious responses to things like the 1998 intersectional feminist body-image essay collection "Adios, Barbie" and Aqua's gratingly ubiquitous earworm "Barbie Girl" didn't help its P.R. Mattel celebrated Barbie's 40th birthday in 1999 with a brand overhaul that shifted focus from dolls to actual girls, debuting an ad campaign that exhorted its young audience to "become your own hero."

The "Barbie" movie is also about becoming your own hero or at least taking a hero's journey — one that leads Barbie into a real world that, for the most part, finds her either dangerous or irrelevant. It's a fitting approach, since the most interesting thing about Barbie has always been our reactions to her. Some reviews

have said the film suffers from an attempt by the director, Greta Gerwig, to incorporate the breadth of the Barbie discourse, causing a narrative overload. But how could it not, given just how much discourse Barbie has inspired over 64 years?

There's a different film — the 2018 documentary "Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie" — that, for me, helps put that discourse in context. "Tiny Shoulders" chronicled Mattel as a company in crisis: Faced with shrinking revenues and declining audience interest, the company was poised in 2016 to introduce a collection of dolls whose skin tones and body types tick a few diversity boxes. I was interviewed for the film, alongside the Barbie historians M.G. Lord and Amanda Foreman and the feminist authors Roxane Gay (a contributing Opinion writer) and Gloria Steinem, with each of us offering context and commentary on Barbie's place in the past, present and future of women's lives.

I didn't realize the film's narrative would essentially serve as a Mattel redemption arc. When I saw the finished film, I realized that in the course of my life I had gone from a guileless Barbie consumer to an enlightened Barbie renouncer to an unwitting Barbie P.R. booster.

Yet for all the ways Barbie has evolved, so have our expectations for her. As Michelle Chidoni, Mattel's P.R. chief (or, as she describes herself, "Barbie's publicist"), said, inspiring the documentary's title, Barbie holds the weight of several generations' worth of beauty standards and feminist analysis on her tiny shoulders. Those shoulders might get the occasional refashioning — to make them more athletic or fleshier or more diverse in hue or, in the case of this new film, more self-aware of the weight they've been tasked with carrying — but that doesn't change the fact that we keep adding standards for her to live up to. As a symbol, Barbie is so complicated as to be useless. But as a vessel, she's proved remarkably durable.

I'm willing to acknowledge — even mock — my once-reflexive feminist rejection of everything Barbie: She never had to be a zero-sum figure, a thing you were either with or against. Many of us definitely saw her that way. That we did speaks only to

the continuing challenges of a world that, even now, isn’t sure whether women can be free of stereotypes or expectations and be allowed to simply exist.

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