Reading the Barbie movie through cyberfeminism: Barbie Land as cyber feminist utopia

# Abstract

*In this paper I explore Barbie (2023) through the lens of cyberfeminism to argue that Barbie Land can be conceptualised as a cyber feminist utopia. I draw specifically on Haraway’s (1985) concept of the cyborg, and Plant’s (1997) literature, to examine how Barbie herself is produced as a cyborg in the film and how Barbie Land draws parallels to virtual spaces. Themes of boundary blurring and transgression are central to this discussion, and I apply these concepts to key moments in the film to highlight how Barbie (2023) can be read as a nuanced feminist film. By placing Barbie (2023) in conversation with cyberfeminist thinking I challenge the notion that Barbie is a postfeminist figure, instead advocating that the Barbie movie offers Barbie Land as a space for conceptualising Barbie as inherently political.*

Keywords: Barbie; Barbie movie; cyberfeminism; cyborg; transgression

# Introduction

In this paper I place the *Barbie* movie (2023) in conversation with cyberfeminist literature in order to explore the ways in which the character of Barbie herself, as well as the wider themes of the movie, can be read and understood as constituting a cyber feminist utopia. Specifically I will explore the work of Donna Haraway (1985) and Sadie Plant (1997) to understand how notions of embodiment, disembodiment, and the cyborg are central to the constructions of the Barbie movie. In doing this I demonstrate the complex ways in which the Barbie movie can be understood as a space of cyber feminist utopia which offers a way of thinking about this movie as inherently political and imbued with feminist potential. Moreover, I also argue for the necessity of a re-engagement with cyberfeminism to examine a contemporary cultural landscape, highlighting its potential for identifying boundary blurring as a key site of feminist resistance.

The Barbie movie, released in 2023 and directed by Greta Gerwig, is marketed as a fantasy comedy which follows the story of “Stereotypical Barbie” (Margot Robbie) who experiences an existential crisis when she begins to have concerning thoughts about her mortality. What ensues is the story of Barbie travelling from Barbie Land, her lifelong matriarchal residence, into the real world following advice from Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) to find the girl in the real world who is playing with the doll version of Barbie; Only then could Barbie return to her pre mortality-conscious state of being, cured of her worries and new alarming physical afflictions (namely flat feet and cellulite). In the real world, Barbie discovers that her understanding of the world is not shared. She finds Sasha, her doll form owner, who rejects her on the basis that she represents an unobtainable femininity. Further adding to her troubles, the Mattel CEO works to find Barbie and return her to Barbie Land as a matter of urgency. Accompanying Barbie on her journey is Ken (Ryan Gosling), who discovers the concept of patriarchy upon entering the real world, and implements a patriarchal social structure upon his return to Barbie Land. After a speech about women’s social role and expectations from Gloria (America Ferrera), Sasha’s mother who is the true owner of doll Barbie, the Barbies revolt against patriarchy and regain their authority. Although a matriarchy is restored, this is a matriarchy reconsidered, paying greater care to the needs of the Kens and other Barbies who have been ostracised and marginalised. During the final scenes, we see that Barbie has in fact returned to the real world to become human, and we leave her as she enters the waiting room for her first appointment with her gynaecologist.

Whilst movies have been made about Barbie in the past, this one is arguably influential and important because it is the first live-action rendition. Moreover, the prior computer animated Barbie films have been produced for an audience of children through the retelling of traditional princess narratives (see Vered and Maizonniaux, 2017), and have not therefore grappled with the complexities of Barbie as an identity. The 2023 Barbie movie does something different in that the intended audience is adults and the themes expressed in the film invite a more thorough discussion of representation, identity, and feminist politics.

What I am offering in this paper is a way of considering Barbie through the lens of cyberfeminism. In doing this, I provide an alternative framework to conceptualise the Barbie movie beyond representations of femininity (see Rogers, 1999; Lord, 2004; Driscoll, 2005). I argue that the film constructs a feminist narrative which seeks to make visible those social structures that are constructed as natural and uses the blurring of boundaries to emphasise feminism as essential in reconfiguring patriarchal social life. Doing this through an engagement with cyberfeminist literature allows a retelling of Barbie as something inherently political which has a potential destabilising force when it comes to considering patriarchy in a broader sense. This means that we are able to conceptualise Barbie Land as a specific cyber feminist utopia, not because of the seemingly matriarchal structure it assumes, but because it offers an imagined space in which to reconsider and reorganise the binaries that make up embodied social life.

# From postfeminism to cyberfeminism

Barbie exists as a cultural figure beyond the Barbie movie and has been central to feminist debate as mentioned in the introduction. Within much feminist writing, Barbie has been regarded rather negatively as a symbol of patriarchal beauty standards, an unobtainable hyper-femininity, and an embodiment of postfeminist ideals of consumption. She has also been regarded as an important feminist figure, being heralded as a ‘feminist pioneer’ (Lord, 2004, 10). Barbie is therefore a complex figure especially when it concerns feminism. As Taber, Clover and Sanford (2019) note, although Barbie was produced by Mattel co-founder Ruth Handler as a representation of women’s independence and choice, ‘these choices are tightly constrained within a capitalist agenda and a traditional notion of womanhood’ (8).

In terms of representation, feminist critique of Barbie has been framed mainly around beauty norms and the regulation of women’s bodies. This is of particular concern for scholars considering the impacts that Barbie has on children and teenagers. Turkel (1998) suggests that Barbie dolls represent adult women’s beauty and bodily norms and that young girls learn to aspire towards these ideals. Similarly Freedman (1986) determines that through play, girls will internalise the sexualised ideals of feminine beauty and embody them as they grow up. On this basis, Kuther and McDonald (2004) researched adolescent girls’ ideas about the influence of Barbie dolls to understand their interpretations of Barbie. Through their focus groups with girls in middle school, they found that girls generally thought that Barbie’s body is unrealistic but presented a perfect body type for women. A central element to this idea of Barbie representing perfect feminine values is thinness. Barbie’s thinness has been noted as unrealistic and unhealthy (Lind and Brzuzy, 2008), which has led researchers to claim that Barbie promotes dangerous attitudes surrounding weight (Tiggemann, 2011). Harriger, Schaefer, Thompson, and Cao (2019) researched the impact of Mattel’s launch of the Fashionista Barbie dolls which included a cast of Barbie dolls with greater body diversity. This included a tall, petite, and a curvy Barbie doll. They found that whilst the introduction of these diverse dolls is a positive step in challenging negative body image, girls still preferred the original thinner Barbie doll, highlighting how pervasive idealised thinness is for women and girls.

Further to Barbie’s body being a site of feminist concern, scholars have argued that she is emblematic of postfeminism in a broader media landscape (Vared and Maizonniaux, 2017; Marston, 2012). Postfeminism describes a conceptual framework referring to the ‘active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined’ (McRobbie, 2004, 255). With strong associations with irony, meritocracy, and individualism (Littler, 2017), postfeminism acts as an undoing of feminism under the guise of engaging in tenets of feminism. Freedom, choice, and empowerment are central to a postfeminist rhetoric. Ultimately postfeminism works to equate girl power with consumer power (Banet-Weiser, 2018), rendering feminism redundant (McRobbie, 2004). Further, Gill (2006, 2007) argues that postfeminism manifests within media culture which sets boundaries of normative sexual conduct (see also McRobbie, 2004).

This postfeminist entanglement of consumption and regulating sexual norms can be seen in Barbie DVDs which bring the character to life, often cast in retellings of fairy tales. Vered and Maizonniaux (2017) point to how these DVDs aimed at children often focus on friendships between girls and generally follow Barbie on an adventure of sorts, casting her as the agentic protagonist. Whilst this offers narratives which allude to an engagement with feminist politics, Barbie’s body and costumes still perpetuate norms of femininity; ‘there is no disruption to the status quo – they are not too masculine for heterosexual romance’ (Vared and Maizonniau, 2017, 199). Similarly, Marston (2012) outlines how Barbie becomes a trope deployed in teen coming of age makeover movies. She suggests that Barbie is positioned as the opposite of the Cinderella trope, acting as a warning of the social damage that neoliberal values can produce. Therefore, by embodying postfeminist markers of American consumer culture in teen coming of age movies, Barbie becomes symbolic of a villainous woman. In these ways of understanding Barbie’s relationship to film, she is considered to be emblematic of a patriarchal version of womanhood, subscribing to patriarchally defined norms through the guise of empowerment.

Whilst these understandings of Barbie are valuable in situating Barbie within wider feminist discourse and are useful ways to conceptualise her representation and influence, what I am doing is examining *Barbie* (2023) through cyberfeminist thinking, particularly Plant (1997) and Haraway (1985). Applying a lens of cyberfeminism will allow an alternative way of considering the wider politics of Barbie, particularly as it pertains to feminism. By doing this I will demonstrate how *Barbie* (2023) can be considered a nuanced feminist film which produces Barbie Land as a cyber feminist utopia. Therefore, the following section does the groundwork in outlining a cyberfeminist theoretical lens in which my discussion arises from and is situated within. The aim is to discuss the Barbie movie in a way that acknowledges and takes seriously Barbie’s complex position within feminist thinking, whilst offering a way to reconsider the feminist potential that Barbie holds within this movie.

Cyberfeminism pertains to a broader discussion of women’s connection to technology. The relationship between technology and gender has been a key site of feminist debate, with discussion ranging from how technology is active in reproducing patriarchy to how technologies have liberatory potential for women. Wajcman (2007) emphasises the interconnectedness and overlapping inherent to such discussions, recognising that they are not linear, nor should they be understood in terms of progression of thinking. In this section I will discuss central ideas to cyberfeminist thinking, demonstrating how cyberfeminism is situated within a wider discourse surrounding the ways in which technology and gender inform and shape one another. Women’s marginalisation from technology and science more broadly has been recognised as a feminist concern, with discussions focusing on how this gender gap can be closed. The historic lack of representation for women within technological pursuits has been a cause for concern and research has examined structural factors which impact this (see Keller, 1985; Harding, 1996). Such research emphasised that technology is a masculine domain, based in notions of rationality and reason. In recalling a history of feminist thought in this area Wajcman (2007) notes how the problems with technology were not only because men had monopoly of the field, but also because of the ways in which gender is embedded within technology itself. Gender is therefore constituted through technology. In understanding how technology was shaped socially allowed the identification of how technologies are shaped by men in ways that exclude and marginalise women (Cockburn, 1985; Webster, 1989).

The emergence of digital technologies and the internet sparked a shift in some feminist thinking throughout the 1990s. Cyberfeminists embraced the potential of the internet, arguing that cyberspace offered freedom from the embodied self as a marker of sexual difference. In cyberspace the materiality of the body is irrelevant so users can play with their identities outside of social structures. This is potentially liberating for women. Plant (1997) highlights how cyberspace is a feminine one, emphasising the intimate relation between women and technologies. She argues that this close relationship between women and machines signals the blurring of boundaries as they fuse together. She suggests that digital technologies are different to industrial technologies, meaning that they are constituted through different values and structures such as networks over patriarchal hierarchy. This means that there are new possibilities for women in cyberspace, as it is an inherently feminine media. Further, Plant (1997) recognises digital technologies contribute to a wider feminisation of culture as they sit at the forefront of the dissolution of a gender binary which maintains social order. This is where the liberatory potential of cyberspace lives for Plant (1997), in the dissolving of boundaries, subverting the power inherent to technology to reassess gender dynamics.

Haraway’s (1985) cyborg is a central figure in cyberfeminist imaginings. The cyborg is a powerful political fiction, emblematic of the blurring of boundaries and the possibilities of creating new ways of knowing with and through technology. As a fiction and a social reality, the cyborg offers a merging and a transgression of boundaries surround the mind and body, human and machine, mechanical and technological, the real and the virtual. This is a vision of hybridity which destabilises binaries which are naturalised through social life. Haraway’s (1985) cyborg is best understood as a discursive vehicle which has the political power of subverting dichotomies. In this way the cyborg is a figure of liberation for much cyberfeminism because it makes a postgendered world possible. This is an optimistic and positive cyberfeminist idea which revels in the difficulty of imagining what technology can mean for gender (Wajcman, 2007).

Much cyberfeminist literature positions cyberspace as holding the potential for a feminist utopia grounded in dreams of disembodiment and the opportunities this held for reimagining gender relations. The fluidity, boundary crossing, and possibilities for transgression are inherent to the pleasures of creating alternative ways of knowing and in turn, about gender. However, there is a problem with cyberfeminist literature in that it can be universalising, conflating the complexities of women’s lives into the catch-all category of Woman and this runs the risk of reverting to essentialist epistemologies. Sunden (2001) highlights this, arguing that when the flesh is left behind in cyberspace in favour of a disembodied consciousness, essentialist categories are easily reproduced. Similarly Nakamura (2002) urges that without the context of sociocultural positions, everyone existing in cyberspace would be assumed to be the dominant default, further embedding patriarchal hierarchy into cyberspace. She critiques the optimism of a disembodied cyberfuture on the grounds that it denies important identities such as race, gender, age, ability, which are complex and compound each other.

This being said, cyberfeminist thinking remains an important lens in which to consider feminist politics in a broader sense. It is worth examining *Barbie* (2023) through an engagement with this literature because it allows a deeper understanding of notions of transgression and boundary crossing, and also because it provides the tools in which to think about feminist politics as they pertain to imagined worlds. In this way cyberspace and Barbie Land can be conceptualised as similar spaces, both functioning as spaces by which identity and binaries are reimagined and transformed. Therefore, a cyberfeminist reading of *Barbie* (2023) is appropriate in considering the feminist politics of the film.

# Barbie is a cyborg

The Barbie movie (2023) presents Barbie as both human and non-human. She is simultaneously flesh and plastic, organism and machine. Her material embodiment is reinforced through Margot Robbie’s physical body, but this fleshiness is always juxtaposed with the notion that Barbie is still a doll, a version of multiple other Barbie dolls, living in a parallel universe outside of a human experience. Whilst this body has previously been read and understood as a hyperfeminine one which promotes unattainable beauty standards for women, considering the Barbie movie’s Barbie as a cyborg body offers ways of understanding the movie as constructing Barbie Land as a feminist utopia whereby the dissolution of binaries surrounding embodiment, and the notion of transgression, are central to the feminist politics constructed there.

Haraway’s (1985) notion of the cyborg focuses on the idea of hybridity. The cyborg is a way of thinking about the fusion between the human body as organic and non-organic. A concept that is central to cyberfeminist thinking, the cyborg embodies the blurred distinctions between machine and organism, of fiction and social reality, and of the real and the virtual. Such contradictions are what gives the cyborg its power, and for feminist theory the figure of the cyborg is symbolic of the politics of transgression. The cyborg challenges the binaries which structure our social realities, and such binaries are built from Cartesian thinking which underpins Enlightenment epistemology. In this way, Haraway’s cyborg vision is not about reversing or inverting particular binaries that feminism seeks to critique, rather the cyborg acts as a political fiction which allows us to imagine an alternative way of knowing entirely. Barbie’s body in the Barbie movie can be read as a cyborg body, and the plot of the movie demonstrates the fluidity of the body as it develops throughout the film.

In the opening scenes, the body of Barbie in the Barbie movie is initially presented to us as a machine, the routinised movements of eating invisible breakfast cereal, her fixed pointed toes and smile all signal the Barbie doll that we are familiar with. This mechanical quality of Barbie going about her day confirms that she is not human, that she is firmly one side of a binary between machine and organism. Following these opening scenes and during the Barbie dance party we first glimpse Barbie’s existential crisis. We learn that the thoughts she is having are unusual for Barbies in Barbie Land, who seemingly embody a world in which problems simply do not exist, further demonstrating the plasticity of their identities. As a result of these unusual thoughts Barbie experiences issues with her body such as waking up with flat feet instead of her usual arched feet with tiptoes, and having blemishes appear on her plastic skin. These physical changes are related to the new thoughts that she is having, and if we understand her body as occupying the position of machine within a machine/organism binary, we can see that she is essentially malfunctioning as a machine; this foreshadows the blurring of binaries surrounding her embodiment for the remainder of the movie. In this way, the production of Barbie’s body embodies this not quite human essence, a hybrid, cyborg identity. Whilst the production of this body offers a humorous take on the coming-to-life of the literal plasticity of the original Barbie doll, the embodiment of this type of hybrid plasticity in the movie, as read through cyberfeminism and especially Haraway’s (1985) cyborg, holds political potential for feminism.

In these early moments of the Barbie movie where we see the breakdown of the plasticity of Barbie we recognise that Barbie is glitching, which in itself is imbued with a feminist politics of resistance. Russell’s (2020) notion of ‘glitch feminism’, set against Haraway’s (1985) ironic dream of her cyborg manifesto, embraces the failures inherent to the hybridity of the cyborg and the fusion of human and machine more broadly. Glitch feminism posits that an error in a machine is not really an error at all, contrary to the taken for granted assumption that an error signals a problem. Rather an error, or a glitch, actually holds revolutionary potential to intervene in the binary constructions of gendered bodies. It also highlights how disruptions are crucial to making visible the misjudgement that the construction of gendered bodies is stable, fixed, and unchanging. The glitch therefore offers moments whereby identities are transformed between technologies, gender, and bodies. Barbie’s failures in these scenes refer to her becoming more human-like, not being able to maintain the mechanics of her body. Whilst this is understood as a problem by other Barbie Land characters, highlighting this as a glitch afford the opportunity to recognise this moment as an enactment of feminist politics.

In her manifesto Russell (2020, 8) writes that ‘glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body.’ In this scene, her glitching can be understood as a vehicle of refusal, as Russell (2020) articulates. Barbie’s machine-like qualities failing her are considered by the rest of Barbie Land exactly that, a failure. The premise of the movie is an attempt to fix the glitch by transgressing multiple boundaries and binaries. However, by considering how Barbie’s experiences of failure are instead glitches, it is possible to understand how the Barbie movie produces a more nuanced feminist politics. Through the glitch it is possible to see that Barbie is, in those moments, intervening in the binary constructions of her gendered body through nonperformance. By failing to function as a machine she is refusing the hyperfeminine tropes that are associated with her body, so much so that they have been naturalised. The melting together of her machine and human parts has resulted in the assumed naturalness of her gendered materiality, and the glitch reveals the fallacy in this, highlighting the fragility of binary constructions. This nonperformance signals Barbie’s noncompliance with the normative frameworks of Barbie Land, and of wider society. Such normative performances maintain the binaries inherent to social structures, and the glitch renders them visible, revealing the space available for errors (Rife, 2023). This is even more significant in how it contributes to thinking about gender beyond the Barbie movie in terms of material feminist politics, because the body that is glitching belongs to Barbie, who has been so heavily critiqued for acting as a type of surveillance of women’s bodies for decades. Barbie has defined, regulated, and maintained notions of normative and idealised femininity in a broader cultural sense. To see her enacting failure through this glitch in the Barbie movie holds so much feminist power in that it demonstrates her own refusal of these very bodily norms for which she is critiqued, highlighting the capacity for error within representation.

However, such transgressions are not celebrated within the plot of the movie itself, and I suggest that this makes visible the ways in which transgressions are regulated within broader social life. When Barbie is in the real world and the Mattel CEO learns of this, he immediately attempts to send her back to Barbie Land. He urges Barbie to get inside of a life-sized toy box which would transport her back to Barbie Land, but she refuses. Whilst this scene in the movie is offered as humour, when we consider the movie through a lens of cyberfeminism, we can understand how this type of regulation is an attempt to maintain a binary which stabilises gender and perpetuates patriarchy, making binaries appear natural and unchangeable. Haraway (1985) notes how the cyborg is a disruptive force because it lapses into boundless difference, meaning that there is no real way of regulation because the binaries themselves are not simply reversed but they are transgressed beyond the binary and into fluidity. Barbie’s cyborg body in this scene with the Mattel CEO is exactly this disruptive force, embodying fluidity and occupying a space beyond both machine and organism. The attempts to deport Barbie back to Barbie Land can be recognised as attempts to regulate the binary and reinstate social order by cleaning up the transgression that Barbie represents. Here we see that Barbie represents a clear threat to patriarchal social order by her crossing of physical boundaries between Barbie Land and the real world, but also boundaries that pertain to gender. If Barbie is both human and non-human, organism and machine, then she cannot be read as ‘woman’ because ‘woman’ only exists within a binary. In this way, the Barbie movie makes visible the ways in which regulation of gender happens, highlighting how clear binaries are useful to patriarchy in naturalising the constructed nature of the binaries themselves. The Barbie movie offers us the chance to take pleasure in Barbie’s transgression and resistance to attempts at regulation, and in doing so we recognise the pleasure in transgression and pleasure in the boundless ways in which Barbie can exist as a woman but outside of a binary, a central tenet of the cyborg.

The final scene is also significant in casting Barbie as a cyborg with feminist potential for a post gender world. We learn that Barbie is living in the real world and in the final moments of the film she enters the reception of the gynaecologist’s office. Whilst this moment is offered as comedy, a call to the original Barbie doll whose body is made entirely of hard plastic and who famously has no genitalia, we are reminded of the juxtaposition of her flesh and her plasticity, and her embodiment constitutive of the ongoing fluidity between them. Not only this, but we are left with the ambiguity of what happens next in regard to the physicality of her body. In this sense, and further adding to the feminist politics of the movie, we do not see a reversal of machine-to-organism which would only serve to reinstate a binary through Barbie’s body. She does not simply *become human* at the end of the movie. Instead, the Barbie movie furthers the notion of transgression through continuing this cyborg identity. This is a crucial point in considering Barbie as a cyborg, as Haraway (1985) emphasises that the cyborg is a girl who is trying not to become Woman. This means that the cyborg is not making an attempt to reassert woman as a collective identity and position of marginalisation in the world. As Sunden (2001, 227) grapples with this notion of the cyborg trying not to become ‘woman’, she writes that this ‘signifies a distance to woman-as-image and woman-as-Other, but also a distance in relation to feminist collectivity based on sameness’. Barbie’s implied continued ambiguity at the end of the movie allows us to imagine a new conceptualisation of gender, one that exists as a cyborg, a hybrid form of embodiment that exists outside of essentialism and outside of a sex/gender dichotomy. Barbie’s gender in the real world is not that of a woman as we know of women in a binary patriarchal social structure, but something else entirely.

With cyberfeminist imaginings, gender becomes uncoupled from the fleshiness of the body in entirely new ways. Haraway (1985) conceptualises the cyborg figure as something that is open-ended and continuous, a fluid process which construct women’s subjectivity through their local and material conditions. The way that the Barbie movie ends invites this type of open-ended and fluid future for Barbie. This is significant in considering a feminist epistemology more broadly, as the Barbie movie clearly positions Barbie as an ambiguous and fluid idea, which provides a radical reconceptualization of Barbie from the fixed and rigid gendered stereotype she has been recognised as. This shift in how Barbie is represented offers a reimagining of gender more broadly, demonstrating that by making the blurring of boundaries visible there are material consequences that offer the potential of experiencing gender and embodiment outside of patriarchal and essentialist epistemology.

Understanding Barbie as a cyborg is full of potential for wider feminist discourse on how we can know about gender. Whilst the concept of the cyborg is not a new way of conceptualising gender, the significance of this argument is that the cyborg body we are considering is *Barbie*. Barbie has long been associated with rigid gender norms and accused of upholding patriarchal beauty standards for women and femininity. Whilst these readings of Barbie are important, understanding how the Barbie movie constructs Barbie as cyborg is significant in thinking about gender, because it allows us to recognise the constructed-ness of binaries themselves. Through a lens of cyberfeminism and the recognition of Barbie’s body as a cyborg body, transgression, ambiguity, and glitching, it is possible to read the Barbie movie as a nuanced feminist text which negotiates and makes sense of the ways in which binaries structure social relations.

# Realising cyberfeminist dreams in Barbie Land

Barbie Land is a space outside of reality, an imagined space which has a clearly marked separation from reality. If we consider Barbie Land in this way, as an imagined space positioned as opposite to the real, then we can liken this to cyberspace and in doing so, and with reflecting on cyberfeminist literature, I suggest that Barbie Land has the potential to be understood as a space of feminist resistance. Throughout this section I will draw on Plant’s (1997) work to illustrate how Barbie Land as constructed in the Barbie movie allows an engagement with embodiment and disembodiment, which provides space for thinking about the possibilities of cyberspace as it pertains to gender. I will also highlight how Plant’s (1997) ideas are helpful in understanding the feminism within Barbie’s journey through and between Barbie Land and the real world. In doing this I will further the arguments made in the previous section which situate the character of Barbie as a cyborg and will argue that Barbie Land as it appears in the Barbie movie enacts the characteristics of the promises of the internet for cyberfeminists.

By making Barbie Land an imagined place outside of the real, the Barbie movie positions the real world and Barbie Land as two distinct spheres with a boundary between them. In this way, it is possible to conceptualise Barbie Land as a disembodied space. Whilst I will critique this notion as this section develops, arguing that there is something much more complex at play here in the production of Barbie Land as a feminist utopia, disembodiment has been a central notion to understanding cybercultures more broadly (see for example Millar, 1998; Plant, 1997). Cyberspaces have been celebrated as having the potential for humans to escape their flesh and thus, their embodied selves. This ideal has been championed especially through fictional cyberpunk literature, which envisions a highly technological future where the boundaries between humans and technologies are dissolved, leaving flesh behind in favour of the mind being released (Lupton, 1995). Lupton (1995) notes how within this genre of writing and thinking, the human body is referred to as ‘meat’. This likens the body to dead and decaying flesh that surrounds and constricts the mind, which is where the true and authentic self is experienced. In this Cartesian way, the mind is perceived to be more important and more intrinsic to a sense of self than the body is. Further the body is most often considered a hindrance, requiring maintenance, nourishment, and sleep, which distracts from the more important tasks of pursuing the idealised virtual self. This cyberpunk vision of a technological future sees the virtual body as existing without the need for such maintenance, ‘it does not get tired; it does not become ill; it does not die’ (Lupton, 1995, 100). The ways that Barbie’s exist in Barbie Land are, on the surface, living out this technological future. In the beginning of the Barbie movie we see Barbie pouring a drink and lifting it to her mouth, but she does not drink it; she stands in a shower with no running water; Barbie’s don’t die in Barbie Land. Barbie exists as a fiction in an imagined space where the fleshiness of the body does not need to be attended to. From this we can see how the Barbie movie produces somewhat of a vision of a cyberpunk future.

However, I am not suggesting that the Barbie movie is a cinematic portrayal of a cyberpunk future. Barbie is not a cyberpunk. Whilst the Barbie movie does at times, particularly in early scenes, present a somewhat disembodied way of living, it actually offers a complex narrative of moving through and between embodiment and disembodiment, blurring the boundaries between spaces perceived to be real and imagined, and in doing so making visible the binaries and multiplicities that exist within ways of knowing about spaces and embodiment. This grappling with notions of embodiment and disembodiment and boundaries between the real and imagined is what gives the Barbie movie its feminist politics. Sunden (2001), in discussing feminist readings of cyberculture, writes ‘where “the meat” is left behind and the disembodied consciousness released from its earthly groundings, the Cartesian separation of mind from body is no longer a contradiction, a divide under threat, but re-articulated and fortified.’ (216). A disembodied technological future does very little for feminism in that it continues a split between mind and body which naturalises women’s subordinate position within broader social structures and therefore justifies gender inequality. Feminist readings of cyberculture and cyberfutures take contradiction and transgression as its core to argue of the feminist potential in cyberspace, and in doing so challenges the ways in which binaries appear as fixed and stable. The Barbie movie articulates transgression, complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction through the narrative of the film and through the body of Barbie herself. This is furthered by the interplay between Barbie, Barbie Land, and the real world which offers a way of looking at the Barbie movie as constructing a cyber feminist utopia.

In imagining that Barbie Land in the Barbie movie is a cyber space, cyberfeminism is helpful in identifying and understanding the feminist politics of the movie more broadly. In *zeroes and Ones*, Plant (1997) conceptualises women and technology as having an intimate and symbiotic relationship suggesting that women have always had a natural affinity for machines. Whilst critiqued for essentialist undertones (see Sunden, 2001), Plant’s (1997) cyberfeminist ideas are useful in thinking through the feminism inherent to the entanglements between Barbie, Barbie Land, and the real world. Taking Barbie Land as the virtual - the machine - the audience can recognise that this has been constructed as a specifically feminine space. The society is matriarchal, Barbies have prestigious careers whilst Kens do not, and the space itself is coded as typically feminine. Virtual spaces according to Plant (1997) are female technologies. She suggests that everything about virtual spaces signals that they are gendered female spaces, such as their organisations and their values as well as the nurturing that happens throughout virtual communities. The Barbie movie’s Barbie Land is a clear example of this utopian vision of virtual spaces. Whilst this is a theoretical understanding of women’s relationship to the virtual and largely ignores women’s everyday experiences as well as differences between women, it is helpful in understanding how by inscribing feminine subjectivity into the space of Barbie Land it is possible to conceptualise the Barbie movie as inscribing our imagined spaces as specifically feminine, thus blurring the boundaries surrounding virtual and real, embodied and disembodied. If virtual spaces are imbued with feminine subjectivity, then this challenges the mind/body distinction which positions the virtual as a space disembodied. In re-embodying the virtual, or in this case Barbie Land as an imaged space, the Barbie movie furthers cyberfeminist politics by constructing a feminine imagined reality, resisting a patriarchal social structure.

Barbie Land has a deep-rooted relationship to the real world in that Barbies in Barbie Land have a real girl in the real world who is playing with them. This blurs distinctions between the real and the imagined worlds, expressed in the way that Barbie transgresses these physical boundaries throughout the movie. The Barbies in Barbie Land have a relationship with a woman or girl who is playing with them in the real world, so much so that an unsettled girl in the real world means that Barbie in Barbie Land suffers somehow. Barbie’s journey to the real world is an attempt to re-establish balance between the worlds to restore her usual characteristics. The journey itself is interesting in thinking about how cyberfeminists have conceptualised the dualism of the real and the virtual. In the movie the audience accompanies Barbie to the real world, Los Angeles, in pursuit of the girl who is playing with her, and we go on a physical journey. What is interesting here is that characters in the Barbie movie can move effortlessly between Barbie Land and the real world with no real barriers. Fleshy, material bodies are able to move between the real and the virtual and back again. Whilst recognising that this is fiction, this does the theoretical work of shattering the real/virtual dichotomy, highlighting the fluidity of how we experience spaces both real and imagined. There is a shift here in how embodiment can be thought about as the Barbie movie actively places the material body across both imagined and real spaces. This type of virtual embodiment on screen, and the literal transgression of boundaries between the real and the imagined worlds, is important for feminism because it blurs the separation of the mind/body dichotomy, which in turn contributes to making visible the naturalisation of this dichotomy. This also furthers the notion of Barbie Land being a space by which the cyborg can be imagined, as the figure of the cyborg represents an alternative way of thinking about binaries through a transgression of those binaries themselves (Haraway, 1985). In transgressing this binary, the Barbie movie then also calls into question multiple other binaries generated from Enlightenment epistemologies, going beyond the simple inversion of these binaries but transforming them entirely.

Barbie Land should be a space where dualisms are emphasised and patriarchy is re-invented, but this does not happen when Ken tries to implement patriarchy upon his return to Barbie Land. The movie sees Barbie Land as the space in which discussions and disagreements about social structures are grappled with, and so instead the movie positions Barbie Land, an imagined space, as being somewhere that makes visible these dichotomies. In making them visible as social constructs rather than a naturalised way of knowing, these dichotomies are negotiated and ultimately transformed. The Barbie Land that we see at the end of the movie is a Barbie Land made different, where social structures are discussed and navigated with care. Barbie and Ken discuss their relationship following the dissolution of imposed patriarchy, with Barbie urging Ken to search for an identity outside of his relation to her. This is emblematic of Plant’s (1997) utopian dream of cyberspace which underscores the importance of networks over hierarchies and the nurturing qualities of cybercultures in cyberspaces. Barbie Land provides the space in which to visualise patriarchy as unhelpful, preferring instead to construct ways of being forged through care. Plant (1997) views cyberspace as inherently feminine and imbued with feminine norms and values and we see this in the Barbie movie. Typically feminine values which Barbie embodies and has received criticism for in terms of how they influence girls, are deeply embedded within the workings of Barbie Land to overthrow patriarchy and reconstruct a cyber society. Whilst this rests upon an essentialist argument, it is still useful in understanding how Barbie Land has been produced through *Barbie* as a cyber feminist utopia. Barbie Land relies of networks and friendships rather than hierarchies, and beyond this it demonstrates how oppressive social structures such as patriarchy are unhelpful in creating gender equality. Therefore Barbie uses traditional feminine values of nurturing and care and subverts how they can be known, using them not to submit to patriarchy but instead to dismantle it. This is the realisation of the visions of cyberfeminist utopia, Barbie Land offers the space to destabilise dichotomies through the relationship between women and cyberspace.

# Conclusion

Throughout this discussion I have argued that Barbie (2023) has constructed Barbie Land to be a cyber feminist utopia. I have drawn on cyberfeminist thinking, specifically Haraway (1985) and Plant (1997) to explore the ways in which Barbie’s body can be conceptualised as a cyborg body, and how the transgression of boundaries is central to the plot of the Barbie movie. In doing this I have highlighted how by viewing Barbie in the movie as a cyborg, it is possible to conceptualise her as being a disruptive force by embodying such a hybrid identity. Barbie’s cyborg identity is further examined in relation to Barbie Land, a key imagined space within the Barbie movie. I have drawn parallels between cyberfeminist visions of cyberspace and Barbie Land, arguing that we can conceive of Barbie Land as the realisation of the cyberfeminist dreams of a feminist utopia. Embodiment, disembodiment, and transgressing notions of femininity are all central in thinking about how Barbie Land offers a cyber feminist utopia.

This is an important discussion because it offers a way of thinking about Barbie (2023) that takes seriously feminist concerns surrounding how harmful Barbie can be especially for young girls and provides a way of thinking about this specific movie as something that is inherently feminist. By engaging with cyberfeminist literature to highlight how the Barbie movie works to subvert hierarchies and patriarchal ways of knowing, I have demonstrated that this representation of Barbie has a nuanced feminist politics. This works to challenge the notion that Barbie is central to postfeminist narratives, instead placing her and the movie at the centre of a cyber feminist utopia. For feminism, this offers a way of thinking about the Barbie movie as a site of feminist resistance, and as a site in which to consider transgression and the dissolution of boundaries as being crucial to feminist politics.

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