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Barbie Land as cyberfeminist utopia

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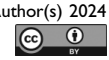

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Abstract

I explore *Barbie* (2023) through the lens of cyberfeminism to argue that Barbie Land can be conceptualised as a cyberfeminist utopia. I draw specifically on Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, and Sadie Plant's literature, to examine how Stereotypical Barbie herself is produced as a cyborg in the film and how Barbie Land draws parallels to utopian fantasies of cyberspace. Themes of glitching, boundary blurring and transgression are central to this discussion, and I apply these concepts to key moments in the film such as Stereotypical Barbie's existential crisis, her travels between the Real World and Barbie Land and the final scene with Barbie visiting her gynaecologist. By placing the film in conversation with cyberfeminist thinking, I demonstrate how *Barbie* sits within a tradition of texts that place transgression and subversion at the core of feminist politics.

Keywords

Barbie, cyberfeminism, cyborg, glitch feminism, transgression

Whilst movies have been made about Barbie in the past,[1] Greta Gerwig's 2023 film is arguably significant because it is the first full live-action rendition. Earlier computer-animated Barbie films have been produced for an audience of children through the retelling of traditional princess narratives and have not grappled with the complexities of Barbie. In this article, I provide a way of considering *Barbie* (2023) through the lens of cyberfeminism, giving a feminist reading of the movie beyond the binary of being either harmful or empowering. 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

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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 it is possible to conceptualise Barbie Land as a specific cyberfeminist 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 in Barbie Land. Through examining moments from the *Barbie* movie through a cyberfeminist lens, including Donna Haraway's (1985, 1991) cyborg, Sadie Plant's (1997) ideas surrounding technology and gender and Legacy Russell's (2020) glitch feminism, this article highlights the value of cyberfeminism for understanding the politics of *Barbie* as well as the ongoing value of cyberfeminism to wider feminist theory. This cyberfeminist lens allows an alternative conceptualisation of *Barbie*, emphasising the feminist politics in how hybridity, transgression and the blurring of boundaries are central to how Barbie Land is created within the movie. I offer a way of thinking about *Barbie* that embraces cyberfeminist utopian dreams, highlighting the feminist potential of the movie.

Cyberfeminism

Barbie has been read negatively as a symbol of patriarchal beauty standards, an unobtainable hyper-femininity and an embodiment of postfeminist ideals of consumption. Much of the critique around Barbie stems from Barbie's body and the impact that it may have on young girls. Ann Ruth Turkel (1998) suggests that Barbie dolls represent adult women's beauty and bodily norms and that young girls learn to aspire towards these ideals. Moreover, Mary Dorsey Wanless emphasises that the images of Barbie's thinness 'are haunting, hovering, constantly draining my self-esteem', arguing that the 'glorification of thinness' (2001: 127) mediated through cultural images begins with Barbie dolls. Emphasising this argument, Helga Dittmar, Emma Halliwell and Suzanne Ive suggest that early exposure to Barbie dolls can damage body image and body satisfaction for girls as Barbie represents 'a distortedly thin body ideal' (2006: 290). Whilst noted as unrealistic and unhealthy (Lind and Brzuzy, 2008), Barbie's body reinforces a feminine ideal which promotes dangerous attitudes surrounding weight (Tiggemann, 2011). However, Barbie has also been regarded as an important feminist figure, being heralded as a 'feminist pioneer' who represents autonomy for women, particularly surrounding career aspirations (Lord, 2004: 10). Barbie is therefore a complex figure, especially when it concerns feminism.

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. Judy 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. 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. Sandra Harding outlines how scientific discourse is androcentric, producing

women as the 'other' (1996: 10). Wajcman (2007) notes how the problems with technology were significant not only because men have/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. 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. 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 surrounding 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 because it makes imagining a postgendered world possible.

In cyberspace, the materiality of the body can be explored so users can play with their identities outside of social structures. This is potentially liberating for women. Plant (1997) argues that cyberspace is feminine, 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 medium. Further, Plant (1997) recognises that 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 in technology to reassess gender dynamics. 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. Jenny Sundén (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, Lisa 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 and ability, which are complex and compound each other.

Cyberfeminist thinking remains an important lens in which to consider feminist politics. The changes and developments within digital technologies since the 1990s have constructed new and different ways to understand the materiality of gender and sexuality as mediated though technologies. With technologies becoming more central as a structuring social force and therefore reproducing hegemonic ways of knowing, a reengagement with 'the ambition and energy – and failed utopian gambits – of the original cyberfeminists can provide critical insight' (Hurst, 2023: 56). Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020) revisits the legacy of cyberfeminism and provides a theoretical update. They position a glitch to mean a type of refusal or non-performance. A glitch aims to make abstract the uncomfortable materiality of the body; it therefore acts as a means to deconstruct the binaries that permeate bodies, allowing the potential to reconstruct meanings. The relationship between the body and digital spaces remains a central focus of glitch feminism, suggesting that the digital world provides a space for the production of new frameworks, new forms of deconstructing and reconstructing and a space of innovation. The in-betweenness of digital space is where liberation lies, and Russell calls for 'an occupation of the digital as a means of world-building' (2020: 12). It is worth examining the *Barbie* movie through an engagement with this literature because it allows a more nuanced understanding of notions of transgression and boundary crossing, and also because it provides the tools with which to think about feminist politics as they pertain to the boundaries that exist between digital and material spaces. Cyberspace and Barbie Land can be conceptualised as similar spaces, both functioning as spaces in which identity and binaries are reimagined and transformed.

Barbie is a cyborg

Barbie presents the Barbies as both human and non-human. She is simultaneously flesh and plastic, organism and machine (see DiCaglio, 2024, for more on plastic, fluidity and Barbie). Her material embodiment is reinforced through Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie): we have Robbie's physical body, but this fleshiness is always juxtaposed with the notion that Stereotypical Barbie is still a doll, a version of multiple other Barbie dolls. Whilst this body has previously been read and understood as a hyperfeminine one which promotes unattainable beauty standards for women, considering the 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. Through the concept of glitch feminism, it is possible to consider Barbie as disrupting the construction of gender, and of exposing the fragility of that construction. Further, the movie makes visible the divide between machine and organism and in doing so continues the ambiguity and subjectivity central to the politics of the cyborg. Haraway's notion of the cyborg focuses on the idea of hybridity: it embodies the blurred distinctions between machine and organism, between fiction and social reality and between 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, binaries which underpinned

Enlightenment epistemology and phenomenology. 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.

In the opening scenes, the body of Stereotypical Barbie is initially presented to us as a machine, the routinised movements of eating invisible breakfast cereal, her fixed pointed toes and smile all signalling the Barbie doll with which we are familiar. This mechanical quality of Barbie going about her day confirms that she is not human. 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 literal plasticity of their identities and reinforcing that they are not necessarily human as they do not usually appear to experience a range of human emotions. 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. 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.

In these early moments of *Barbie* 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 notion of glitch feminism, set against Haraway's 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 affords the opportunity to recognise this moment as an enactment of feminist politics.

Russell argues that the 'glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of non-performance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body' (2020: 8). In this scene in the film, her glitching can be understood as a vehicle of refusal. Barbie's machine-like qualities failing her is considered by the rest of Barbie Land to be exactly that, a failure. The premise of the movie is an attempt to fix the glitch by transgressing multiple boundaries and binaries. However, by repositioning Barbie's experiences of failure as glitches, it is possible to understand how the film produces a more nuanced feminist politics by making visible the construction of gender as a natural and fixed phenomenon. Making visible the

breakdown, or the error, of Barbie's body 'reveals cracks in the seemingly glossy narrative of the absolute fixity of gender binary, exposing it as a carefully constructed fiction' (Russell, 2020: 102). Through the glitch, it is possible to see that Stereotypical Barbie is, in those moments, intervening in the binary constructions of her gendered body through non-performance. 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, the body and her human-like emotions, has resulted in the assumed naturalness of her gendered materiality. The glitch reveals the fallacy in this, highlighting the fragility of binary constructions.

This non-performance 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. Tyler Rife (2023) introduces the concept of glitch virality, highlighting how the feminist politics of the glitch is circulated between the digital, social and material. In this way, the glitch exposing the fragility of gender in digital space, or in this case in Barbie Land, has implications for resistance to a hegemonic social order in the social world. Rife emphasises that 'the project of glitch feminism is figured as a world-making project for those subject to the violences of dominative gendered constructs' (2023: 137), and so the glitch acts as an error which deconstructs the codes in social and material worlds, allowing for a reconstruction. This is significant in how glitching contributes to thinking about gender beyond *Barbie* 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 (Will Ferrell) learns of this, he immediately attempts to send her back to Barbie Land. He urges Barbie to stand inside 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, we can also 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 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 are transgressed beyond the binary and into fluidity. Stereotypical Barbie occupies this space between boundaries by demonstrating how her body is something in flux between machine and organism. This fluidity is reinforced when Stereotypical Barbie skates through Venice Beach, her introduction to the Real World, and asserts that she does not have a vagina. This demonstrates how her body is something in between plastic and flesh, causing a rupture to the binaries which sustain patriarchy. Stereotypical Barbie's cyborg body in the scene with the Mattel

CEO is exactly this disruptive force, embodying fluidity outside of a binary. The attempts to deport Stereotypical Barbie back to Barbie Land can be recognised as attempts to regulate the binary and reinstate social order by cleaning up the transgression, and thus the threat, that Barbie represents. In this way, the film makes visible the ways in which the regulation of gender happens, highlighting how clear binaries are useful to patriarchy in naturalising the constructed nature of the binaries themselves. Moreover, it offers us the chance to recognise the pleasure in transgression and 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 significant in casting Barbie as a cyborg with feminist potential for a post-gender world. We learn that Stereotypical 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. Although we could assume that Barbie becomes fully human from this point on, this assumption rests on binary thinking that is not reinforced through the film. Instead, we are left with the ambiguity of what happens next in regard to the physicality of her body; there is an open-endedness surrounding her identity. This is what imbues Barbie with a cyborg subjectivity; as her identity is not linear in that she does not simply become human, there are ongoing linkages between the human and the cyborg which inform and intersect each other. Dijana Jelaca's concept of alien feminism can be helpful here: 'broadly constructed as both of and not of this world and a liminal figure who is elusive and concrete at the same time – resides at and haunts the human-posthuman spectrum, refusing to conform to a strict binary between the two' (2018: 380). The refusal inherent to alien feminism resonates with the notion of the glitch, where refusal is a key strategy for deconstructing the body as it moves through times and spaces. This is useful in considering how Barbie constructs feminist epistemologies. Her presence in the Real World (when she first visits) as a non-human body offers potential for thinking about how gender is continually being constructed through subjectivities positioned in and around and in between binaries that position bodies, and therefore gender, as fixed entities. As an alien, or a cyborg, Barbie embodies the intertwining of human and machine, and her visit to the gynaecologist assumes the literal and ongoing merging of human and non-human bodies without a clearly defined binary endpoint.

This scene in the movie provides a lens through which to consider 'the nature – (techno)culture continuum in a way that does not place the two in binary opposition or within linear temporality but rather reaffirms nature and (techno)culture as mutually intertwined systems to such an extent that we cannot determine with certainty where one ends and the other begins' (Jelaca, 2018: 381). We do not see a reversal of machine-to-organism which would only serve to reinstate a binary through Barbie's body. I argue that she does not simply *become human* at the end of the movie. This is a crucial point in considering Barbie as a cyborg, as Haraway 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 Sundén 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' (2001: 227). Barbie's implied continued ambiguity at the end of the movie allows us to imagine the fluidity and subjectivity 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. This is significant in considering a feminist epistemology more broadly. The film positions Stereotypical Barbie as an ambiguous and fluid idea by highlighting the plasticity of the body whilst exploring the humanness and subjectivity of identity, and this provides a reconceptualisation of Barbie (more generally) from the fixed and rigid gendered stereotype that she has been recognised as.

Understanding Stereotypical Barbie as a cyborg has 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 Stereotypical Barbie, who 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 film constructs Stereotypical Barbie as a cyborg is significant in thinking about gender, because it allows us to recognise the constructedness 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 *Barbie* as a 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 exists beyond the Real World (see: Hall, 2024). In many ways, this is similar to conceptions of cyberspace as a cyberutopia. Wajcman notes how a dominant theme in cyberfeminism of the 1990s focused on the virtuality of cyberspace because 'the internet spelt the end of the embodied basis for sex difference' (2006: 12). This fantasy of utopianism had particularly liberating potential for women because the internet offered a space that existed beyond the materiality of the body, rendering discrimination based in essentialist thinking obsolete. Inequalities rooted within the fleshiness of the body could be suspended in cyberspace because identities could be explored beyond the body itself. This makes cyberspace a place of infinite possibility for exploration and the freedom to construct identities and meanings outside of social contexts. Cyberspace could be a place where gender subversions are enacted for women; Liesbet van Zoonen claimed that it offers a 'playground for the experimenting with gender symbols and identity' (2002: 12). Barbie Land can be read as offering this type of playground, as we see multiple versions of Barbie: President Barbie (Issa Rae), Doctor Barbie (Hari Nef), Physicist Barbie (Emma Mackey), Supreme Court Justice Barbie (Ana Cruz Kayne), even Mermaid Barbie (Dua Lipa). There is a playfulness here, a trying-on of social roles and occupations that have been typically coded as masculine. The performance of gender is particular to Barbie Land and offers a stark difference to gender roles in the Real World, as evidenced when

Barbie approaches a construction site upon her entrance to the Real World on a quest to find some feminine energy, only to be met by a group of men sexualising her. In this way, Barbie Land offers very similar potential to cyberspace in terms of its liberatory utopianism.

This disembodied consciousness of cyberspace, whilst potentially liberating, does have some dangers. The abstraction of identity from the very real consequences of the body denies the experience of difference, acting instead as a universalising and essentialising force. Sundén (2001) warns that when the body is forgotten in cyberspace, there is a risk that patriarchal models will simply be repeated. This is true of Barbie Land: whilst Barbies can challenge gendered symbols and meanings, they all represent a universal image of Barbie. In cyberspace, all women become synonymous with the universalising idea of Woman because there is no social context to ground any accounts for difference; similarly, Barbie becomes a universal category in Barbie Land which reproduces ideas about what Barbie is. Nakamura (2002) argues that in cyberspace everyone is assumed to represent dominant identities in regard to gender and race, meaning that race is rendered invisible in cyberspace. In this ironic twist, the very categories that are being deconstructed in Barbie Land are actually being reconstructed through the image of Barbie remaining white, thin, able-bodied and heterosexual. For example, the intersectional lived experiences of President Barbie as a black woman are denied, as she is representative of the universal idea of Barbie. The supposed freedom of cyberspace as a space to perform gender without limits is actually laden with assumptions which cannot be disconnected from lived experiences. In Barbie Land normativity is made visible, played with, but ultimately reinforced.

It remains possible to conceptualise Barbie Land as a feminist utopia because of the way that it handles the relationship between embodiment and disembodiment through emphasising the differences between Barbie Land and the Real World. Barbie Land can be considered a disembodied space complicated by the clear boundary crossing between the Real World and Barbie Land. Cyberspace has been celebrated as having the potential for humans to escape embodiment. This ideal has been championed especially through some 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. Deborah 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 mode, the mind is perceived to be more important and more intrinsic to a sense of self than the body is. 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 Barbies exist in Barbie Land are very similar to the futures imagined in cyberpunk. In the beginning of *Barbie*, we see Stereotypical 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. Barbies do not 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, this sense of disembodiment signalling a utopian cyberpunk future.

I am not suggesting that *Barbie* is a cinematic portrayal of this first-generation cyberpunk future. Indeed, Lisa Yaszek (2020) remarks that since the mid-2000s a third wave of feminist cyberpunk has complicated the relationship between the mind and body in cyberspaces. She outlines how more recent feminist cyberpunk writing is focused on connectivity across time and space, rejecting the alienation present in the first and second waves. Instead, third-wave cyberpunk focuses on 'how people might live long and prosper in socioeconomic futures even more complex than our own present' (Yaszek, 2020: 37), which emphasises a slow revolution that happens over time and across space. Whilst the *Barbie* movie does present a somewhat disembodied way of living similar to earlier cyberpunk writing, it also offers a complex narrative of moving through and between spaces of embodiment and disembodiment. It blurs the boundaries between spaces perceived to be real and imagined, and in doing so makes visible the binaries and multiplicities that exist within ways of knowing about spaces and embodiment.

Barbie Land can be understood as an extension of the real world, then, making it clear that the space between the real and imagined is not a physical boundary. Gloria (America Ferrara) and Sacha (Ariana Greenblatt) enter Barbie Land as their embodied selves, and Stereotypical Barbie and Beach Ken (Ryan Gosling) can move between the spaces as cyborg bodies. There is no real separation between the Real World and Barbie Land. Jessica Brophy (2010) rejects the idea of cyberutopia, arguing that an engagement with corporeality is essential in understanding relationships between self and technologies. A disembodied cyberspace would have to be impermeable to maintain its disembodiedness, and it is impossible to see our experiences in cyberspace as contained and separate from our embodied lives. She contends that 'cyberfeminists should not understand cyberspace as a utopian *replacement* for the spaces of lived experiences, but rather as an *augmentation* of those spaces' (Brophy, 2010: 932; emphasis in original) meaning that the embodied lived realities in the offline world impact and shape experiences in cyberspace. Barbie Land is ultimately reshaped through an engagement with Barbie's and Gloria's embodied experiences of the Real World. The contradictions of being a woman, as heard through Gloria's speech in Weird Barbie's (Kate McKinnon) house, function to mobilise change to the social structure of Barbie Land. Lived realities are not left at the threshold of Barbie Land; they permeate the boundary and in doing so demonstrate that the boundaries which structure social life are also permeable. This grappling with notions of embodiment and disembodiment and boundaries between the real and imagined is what gives Barbie Land its feminist politics.

In imagining that Barbie Land 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: Sundén, 2001), Plant's cyberfeminist ideas are useful in thinking through the feminism inherent to the entanglements between Stereotypical Barbie, Barbie Land and the Real World. Taking Barbie Land

as cyberspace, 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 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. These ideas have been challenged – for example, van Zoonen (2001) argues that viewing technology as inherently feminine falls short of a complex conceptualisation of gender – but I posit that reflecting on Plant's ideas remains helpful in understanding Barbie Land because of its overt femininity. I argue that Barbie Land is a clear example of Plant's utopian vision of virtual spaces for women. 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 *Barbie* 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 cyberspace, *Barbie* embeds cyberfeminist politics by constructing a feminine imagined reality, resisting a patriarchal social structure.

Barbie Land should be a space where dualisms are emphasised and patriarchy is re-invented, but this does not happen when Beach Ken tries to implement patriarchy upon his return to Barbie Land. Barbie Land is a space in which discussions and disagreements about social structures are grappled with, and where dichotomies are made visible. 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. Stereotypical Barbie and Beach Ken discuss their relationship following the dissolution of imposed patriarchy, with Stereotypical Barbie urging Beach Ken to search for an identity outside of his relation to her. There are resonances here with Plant's 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 views cyberspace as inherently feminine and imbued with feminine norms and values and we see this in the *Barbie* movie. *Barbie* embodies codes constructed as inherently feminine, such as being nurturing, caring, sensitive and emotional. These values coded as feminine are embedded within Barbie Land as evidenced through the community building happening there with the goals of overthrowing patriarchy and reconstructing Barbie Land. Whilst this rests upon an essentialist argument, it is still useful in understanding how Barbie Land has been produced through the movie as a cyberfeminist utopia. Barbie Land relies on 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 constructed 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

I have argued that *Barbie* can be read as constructing Barbie Land as a cyberfeminist utopia. I have drawn on cyberfeminist thinking, specifically Haraway (1985), Plant (1997) and Russell (2020), to explore the ways in which Stereotypical 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. I have highlighted how by cyborgically viewing Stereotypical Barbie, it is possible to conceptualise her as being a disruptive force by embodying such a hybrid identity. I have drawn parallels between cyberfeminist visions of cyberspace and Barbie Land, arguing that we can conceive of Barbie Land as the one realisation of the cyberfeminist dreams of a feminist utopia because of how it destabilises binaries that construct and maintain gender by exposing them as a construction and subverting essentialist claims. Embodiment, disembodiment and transgressing notions of femininity are all central in thinking about how Barbie Land offers a cyberfeminist utopia. Examining key moments of the movie through this lens of cyberfeminism recognises the feminist politics that move beyond the binary of Barbie being harmful or powerful, focusing on the boundary crossing that exposes the fallacy of such binaries and revels in the possibilities of glitching and transgression. Such a re-engagement with cyberfeminism offers an understanding of how cyberfeminism can be used as a theoretical lens in which to examine cultural products beyond the internet and literal cyber spaces. Here, the values of cyberfeminism are disentangled from technology and instead are used to examine how the *Barbie* movie produces and constructs its feminist politics. This article not only offers a perspective on the *Barbie* movie as a film imbued with feminist sensibility but also demonstrates how cyberfeminist thinking remains useful and important for feminist theory especially within a contemporary cultural landscape. This is an important discussion because it offers a way of thinking about *Barbie* as something that is inherently feminist because it challenges the fixity of gender. 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 offers a way of thinking about the *Barbie* movie as part of a tradition of feminist texts which produce a site in which to consider transgression and the dissolution of boundaries as being crucial to feminist politics.

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Note

1. Karen Vered and Christele Maizonniaux (2017) note that thirty movie titles have been produced by Mattel, each casting Barbie as the protagonist. As of 2024, the Barbie movie series includes forty titles, all of which are aimed at an audience of children and primarily young girls. These movies are all animated coming-of-age-style narratives, some are adaptations of fairy tales and classic ballets, whilst others are original princess fairy stories – and all have a focus on female agency and friendships. They share a particular aesthetic that maintains the Barbie brand of a pink colour palette with neat and tidy characters. Barbie is always white in these movies and subscribes to a heteronormative femininity.

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