

Pretty in Plastic:  
Aesthetic authenticity in  
Barbie Land

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BBR Report 2401v1, January 2024.

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The Breaking Binaries Research (BBR) programme was founded by Katrina and Helen to explore complex and diverse identities at work. We spend most of our lives in work and are shaped by the workplaces and types of work we engage with. Therefore, we believe work and workplaces have a significant role in wider equity and equality agendas and demand a greater level of focus. Our research programme challenges problematic categorical understandings of difference in the context of work. We are interested in exploring the multifaceted ways in which identities are understood, assumed, and constructed. Research has yet to take account of how diverse identities are not simply categorical but complex and intersectional, as individuals self-identify beyond, between or across identity binaries. Our programme of research projects seeks to address and progress current conversations of diversity at work.

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Pritchard K & Williams HC (2024). Pretty in Plastic: Aesthetic authenticity in Barbie Land. BBR Report 2401v1. DOI: [10.23889/sureport.65542](https://doi.org/10.23889/sureport.65542)

## Abstract

Our report critically applies aesthetic authenticity as a theoretical lens to interrogate the multimodal reproduction of gendered relations in the Barbie (2023) movie. Recent research has focused on how the aesthetic authenticity stakes are being continually elevated, such that this requires ongoing labour and continual renegotiation. It is not surprising that even Barbie finds this exhausting! We offer an analysis of character arcs across the movie, before exploring how a plastic doll enables conceptual insight regarding aesthetic authenticity. We discuss how the movie reconfirms neoliberal postfeminist perspectives on how women should seek their happy ever after. Finally, we consider the implications of representations of patriarchy and matriarchy before setting out suggestions for future research and concluding our report.

## 1. Introduction

*'I want to be part of the people that make meaning not the thing that is made'*

Barbie (2023)

Our report examines aesthetic authenticity as a central concern of the contemporary political economy that resonates across many academic fields. Moreover, many scholars observe that understandings of aesthetic authenticity are gendered; with such gendering experienced in our everyday lives whether at work or in leisure (Pickard, 2018). Thus, critically utilising aesthetic authenticity to explore the Barbie (2023) movie offers opportunity to interrogate the multimodal reproduction of gendered relations.

There exists a rich scholarship examining the aesthetic demands placed upon workers within contemporary organisations (Swan, 2017), with a particular focus on the construction of the ideal professional (Kelan, 2013) as a culturally mediated gendered subject. This report develops previous examinations of Entrepreneur Barbie (Pritchard et al., 2019), which adopted aesthetic labour as the primary conceptual lens, and examined participant responses to Entrepreneur Barbie and her real life, women chief inspiration officers. Pritchard et al.'s (2019) findings highlighted the aesthetic symmetry of Entrepreneur Barbie and the real women enrolled in her marketing campaign; portraying glamour that 'was associated with her existing aesthetic privilege as white, young, pretty and able-bodied' (p.258). This aesthetic was seen as out of reach for this study's participants who cited lack of access to the genetic, financial and/or time resources or felt otherwise unable to achieve the Barbie look; noting that this prompted a form of aesthetic anxiety. Concluding, the authors noted aesthetic

authenticity as a potential avenue for future research. In analysing the *Barbie* (2023) movie, we aim to extend this examination of gendering to include both real and plastic and adopt a multimodal perspective exploring character arcs.

It seems unlikely that Gill's call for 'studying postfeminism as a cultural object' (2017: 607) could have predicted *Barbie* as the movie event of 2023 (Wagner et al., 2021), igniting claims that this redeemed *Barbie* as a feminist icon (e.g., Seltzer, 2023). Academics have, however, been more reticent to join the pink revolution. We reflect on the implications of these issues for unpacking aesthetic authenticity, its construction in contemporary times, and the recursive connections that implicate gendering in our understanding. We begin our report by conceptually unpacking aesthetic authenticity before exploring the nexus with gender(ing). We then introduce *Barbie* as our empirical focus, outline our methodology before unpacking both men and women's character arcs. Our discussion explores how a plastic doll might lead to conceptual insight regarding aesthetic authenticity. We discuss how the movie might reconfirm neoliberal postfeminist perspectives on how women should seek their happy ever after. We then consider the implications of representations of patriarchy and matriarchy before setting out suggestions for future research and concluding our report.

## **2. Aesthetic authenticity in contemporary times**

Many scholars have argued that aesthetic concerns are pivotal in relation to contemporary postfeminism in neoliberal economies (Gill and Scharff, 2013; Lakämper, 2017; Lewis et al., 2017), with some suggesting we are now in an aesthetic capitalist mode of production (Mavin et al., 2019). Within organisation studies, our own discipline, initial work on aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2020) captured the idea that appearance – the appropriate body, appropriately dressed and accessorised - was of organisational value and could be mobilised to achieve competitive advantage (Elias et al., 2017). Aesthetic labouring was rarely rewarded but was observed and sanctioned, such that workers felt pressured to keep up appearances (van den Berg and Arts, 2018). This labouring was not contained within the workplace but necessitated investment of time and money outside working hours, and critically required individuals to continually work on themselves (Pritchard and Whiting, 2022).

The central ideas of aesthetic labouring connect to the related concepts of biological capital (Pickard, 2018), glamour labour (Wissinger, 2016), and beauty work (Clarke, 2010). Debates across these related conceptual areas, prompted increased focus on the wider context for aesthetic concerns beyond specific organisations and attention turned to aesthetics within contemporary neoliberal economies (Holla, 2018). This led Elias et al. (2017: 5) to observe that 'neoliberalism makes us all aesthetic entrepreneurs'. Within contemporary neoliberal economies, the individual is held

accountable and must continually self-regulate and self-improve (Bröckling, 2015). The aesthetic self is just as subject to the neoliberal imperative as the thinking self in this regard and requires 'self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline' (Gill and Scharff, 2013: 4). This is not simply a matter of an isolated self (scrutiny, regulation, improvement, etc.) since the self is situated. As Wolff (2006: 149) observes 'aesthetic judgements are always, amongst other things, a function of social structures and ideological interests'.

These structures and interests are also economic; aesthetic capitalism offers the products and services necessary to become one's best aesthetic self. Consumer culture and media ensure we are continually reminded of aesthetic ideals (Budgeon, 2021) while products and services, including aesthetic surgery (Alsop and Lennon, 2018) offer means to achieving aspirational aesthetics (Foster, 2022). It is no coincidence then that the Barbie movie is both possible and successful in 2023, as it reflects and reproduces this aesthetic attention.

Alongside the ubiquity of aesthetic concern, authenticity has similarly emerged as a byword for success in contemporary times. However, as Heřmanová et al. (2023: 2) observe conceptually authenticity is 'cloaked in ambiguity and contradiction'. Academic concern with authenticity is long standing and has been variously theorised in connection with notions of consistency, norm conformity, and evidential support (Lehman et al., 2019). This is often conceptualised as a revealing of the core of selfhood which is made accessible in some way; emotionally, discursively and/or aesthetically (Hewlin et al., 2020). This core is then positioned as real and contrasted with that which is fake (plastic, even) (Plesa, 2023). Yet authenticity can be associated with individuals, groups, organisations, products and media (including film). Indeed in contemporary culture authenticity is often multifaceted, a complex co-construction across many elements all of which must be aligned if the whole is to be perceived or experienced as authentic (Colucci and Pedroni, 2022). This alignment is rarely, if ever, achieved by chance leading Banet-Weiser (2021: 5) to suggest that the key issue is now 'whether and how successfully one can *perform* authenticity in order to claim visibility and identity'. Authenticity is thus a social and temporal process, which is subject to complex processes of confirmation or denial.

Authenticity is negotiated, assessed, and monitored almost constantly across media and communication technologies, which allow aesthetic access to all aspects of our lives (Plesa, 2023; Banet-Weiser, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that much research exploring aesthetic authenticity has engaged with social and mass media, which offer multimodal displays (Budgeon, 2021). Here multimodality refers to the combination of modes of sensory engagement (sound, visual, etc) that combine to produce an affective response (Elleström, 2021). An emergent concern is the multi-dimensionality of aesthetic authenticity. In this regard Maares et al. (2021) have proposed the term authenticity labour to recognise the work that goes into the construction of authenticity online. This

not only recognises that authenticity is constructed but draws attention to how this construction might be an effortful process; a point also made in Banet-Weiser's work (2018, 2021). Critical here is that this effort involves not only the process of constructing an ideal aesthetic but also disclosures of vulnerability or failing (Elias et al, 2017). These disclosures are then required to be resolved, and the resolution observed, in an ongoing negotiation of aesthetic authenticity (Pritchard and Whiting, 2022): a dynamic that is reflected in the Barbie movie (2023). Moreover, alongside this complex multidimensionality, the gendering of aesthetic authenticity offers a connection to postfeminist and neoliberal prioritisation of working on the self. We turn to discuss this in the following section.

### **3. Gendering aesthetic authenticity**

Any discussion of gendering needs to begin by acknowledging complex and longstanding definitional issues. Gender is now commonly regarded as socially constructed, but often binary terms: men and women. There has been a more controversial debate regarding the social construction of sex (as opposed to its natural or biological status) with the female-male binary remaining stubbornly intact. Much research has unpacked the normalisation of sex and gender binaries; highlighting how individuals align, resist or renegotiate their identities. It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that feminist theory is at the forefront of these debates (Butler, 1993; Ussher, 1997), while critical work moves beyond binary thinking by exploring the generative potential of feminist new materialisms (Barad, 2007) and affect (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Sedgwick, 2003). Building on ideas introduced earlier, a key concern here is the mutually reinforcing premises of postfeminism and neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). However, we recognise this as a rich area of scholarship, and a comprehensive overview is beyond this report's scope, thus we focus on gendering in relation to aesthetic authenticity.

We propose that aesthetics, and assessments of aesthetic authenticity are deeply embedded in these processes gendering and, critically, are often used to hold gender nonconforming individuals to account. As Kay notes this 'has especially fraught implications for women, queer and feminised people who are much more vulnerable to accusations of being "fake" (2022: 160). While research has attended to the challenges of aesthetically authentic masculinity, there has been considerably more attention to femininity and to women's experiences; and the ways in which these are shaped by men (Banet-Weiser, 2021), other women (Pritchard et al., 2019), and themselves (Gill and Scharff, 2013). Scholars highlight that these issues require consideration beyond an either/or approach (Connell, 2020) with men examined in relation to masculinity, and women to femininity (Maaranen and Tienari, 2020; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017). A large proportion of studies exploring men, masculinities, and patriarchal structures build conceptually on hegemonic masculinity (Anderson and Magrath, 2019). Connell (2020) theorises that masculinities exist in relations of hierarchy, dominated by a loosely

coherent and evolving hegemonic form operating, counter-intuitively, through consent. This offers understandings of masculinities as complex configurations of social practice which shape a sense of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' gendered behaviour (Messerschmidt, 2018: 48). Thus, hegemonic masculinities function through organising societies in unequal ways, differentiating access to power (over women and other men), and sedimenting the patriarchy (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019).

Recent research has focused on how the aesthetic authenticity stakes are being continually elevated, such that this requires ongoing labour and continual renegotiation. It is not surprising that even Barbie finds this exhausting! Moreover, a constant portrayal of perfection risks allegation of fakery. Much research on these gendered issues considered online media (Aiello and Parry, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2021). For example, research with young Instagram content creators highlights how women face a no-win 'authenticity bind' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4985) and engage in 'strategic acts of revelation and concealment' (p.4997). This struggle reflects how women are scrutinised and how looking fake can be censored (Clarke, 2010); it is proposed that women must labour (just) enough to secure an appropriately 'real' presentation (Elias et al., 2017). The makeup-free movement (Jermyn, 2021) has raised expectations of authentic natural beauty whilst also legitimising a new form of scrutiny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Pritchard and Whiting (2022) highlight how this requires attention across the life course such that women are enrolled in an ongoing binding driven by processes of consumption.

#### **4. Barbie girls**

Mattel's Barbie has achieved a not untroubled iconic status, having featured in exhibitions (Les Arts Decoratif, 2016) and documentaries (Channel 4, 2017; Nevins, 2018). Previous research on Barbie explored her marketing and commercial success (Hains, 2021; Wagner et al., 2021), impact on understandings of gender roles (Martincic and Bhatnagar, 2012; Sherman and Zerbruggen, 2014), body confidence (Harriger et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2023) and sexuality (Dobson, 2015). Barbie has her own online presence, including across social media, while the doll, in her many forms, has been portrayed in television series, books and films. The Barbie Computer Engineer book was rewritten after critics noted that Barbie needed men to help her, an incident referenced in the new movie (Flood, 2014). Mattel has a long-standing contract with Netflix for the release of Barbie animation, despite turning down a role for Barbie in the original Toy Story movie.

The current movie was directed by Greta Gerwig and released in 2023. The starring roles of (stereotypical) Barbie and (Malibu beach) Ken were performed by Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling respectively. Barbie (2023) has become one of the top twenty grossing movies of all time (Dexerto, 2023). The movie has been criticised for being too feminist (Pulver, 2023) or not feminist enough (Cox, 2023), though both sides bemoan the subsequent proliferation of Barbie merchandise. Indeed,

it is possible to purchase dolls of one of the human characters, Gloria, who is available wearing her 'pink power pant suit' (Mattel, nd), currently retailing for £66.99. This price point usefully illustrates that the marketing of Barbie frequently pushes beyond that of an affordable child's toy. Moreover, this is demonstrated by her cover appearance on *Sports Illustrated* (Elliott, 2014) and her LinkedIn account (initially as Entrepreneur Barbie, Barbie, 2014) offering advice such as 'packaging matters'.

## 5. Researching Barbie

Our approach draws inspiration from visual methods, particularly Rose's (2016) attention to 'sites' of investigation. In relation to her framework, we attend to both the site of audience, through our initial engagement with the movie as entertainment, and the site of images, through our subsequent academic review (Rose, 2016). We further draw on discussions of multimodality, recognising that film is a classic multimodal artefact, combining the visual and aural in complex ways that involve characters, sets, dialogue, music, props etc; together these deliver the overall audience experience (Jewitt et al., 2016). Höllerer et al. (2019: 19) propose combining analytic approaches enables research to 'reconstruct the socially constructed meanings' within multimodal artefacts. Thus, additionally, we analysed key character arcs across the movie; an approach commonly adopted in filmic research (Bateman and Schmidt, 2013). However, we stop short of a technical breakdown encompassing more complex analysis of aspects such as editing, camera positioning and scene framing. This would have required a full technical transcription of the movie, which is beyond the scope of this report. In attending to character arcs, we analyse the journey presented through different modes, enrolling understandings of the visual presentation (Rose, 2016) along with attention to other modalities experienced while watching the movie.

Engaging with multiple analytic approaches is widely applied in studies of this kind, not in some naïve form of triangulation but to prompt engagement with the object of study (here the Barbie Movie) through different lenses to develop academic insight. This requires a reflexive approach that acknowledges the limitations of ourselves as researchers to move between these lenses, and of our own positioning in relation to the Barbie movie. We are white Western ciswomen, diverse at intersecting levels of identity (e.g., age, sexuality) and fully recognise that our personal experiences shape the research process. We therefore engaged in constant dialogue across the main steps of the analytic process which included an immersive audience experience, scene by scene review, building and refining character summaries and mapping characters arc.

As already highlighted, we first approached the movie as entertainment, simply watching the movie. The first author watched this on a streaming service alone, while the second author attended a cinema screening in a group. Following advice from both visual (Rose, 2016) and multimodal methods (Jewitt



et al., 2016; Höllerer et al., 2019), the next task was a detailed scene-by-scene review. This involved watching in short bursts with detailed note taking, rewinding and revisiting different scenes as necessary. Given the focus on character arcs, notes were organised by the key roles in the movie and incorporated aspects visual compositional analysis and attention to other modes as highlighted above. Further discussion between the authors developed this analysis which was then reviewed alongside watching the movie again.

From this analysis we focus our attention on four characters or character groups:

- Stereotypical Barbie
- (and) Ken
- 'Real women' (Sasha and Gloria)
- 'Real Men' (from Mattel)

Across our reviews we incorporate relevant aspects of plot and supporting characters as necessary before moving our discussion of how this analysis relates to our overarching concern with aesthetic authenticity.

## 6. Barbie Movie Unpacked

### Stereotypical Barbie

Played by Margot Robbie, 'Stereotypical Barbie' is the lead character whose story is narrated across the movie. This encompasses the journey from a contented plastic doll, who is (according to Lizzo's 'Pink' on the soundtrack) 'beautiful from head to toe' through to the final (and seemingly medical) transition to human. Barbie's quest for aesthetic authenticity, both in correcting her problematic doll's body and then transitioning to a human body is the central plot.

We first establish that Barbie Land is run by the Barbies in realisation of Mattel's own motto: 'if you can dream it, you can be it'. Within this pink plastic and apparently feminist utopia, the Barbies spend their time in sisterly togetherness, united in harmony and prosperity. For the Barbies there seems to be no 'need' for the Kens, they have immortality and do not need the Kens for reproduction. Yet at the same time, the artificial 'toy' status of this land run by women is thread across the opening scenes to establish the mythical nature of such a world, a commentary on contemporary political instability as well as the position of women.

Artistically, the clever presentation of this way of life, from magic wardrobe to the dream house slide, is enthralling. Here, Stereotypical Barbie is hyper-visible in her open walled house or car; only subject to the gaze of an unseen and assumed young girl who is playing with her. Here then there is no sense of an unwanted (potentially male) gaze or risk of aesthetic judgement: everything is perfect. Barbie

is unproblematically aesthetically authentic; there is no effort involved. The privilege of Stereotypical Barbie – blond and white - is also established, she has access to all areas (from the Supreme Court to the President) and is desired by multiple Kens. Other Barbies reflect Stereotypical Barbie's actions and thereby reinforce this privilege, particularly through the uniform choreography of the dance routines which nevertheless place Stereotypical Barbie in the lead role.

This changes as Barbie's (plastic) body becomes the means through which a disruption to this perfect way of 'life' is revealed – heels on the ground, cellulite, and becoming tearful. Here the discomfort is revealed, without specially shaped feet who would wear heels? These are particularly feminised disruptions that Barbie must work to fix herself. Conversely, Ken's body only ever has a quick physical fix, it is only the feminised body that requires ongoing work throughout the movie.

Despite her malfunctioning body, Barbie continues to be outwardly pretty in pink, wearing heels and (largely) smiling through the disruption. She is supported by the sisterhood, which extends even to 'Weird Barbie', an otherwise ostracised member of Barbie Land. This portrayal of female solidarity extends through Barbie's foray into the real world as she attempts to fix her unruly body, recruiting real people - Gloria and Sasha - to her cause. Barbie is also discovering that 'crying is achy but good'; with learning to cry positioned as key to her development as a real woman. We see that Barbie is continually struggling with her own body, both through self-scrutiny and, as the movie progresses, as she is scrutinised by others, particularly men.

Thus, we see in the real world, Barbie comes to realise the problematic positioning of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Her body issues now not only relate to the imperfections she discovered herself; but also result from the way she is continually scrutinised. This perpetual observation is parodied as Barbie remains dressed in outfits from or resembling her doll wardrobe (neon leotard and hot pink cowgirl outfit). It is further parodied through the context in which she experiences direct sexism: the building site and the police station. The former being stereotypically expected while the latter offers a satirical take on notions of everyday sexism. Subsequently Barbie is also scrutinised and critiqued in a different way, by Sasha and her friends at school.

We then follow Barbie to Mattel HQ and via a classic physical comedy chase, Barbie escapes to a domestic setting (Ruth Handler's kitchen) before being rescued by Gloria and Sasha and returning to Barbie Land. On discovering Ken has established patriarchy, Barbie first bemoans her lack of leadership skills as she surveys the scenes in which all other Barbies have apparently been completely seduced by the power of Kendom. However, she dons a pink boiler suit, which becomes the uniform of the Barbies (and Allan) who are trying to restore Barbie Land. This outfit, while pink, echoes 'Rosie the Riveter'; a symbol of female empowerment during the second world war. Yet in these scenes, Barbie(s) use stereotypical feminine ways, including a scene replaying the much-maligned Barbie computer engineer book mentioned earlier. By virtue of hot pink vintage Chanel,

and fake helplessness, Barbie ensures Barbie Land is restored. While we do not find out if Barbie's initial plastic body issues are resolved, she now transitions to becoming a real woman. This transition is ultimately seamless, accompanied by tears, a smile, a pair of Birkenstocks (a classic postfeminist accessory) and confirmed with a trip to the gynaecologist.

### (and) Ken

While this might be titled Barbie, Ryan Gosling's performance as Ken almost steals the show; he is more than Kenough. In the beginning, since the Barbie's run Barbie Land, we see a troubled Ken constantly seeking affirmation; he is only happy when Barbie looks at him. Ken(s) are confined to recreational activities and have no productive role to play. Interestingly as there is no reproduction in Barbie Land and any domestic chores are achieved by 'sparkle', while gender roles are reversed the issues of parenthood and domestic labour are avoided.

This results in tetchy relationships between the Kens, which sometimes materialises as a parody of bitchy women and other times in more stereotypical masculine ways. These include how Kens' lift Barbie in the dance routines and resort to physical threats to 'beach off'. While Ken's attempt to surf is an epic failure, asking Barbie to watch his physicality speaks more to a traditional form of aesthetically achieved masculinity. Moreover, when Ken's masculine body needs fixing, this is easily achieved, contrasting with Barbie's ongoing mission. Ken's wardrobe in these early scenes is largely pastel beachwear, and while Barbie consistently places Ken in the friendzone, he is objectified by Weird Barbie. Early Ken then is constructed through both masculine and feminine stereotypes, potentially in an ironic take on notions of metrosexuality (Waling, 2019).

Ken follows Barbie to the real world, where he is invigorated by the patriarchy. Indeed, patriarchy is everywhere and offered as an easily attainable solution to the Kens' exclusion in Barbie Land. This straightforward path for Ken contrasts with the many obstacles Barbie faces in her quest to fix herself. Yet the ongoing joke across in which Ken conflates patriarchy and horses suggests he lacks the capability to be a real man (which of course contrasts with Barbie's own character arc). There is a danger here then that Barbie can only be seen as more capable than this rather diminished Ken, if so, perhaps this leaves the viewer to contemplate if there were a better man (a better Ken), the outcome might be different. As Ken experiences patriarchy (and horses) in the real world, the imagery is hypermasculine but also somewhat dated. For example, classic images of Western movies, scenes from Grease (released in 1978), and President Clinton. This suggests that patriarchy – or maybe it's just horses – might be a rather dated notion; although as he discovers, perhaps it is just because it is being hidden more effectively.

Ken returns to Barbie Land and adopts the style of Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*, strutting bare chested in his long mink coat and sunglasses. The previously open Barbie Dream House acquires doors and in contrast to Barbie's pink open top car, Ken drives a hummer. Kendom is more closed, grimy, and directly supported by Barbie's in subservient roles (including giving foot massages and serving beer). In the end, this is undone by the distraction of the feminine Barbie and the jealousy between the Kens, leading to an almighty beach off. The earlier hints at Ken's lack of capability are confirmed, he is more interested in horses as 'it was hard running stuff'.

### The real women: Gloria and Sasha

Gloria (America Ferrara) and Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt) are mother and daughter whose character arcs are intertwined and therefore considered together. Across the movie we discover that problems arise from time to time in Barbie Land due to events in the real world, particularly resulting from how the Barbie's are played with. Indeed, the character of Weird Barbie acts as a warning to other Barbie's of this risk. Thus, the real girl – Sasha - is initially blamed for Stereotypical Barbie's body issues, although we later learn it is her mother Gloria's fault, who is expressing her own angst (creating 'Inexplicable Thoughts of Death Barbie' for instance). Nevertheless, the problems are clearly attributed to women.

As Stereotypical Barbie travels to the real world we discover that both Sasha and her mother are discontented – with life and with their relationship. Flashbacks, in which both are dressed in a feminine style, are used to show how the once loving relationship has changed. Across the movie, they both undergo individual growth and resolve their relationship, in a postfeminist sense, they are shown to have it all. Sasha is depicted as a feisty teen, dressed in black and anti-Barbie, but by the final scenes she is wearing a pale pink prom dress and fully supporting the Barbies. Gloria has an administrative role at Mattel but by the end has offered a new doll line to her CEO, though seemingly without any assurance her job circumstances will improve. Both Sasha and Gloria are clothed in a generic middle America aesthetic, but their dialogue is peppered with Spanish phrases to underline their ethnicity. When Sasha and Gloria team up to assist Barbie escape from Mattel, Gloria drives the getaway car in one of the few counter-stereotypical aspects of her role. Yet this is somewhat undermined by the explanation that it was Sasha's father (an unnamed character played by America Ferrara's actual husband) that taught her. Later it is Gloria whose monologue about the fate of the modern woman acts to release the Kens' hold on the Barbies' during the brief reign of Kendom. Here Gloria apparently reveals her authentic inner self; the angst that through her drawings created Barbie's body issues in the first place. It is this expressed authenticity that frees the Barbie's from Kendom's grasp. During this time both Gloria and Sasha wear the same hot pink boiler suits as the Barbies in a depiction of female solidarity. This passage seems to hint at the possibility of collective

action as a nudge away from a postfeminist and neoliberal focus on the self. After Barbie Land is restored and Barbie becomes a real woman, it is Gloria and her family (with her husband again making a brief cameo) that support her and are last seen driving her to the gynaecologist.

### Real Men of Mattel

Mattel takes the role of the somewhat incompetent, pantomime villain in the movie, with an eccentric CEO (Will Ferrell) at the helm. We first meet a corporate underling in a stark cubicle, surrounded by similarly dressed employees and desks. The office is so bland to as be a parody, emphasised by the contrast with the FBI paper strewn office in a split-shot scene. Along with the bland office, bizarre work practices, such as 'whisper me', tickle games and asking to be called mother create a detachment from the likely 'real' Mattel, thus distancing the company from any of the issues discussed. The Mattel men are characterised as incompetent throughout, although they are still able to calculate the value of a new 'ordinary' Barbie doll in a few seconds and maintain their status as executives. However, they struggle to even leave the office building or capture a doll and are only observers in Kendom/Barbie Land. While Barbie, Ken, Gloria and Sasha all change during the movie, the Mattel men and Mattel itself remain unchanged, with the narrator reflecting that even changing Barbie Land will take time and that one day 'the Kens will have as much power and influence in Barbie Land as women have in the real world'.

Across our analysis we have reviewed the arcs of the four main characters or groups of characters. However, there are many other Barbies and Kens that feature and also notable outcast characters, who do not fit within either version of Barbie Land. Allan for example, Kens' best friend, who remains side-lined for most of the movie before going into battle with Gloria, Sasha, and the Barbies to defeat Kendom. However even when wearing coordinating pink outfits during these scenes he is portrayed as an awkward misfit, with no happy ending. Weird Barbie plays a more pivotal role in the plot, offering advice to Barbie about her journey to the real world, providing a haven for the other marginalised characters and helping defeat Kendom. Unlike Allan however, once Barbie Land is restored, Weird Barbie is offered an official role in the new administration, albeit that she chooses sanitation, a potentially peripheral role which emphasises her association with being dirty and broken. Many other discontinued Barbies and Kens appear across the movie, most of whom have bodies or appearances that do not fit in to either Barbie Land or Kendom. Having offered our analytic account, in the next section we discuss the implications for understandings of gender and aesthetic authenticity.

## 7. Discussion

Building on understandings of aesthetic authenticity as complex and multifaceted (Aiello and Parry, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Elias et al., 2017), we explored character arcs across the Barbie (2023) movie, inspired by visual and multimodal approaches (Rose, 2016; Jewitt et al., 2016). Considering the potential contributions, we first question how a plastic doll might lead to conceptual insight before unpacking how Barbie (2023) reconfirms neoliberal postfeminist narratives on women's' happy ever after. We then consider representations of patriarchy versus matriarchy and their implications for gendering. Finally, we provide suggestions for future research and conclude our report.

Returning to aesthetic authenticity, we first ask: is it viable to discuss issues of authenticity related to a plastic toy portrayed by a live actress? We suggest that unpacking the filmic offers nuanced insights into how authenticity emerges as a site of tensions between the fictional and the real, genuine and fake, central and marginal, self and other. These tensions are continually in the making, and authenticity is only ever partially and temporarily achieved (Boyce, 2022; van den Berg and Arts, 2018). Approaching film as a dynamic multimodal process enables us to expose these tensions in ways that are not always possible via social media, which to date has been the focus of empirical attention (Aiello and Parry, 2020; Duffy and Hund, 2019).

Moreover, we regard the authentic primarily as an effect of aesthetic objects and aesthetic experience. Consequently, we suggest our main interest lies in an analysis of how authenticity is brought forth as a perceptible and consciously constructed quality of cultural artifacts (Gill, 2017). Across the movie, we find that authenticity, which requires the impression of being inherent or natural, frequently turns out to be the result of a careful aesthetic construction that depends on the use of identifiable (gendered) techniques with the aim of achieving certain effects for specific reasons. Here, both in Barbie Land and the portrayal of the real world, aesthetic authenticity functions as the ultimate arbiter for assessment, by both self and others. Yet aesthetic anxiety (Pritchard et al. 2019) is inescapable, even for seemingly rigid plastic dolls, aesthetic failure might be just around the corner and out of your control. Here we draw attention to the catch that this failure is also essential (Elias et al., 2017) so that the assessment of authenticity can be secured. While Duffy and Hund (2019) propose this as an authenticity bind, Pritchard and Whiting (2022) prefer the term binding to invoke this ongoing, constant work. Our analysis of the Barbie movie offers insights into the more complex and sometimes twisted plot that lies at the heart of this binding, offering the means to enrich understandings of authenticity labour (Maares et al., 2021).

Authenticity is increasingly valued in a society in which new forms of media and new forms of mediation pervade virtually every aspect of life (Boyce, 2022). Promising the genuine and the immediate and by this - at least to some extent - an escape from mediated existence and experience, we suggest that authenticity becomes a quality of mediation and is thus conditioned by what it seems

to deny. Moreover, our aesthetic analysis of authenticity reveals it to reside in fragmentation, in the piecing together of disparate elements, an idiosyncratic collage which can serve to construct the authentic appearance. In this way authenticity is confirmed as performative. As an aesthetic construct, authenticity is embedded in the process of communication that is realised through the interplay between production, aesthetic object, context, and audience interpretation (Rose, 2016). Authenticity becomes a matter of form and style in which the authentic is realised as a performative effect.

Moreover, the role of scrutiny is placed in sharp focus (Wolff, 2006; Gill, 2017); not least since it is at the heart of our own academic endeavour. Indeed, across our analysis scrutiny emerges as multifaceted; not only in relation to the self/other assessment, but also in the gendered appraisals of and by men and women, a point we return to later. Authenticity is contested: not only a highly debated term (Elleström et al., 2021), it is also always implicated in power structures (Banet-Weiser, 2018), ideological constructions (Elias et al., 2017), and the politics of signification (Jewitt et al., 2016). Arising from encounters between self and other, we note authenticity as a site of ongoing power struggles and endless (re)negotiations of values and meanings that circumscribe individual's roles in, and relationship to, wider society.

Concluding our analysis, we note the significance of (literal) out-casts; those marginalised characters that serve to function as an aesthetic other against which the main characters are also compared: Barbie to Weird Barbie; Allan (who can never compare) to Ken. Relating to aforementioned notion that authenticity is contested, the Barbie (2023) movie cleverly plays on notions of exclusion, suggesting that boundaries of authenticity will always require someone to be placed outside. Nevertheless, we also observe that these outliers become sites of resistance, against the mass produced, oppressive regime; though ultimately this resistance benefits and enables the aesthetic authenticity of the main characters, leaving Allan and Midge to return to obscurity and Weird Barbie to sanitation.

We now turn to examine the complex relationality between the Barbie (2023) movie and neoliberal postfeminism. Barbie is neither straightforwardly feminist or postfeminist; yet ultimately acts to reinforce significant tenets of neoliberal postfeminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), not least since the movie is embedded within the aesthetic capitalist movement and reinforces many aesthetic ideals (Budgeon, 2021). The plot confirms that finding yourself, seeking the happily ever after, is a fundamentally meaningful endeavour for both men and women. However, mens' (and Kens') bodies are offered as more robust, require less fixing or are at least less problematic. For women, finding yourself might involve some discomfort or challenge, but this is simply a further opportunity for growth and development (Budgeon, 2021). Indeed, this working on oneself is really the only form of work depicted within the movie, as other forms of work, both in Barbie Land and the real world are used for

dramatic effect to support the central plot. By putting the effort into themselves, their relationships (Gloria and Sasha) and their bodies (Barbie); other outcomes are also achieved (Gill and Scharff, 2013). However, aside from Gloria and Sasha, and the exclusion of Midge, there are few references to family or motherhood. Barbies' can run Barbie Land free from worry about childcare, their aesthetic concerns do not extend to considering biological changes associated with 'real' women (Dobson, 2015). These issues have been of central concern to both postfeminists and their critics yet are sidestepped in the movie. However, we do see evidence of female solidarity, of women (and Allan) acting together to achieve a mutually beneficial goal (Lakämper, 2017). This hints at a more feminist than postfeminist sensitivity but we suggest is too little and too late.

What then does *Barbie* (2023) potentially tell us about femininity and masculinity? Both the movie and our own analytic focus on Barbie and Ken reveals the embedded relationalities of hegemonic gendered performances. Indeed, both the original (and ultimate) matriarchy of Barbie Land and the brief reign of Kendom are secured through setting the feminine and masculine in opposition, albeit not always in traditionally stereotypical ways (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). While a clear message is that matriarchy can exclude as much as patriarchy, we never get to see the new potentially more equitable regime emerge. There is a further risk here that as we focus in on Ken and Barbie as the central characters, other – often less privileged - femininities and masculinities are ignored. Here we suggest due to the obligatory scrutiny embedded in aesthetic authenticity, Barbie does not become another Weird Barbie, she becomes a beautiful, slim, white, real woman. While the movie does offer glimpses of diversity, ultimately Stereotypical Barbie is exactly that.

Analysing the *Barbie* Movie affords some unique observations and reinforces the significance of film and a multimodal sensitivity to gendering aesthetic authenticity (Rose, 2016; Elleström, 2021). Ultimately, despite the straightforward plot, we suggest that this opens opportunities for embracing the complex and multifarious ways in which gendered performances in the 'real' world play out. Thus, we conclude that being fragmented, contested, and performative, authenticity is constantly negotiated, (re)created and (re)discovered and therefore, always exposed to aesthetic revisions and reinventions. Due to this, the continual attempt to be aesthetically authentic persistently alludes to realms beyond the profane and ephemeral. Moreover, further research on aesthetic authenticity, how this operates as a critical nexus of postfeminist neoliberal economies should cast both a theoretical and empirical eye away from the centre stage to consider how a wider range of masculinities, femininities and minority genders are positioned.



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