


Toxic sexuality: Barbenheimer review

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Last summer saw a cinematic explosion known as the 'Barbenheimer' phenomenon, a phrase merging director Greta Gerwig's feminist *Barbie* film (2023) with Christopher Nolan's epic biopic *Oppenheimer* (2023).¹ I was disappointed, however, by the way both the *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* films perpetuated outdated and stereotypical images of heterosexual normativity. The following short academic film review contemplates the toxic sexuality that undermines both films.

Box office success

I wonder whether the box office success of *Barbenheimer* marks a new golden age of cinema. This is because Gerwig, the director of *Barbie*, became the first female to make over one billion dollars at the box office while *Oppenheimer* became the highest-grossing biographical drama of all time, winning seven Academy Awards (including best film, director and actor) in March 2024. *Barbie*, in turn, only took away the Oscar for Best Song, performed by Billie Eilish.²

The *Barbie* film sees the protagonist (Margot Robbie) having an 'existential crisis' (see Jean Paul Satre 1938), which leads her to journey into the proverbial 'real world' and incorporates profound statements such as '[h]umans only have one ending; ideas [such as Barbie] live forever'. Joined by Ken (Ryan Gosling), during her visit to the real world the 'Stereotypical Barbie' experiences 'patriarchy'.³ *Barbie* entices its audience into cinemas with its cherry pink tones to hit them with its deeper feminist message, whereas the chilling depiction of Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) reminded me of the power and privilege of being an academic. *Oppenheimer* illuminates the way in which, during the Second World War, the American scientific community became so caught up in the idea about whether they 'could' create an atomic bomb, that they did not give enough credence to the ethical question as to whether they 'should' and the consequential effect opening this Pandora's box (or bomb) has had upon our world.

Sexual toxicity

The paradigm of heterosexuality in Western culture assumes a strong dominating man, and a weak submissive woman. (Davies 2008:245)

Barbie has been heralded as a 'feminist masterpiece' (Maddick 2023). Historically, liberal feminists such as Wollstonecraft ([1792] 2017) called for the equality between the sexes, whereas De Beauvoir (1948:301) famously stated that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', suggesting that our notions of sexuality gradually form part of a person's identity. Towards the end of *Barbie*, the 'real world' character Gloria (American Furera) provides a powerful monologue about how it is impossible to be a 'good enough' woman today, as the following snippet alludes:

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong... (Burack, 2023).

Radical feminists, such as Mackinnon (2007), assert that sexuality is something, which is socially constructed and that female sexuality is repressed by male patriarchy because 'women have been trained to want what men want from women' (Jackson 1992:202). Accordingly, Mackinnon argues that female sexuality is so 'fundamental to the structure of male dominance: it is the social structure of male dominance' (Davies *supra*: 244).

1. See the image of the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon used in Travis' (2023) article published in *Empire* magazine.

2. Whilst Ryan Gosling was nominated for the Oscar for best supporting actor and his performance of the song 'I'm Just Ken' went viral.

3. The system of society in which men hold the power and women are oppressed, see Beechey (1979).

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Furthering the point, conservative commentator Ben Shapiro's (2023) *Barbie* review is imbued with what feminists term 'toxic masculinity' – a term used to point out misogyny (Harrington 2020). However, we frequently omit to discuss the notion of 'toxic femineity' present within society, epitomised by internalised misogynistic characteristics such as meekness, emotionalism and self-sacrifice (Savin-Williams 2019). For example, although Shapiro points out the blatant feminist overtone of the *Barbie* film, there has been little commentary on the way in which women are portrayed in Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Applying the Bechdel test to measure the representation of women in film,⁴ female characters only feature as either *Oppenheimer's* supportive wife (Emily Blunt) or highly sexualised, Communist, lover (Florence Pugh) or by being depicted with the classic line in the film that 'I have a doctorate from Cambridge' and being invited to become an office secretary for the project. Certainly, the lack of involvement of female scientists on the Manhattan project is a serious omission of the film.

For me, 'feminisms' call for the ability for a woman to choose her own destiny, including her own sexuality. I endorse a pluralistic notion of feminisms because I believe that *every* person has their own ideas about what feminism is, an idea that has long been encapsulated in much of the work on 'intersectional' thought (Crenshaw 1989). Even though *Barbie* has been heralded as epitomising the modern feminist movement, speaking to one of my female students it is felt that the film did not actually go far enough in its endeavour (see Pourriate 2010 for a powerful alternative approach). As the old advertising phrase goes, 'sex sells', unfortunately, through *Barbenheimer*, we watched the toxic way in which both feminine and masculine sexuality is depicted on screen. Indeed, it seems, the whole world saw.

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⁴The Bechdel test measures whether at least two female characters have a conversation about something other than a man, a test that the existentialism of the *Barbie* film passes.

Ethical considerations

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Disclaimer

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