

Aesthetic Epiphany: *Barbie* and the Myth as Enlightenment / *Epifania Estética: Barbie e o mito como Esclarecimento*

Josef Früchtl *

ABSTRACT:

The article argues for Greta Gerwig's film "Barbie" as an aesthetic epiphany, as an aesthetic phenomenon that confesses to be appearance and therefore offers a fine example of a product of "culture industry" that simultaneously affirms and criticizes the manifestations of ideology. The movie creatively works on the myth of Barbie, outwitting it, and thus becomes a piece of enlightenment itself.

KEYWORDS: Barbie, Epiphany, Myth, Enlightenment, Critical Theory

RESUMO:

O artigo defende que o filme "Barbie" de Greta Gerwig, como uma epifania estética, como um fenômeno estético que se confessa aparência, oferece um belo exemplo de produto da "indústria cultural" que, simultaneamente, afirma e critica as manifestações da ideologia. O filme trabalha criativamente o mito da Barbie, enganando-o e, assim, torna-se ele próprio uma peça do Esclarecimento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Barbie, Epifania, Mito, Esclarecimento, Teoria Crítica

Barbie is an epiphany. She was already as a doll, and now Greta Gerwig's film is it once again. However, it is different from the mere doll. The film is an aesthetic epiphany, one that makes itself transparent as such.

"Epiphany" is originally a theological term. In Greek and Latin it means "apparition", and in Christianity it means the appearance of the Lord in the birth of Jesus Christ, an event celebrated on the day of the three Magi, January 6. The Magi brought gifts to the Christ child, so in countries such as Italy and Spain, Christmas presents for children to this day are only on this day. Clever theologians have interpreted the so-called

* Filósofo alemão e professor universitário. De 1996 a 2005 lecionou na Universidade de Münster e de 2005 a 2020 na Universidade de Amsterdã/Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA). É autor de vários artigos e livros sobre Estética, Teorias da modernidade, Teoria crítica da cultura e a Filosofia do filme. Seu livro mais recente é *Demokratie der Gefühle: Ein ästhetisches Plädoyer*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1. Juli 2021.

wise men from the Orient not only as representatives of the peoples of this earth, but even as missionaries who were the first to bring the good Christian news to the world.¹

Epiphany, however, has also risen to become a term of literary and philosophical aesthetics. It is notably James Joyce who adopts the theological term for literature. He uses it to describe moments of sharpened perception in the midst of everyday life, in which an insight suddenly arises that changes one's understanding of the world. Here, truth takes the place of God, and inner-worldly appearance takes the place of the divine. In the aesthetic perception, objectively speaking: in the work of art, a sense is momentarily revealed that goes beyond the habits of everyday life and is insofar experienced as a higher sense. It acts like a small conversion. All philosophical and literary aestheticians who emphasize the momentary, often shocking character of aesthetic experience that cannot be logically, morally, or politically pacified belong to this tradition, most recently also Taylor Swift with her song "Epiphany."²

Gerwig's film makes Barbie's epiphanic character clear from the beginning. The film stages the doll woman as an apparition. The model is Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001 - A Space Odyssey*. In the first act of his film, Kubrick shows the becoming human of the ape loosely based on Marx, Nietzsche and fetish metaphysics. There it is a darkly gleaming, smooth monolith that, after touching it as carefully as Michelangelo's Adam touched the Creator God, triggers a mental leap in one of the apes when he later plays around with a bone and suddenly realizes that this piece of dead matter can also be used as a striking tool and weapon. It is the birth of reason from unintentional game, the realization of the mind as a weapon, a head birth for the purpose of self-preservation.

Just as powerful as Kubrick's monolith, Gerwig's Barbie suddenly stands in front of little girls sitting around playing with dolls in a kind of primeval landscape. It is the brown withered landscape of the 19th and 20th centuries before the invention of the Barbie doll in the year of the Lord 1958. As in Kubrick's work, the majestically radiant music of Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra* resounds, rising timpani and trumpet sounds, as the girls' gaze slowly and incredulously glides upward. For there she stands: Barbie. She's wearing a gaudy black-and-white striped swimsuit, and her legs, when

¹ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, the later pope Benedictus XVI., „Die Wallfahrt der Völker“ (1987), in: *Gesammelte Schriften 14/1*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder 2019, pp. 234-240.

² Cf. Beja Morris, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Seattle, University of Washington Press 1971, likewise London: Peter Owen 1971; Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1981; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press 1989, pp. 456ff. (chapter 24: “Epiphanies of Modernism”).

viewed from below, are as long and curved as a catwalk to heaven. Faced with this aesthetic, almost divine appearance, the girls can't help but do to their old dolls what Kubrick's man-ape does to the bone lying around: indulge in the pleasure of destruction. Gerwig shows us this with a fair amount of irony, though. Her Barbie, of course, looks like something out of a 1950s fashion catalog. She smiles as winningly as a movie star on a poster. Then she takes off her white sunglasses, looks at her little admirers, ultimately at all of us in the movie theater, and winks at us. She will do this several times during the movie to let us know: Hey, my dears, don't take this priestly seriously! Not even as serious as Kubrick's staged history of mankind. We rather corrupt and spoof the whole thing to the higher fun of the woman history. All get their fat: patriarchy, capitalism, consumerism and, of course, feminism. Because all these isms have to be taken seriously, but not too seriously.

Critique of ideology as intellectual schizophrenia

The old question of ideology critique thus reappears: Can one affirm and criticize the manifestations of ideology at the same time? Can one simultaneously enjoy and see through the manifestations of false consciousness? The answer is now clear: one very well can. Even Theodor W. Adorno, probably the most relentless but also the most dialectically shrewd critic of ideology, points out that no one quite believes in the promises of the culture industry; rather, the consumers show a peculiar split in consciousness. Thus, in the 1963 article "Culture Industry Reconsidered," he writes: "It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings."³ In the essay "Transparencies on Film" (1966) he considers that an "unofficial, if you will, heterodox ideology" is at work in the products of the culture industry. He has the 1950s and early 1960s in mind, perhaps even Federico Fellini's bittersweet account *La dolce vita* (1960), when he writes: "While intention is always directed against the playboy, the dolce vita and wild parties, the opportunity to behold them seems to be relished more than the hasty verdict." This assumption proves to be appropriate if the officially disapproved models of behavior shown in the film "carry

³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered", in: idem, *The Culture Industry. Selected essays on mass culture*, edited and with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London and New York: Routledge, 200, p. 103.

an element of collective approval", which can be psychologically explained as an unofficial reaction to the "repressed by a variety of taboos". The ideology of the culture industry is therefore no less "antagonistic" than the structure of society. It contains, entirely in the sense of dialectics, "the antidote to its own lie".⁴ Adorno's critique of ideology owes itself to an intellectual schizophrenia: one rejects theoretically what one embraces practically; one despises pop music (German *Schlagermusik*), but moves a foot to the beat quite elatedly when one hears it. Adorno thus gives us, secondly, together with Max Horkheimer, a concept of pop culture and - more generally - myth that does not simply oppose enlightenment.

On the ambiguity of the myth

"Myth" is a tradition-bound and therefore ambiguous term. It is obvious to orientate oneself for the time being to the original Greek sense of the word. A myth tells a story, and it does so in a pictorial, vivid, expressive narrative. Thinking mythically means first of all to move in ambiguous and emotionally charged images, not to use unambiguous and abstracting terms. These figuratively charged stories attach themselves to persons (Oedipus, Joan of Arc, Che Guevara, Marilyn Monroe), to things (the Volkswagen, the Kalashnikov) or to events (the battle of Stalingrad, Germany as soccer world champion in 1954). They thus acquire - secondly - a highlighted symbolic meaning. As Roland Barthes showed in his *Myths of Everyday Life* (1957), anything can become a myth; it is by no means limited to resounding persons, things, or events from so-called prehistory. From this meaning it is only a small, almost transitionless step to myth - thirdly - as a false idea and blurred lie. Only in this last meaning can myths be confronted with truth; only in this context can facts act as myth-killers.

The culturally interesting and politically momentous significance, however, lies on the first two levels. One must look to philosophy and the social sciences for more clarity in this matter. Here, one has long since gone beyond simplified classifications. The development formula "from myth to logos", which, in the spirit of the Enlightenment of the 18th century, has been coined by the philologist Wilhelm Nestle in 1940, and the discourse on the myth as a "pre-logical", which Lucien Lévy-Bruhl had presented three decades earlier, has meanwhile been replaced across the board by an account that

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film", in: idem, *The Culture Industry*, loc.cit., p. 181.

understands the myth in its own logic as a "symbolic form" (Ernst Cassirer) or as a form of "enlightenment" (Max Horkheimer / Theodor W. Adorno). Myth is an independent, irreducible form of human self-understanding, which stands on an equal footing with religion, art, science and technology.

The question of the truth of the myth tends to be replaced by the question of its effectiveness. The myth fulfills psychologically, culturally and sociologically important functions. It works as a valve, surrogate, stabilizer or corrective, be it for the individual (as Sigmund Freud has worked out), the peoples (Carl Gustav Jung is outstanding here) or the structure of societies (Claude Lévi-Strauss is exemplary in this respect). In most cases, these effects cannot be neatly separated from each other. This becomes especially clear in those myths that are based on prehistory. Achilles, Oedipus, David and Goliath - around them and a few sparsely sown historical data stories are entwined and through them values are conveyed, which a family, a tribe, a city, a nation traditionally makes its stories and values and thus grasps itself as a community. Functionally seen, reason and myth are not opposites. They establish familiarity with the world, explain nature in their own way, enable the mastery of nature and justify the values of a community. This means, however, that the myth cannot be completely transferred into one of the other forms of self-understanding and thinking, and therefore cannot be refuted or overcome. It shows itself largely untouched by facts. One can only continue to work on it. The "work on the myth" (Hans Blumenberg) or its outwitting, circumvention, gaming (Horkheimer/Adorno) becomes the appropriate motto of a continued enlightenment.

***Barbie* - a deconstructed heroic story**

So, the conclusion for the children's children of the Enlightenment must be: Come up with something! Be creative in transforming myths and narratives! Help yourself to the rich reservoir of art and popular culture, the undisputed model of myth transformation. And that's exactly what Gerwig does in *Barbie*.

The film uses a simple narrative structure. In literary studies, it is called a story along the lines of the *Bildungsroman*; in mythology, a story along the ancient lines of the hero's journey: departure, initiation, and homecoming.⁵ In the beginning there is a confusing experience in the middle of an ideal world and the call to leave this world

⁵ Cf. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press 1949.

behind. Leaving behind the familiar and crossing thresholds means exposing oneself to adventures. The stage of maturing begins, at the end of which the subject who has traveled to a foreign land, that is, who has been alienated from himself, finds his way back to himself on a higher level and finally returns to the old homeland in order to form it according to the new image and likeness.

Barbieland is a perfect Sunshine State. A world of perfection made of artificiality entirely in the flavor of a 1950s U.S. shopping catalog. *The Truman Show* (1998) already built up such an artificial world, in which the main character, played by Jim Carrey, is unsuspectingly held captive as a media observation object until he gradually sees through the phenomenal deception. Barbie's world, as a child's world, is even more artificial in comparison. Here everything becomes a toy, the house, the car, the cocktail. The daily greeting rituals, on the other hand, seem no different than in *The Truman Show*: rehearsed, always the same, and always equally friendly. Equality is the great denominator of this world. Feminist consumer socialism reigns. Everyone is - with certain nuances - the same. All the women are named Barbie, but of course they are all magnetically oriented towards the Barbie who gives the film its title, self-ironically also called "Stereotype Barbie". She is prima inter pares. The one who, loosely based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, is nevertheless more equal in the realm of the equal. The star in the golden cage of the matriarchy. There are also Attribute-Barbies: the President Barbie, the Writer Barbie, the Physicist Barbie and a few others. There are also outlandish variants like the pregnant Midge and the "weird" Barbie, whom the film probably adapted from *Blade Runner* (1982), because she resembles, half clown, half acrobat, the replicant Pris from Ridley Scott's science fiction film. But they remain all stuff of the same stuff called Barbie. It's no different with the men. With the exception of Allan - who was invented as a doll to provide Ken with a friend, but was not successful as a sales object - they are all named Ken. But since they sometimes want to prove their athletic or dancing prowess in front of the Barbie queen, competition creeps in, which the blond Proto-Ken in particular takes very seriously.

All in all, however, one moves in a perfect world, which by definition cannot change. Everything stays the way it is forever. "This is the best day ever!" the Barbies beam all over their faces. "Just like yesterday and just like tomorrow and every other day - and forever. Yay!" Fun here is not a "steel bath" in which to toughen up for the ruthless

capitalist struggle⁶, but a bubble bath in plastic, a bath for playful swashbucklers. But one day a question carelessly tumbles out of Barbie's mouth: "Do you ever think about dying?", and her ideal world begins to topple. For death, transience and ugliness - cellulite and flat feet - are not foreseen in this utopian, feminist children's world.

As a classic heroine, Barbie must now go out into the wide, real world and shrinks from it. She is faced with the alternative of either remaining in her normal life or learning "the truth about the universe." For her, this is like choosing between high heels and Birkenstock health shoes. Her answer comes promptly: she wants the high heels. But weird Barbie is adamant. She holds the role of priestly guide, as we know it from Mozart's *Magic Flute* or from *Matrix I*, where the hero Neo has to choose between a blue and a red pill, between the manipulated life in the Matrix or resistance. So Barbie leaves her doll home, obtrusively accompanied by the blonde Proto-Ken. What she then encounters in the real world, centered on Los Angeles, is confusing, infuriating and sad. There is strife, loneliness, sadness, and above all, this world is dominated by men and their sexist looks and comments. The fun and power girls from Barbieland are completely out of place here.

This insight culminates in a monologue delivered by Gloria (America Ferrera). As a designer of Barbie dolls, it was she who gave birth to the idea of death in Barbie when she transferred her own frustrations to the doll. Finally, the rhetorical climax of the film belongs to her, the brilliant feminist paradox speech, which also derives its force from the fact that, unlike all the other statements, it is not delivered with an ironic or satirical overtone. It will now be downloaded from the Internet and will certainly accompany the cultural studies seminars of the future as a parade text: „It is literally impossible to be a woman ... You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of

⁶ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press 2002, p. 112; the German word "Stahlbad" here is translated as "medicinal bath".

the sisterhood ... It's too hard! It's too contradictory! And nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault."

Thus, Barbie has an experience pretty much along the lines described by Georg W.F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Not the life "that shrinks from death" and "closes its eyes to the negative" is true life.⁷ It rather wins its truth only by finding itself in what is alien to it. The seemingly trivial is philosophical, which admittedly means the other way round that Hegel's famous book also presents a kind of adventure story. One can describe the old concern of philosophy in general as the large-scale attempt to transfer the thought-world of myth and religion into the language of reason or wise consideration.

Equally incisive, even dramatically accentuated, is Ken's experience. He suffers from the structural gender inequality in Barbieland and his status of being merely an appendage of Barbie. He is "the eternal number 2" because it is always "Barbie *and* Ken," never the other way around or in a third, higher-level expression. Ken therefore claims for himself what one should show to every human being since Immanuel Kant: respect, and what since Hegel one must presuppose in every being with self-consciousness: recognition. In order to make Barbie understand this, he inflicts on her (consciously) what she has inflicted on him (not consciously): disregard as a person, non-recognition as an individual. Having learned the system of patriarchy together with Barbie in the real-capitalist world, he overthrows the matriarchy of his original artificial world. But in this way he only turns the domination relation around and cannot achieve what he necessarily (turning his need) wants to achieve: true, that is mutual recognition. It only occurs after women's power is once again the order of the day in Barbieland, but at the same time the Ken men can take a first step toward more participation in power; they cannot immediately become Supreme Court justices, but at least they can become judges. And so it will continue. Ken learns that he can only "emancipate" himself, become an independent individual, if he no longer defines himself by his female counterpart, but accepts himself for what he is. "I am Kenough," is the slogan at the end. From the point of view of a philosophical history of education (*Bildung*), Ken is the more interesting, because almost tragic, character of the film. That it does not actually tip over into the tragic is due to the fortunate circumstance, dictated by the genre, that it is allowed to express its suffering by singing and dancing.

⁷ Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. by A.V. Miller with analysis of the text and foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford University Press 1977, p. 19.

Barbie takes the step into the human world at the end. She goes to the gynecologist to have a vagina formed, one may assume. The time of childlike, naive ignorance will then be over. There will be no more dialogue like the one when Ken suggests, "I could spend the night at your place," and Barbie can only ask back, "Why?" in puzzlement. Ken's answer - "because we're together" - is only half-heartedly convincing, but Barbie's follow-up question, "What are we going to do then?" is disarming. Ken can then only admit, "I'm not really sure." Barbie, of course, will learn later that people in the real world often don't quite know what to do when they spend a night together either.

Before Barbie takes this big step of becoming a woman, her creator, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman) makes another appearance. She is Barbie's mother, so to speak, and wants to show her what matters in the real world. So the two join hands and before Barbie's eyes unwinds a rapid montage of scenes and images, photographed with the grainy footage of Super 8 or video cameras, footage from the real, unsmoothed and artificially lit world. Barbie already knows that there is only one kind of ending in this world, namely to die, but she now sees what outlasts this painful end, namely the round dance of generations, the endless succession of mothers (less so of fathers) and children in their various stages of life. They play, laugh, dance, and grow older until one finally dies while the other takes its first crawling steps. From a feminist perspective, this is certainly a highly ambivalent overall picture. Being a woman here means being a good, caring mother, but at the same time it means not letting the strand of history break, carrying the past into the future, giving the people you love and gather around you everything they need to continue living as happily as possible.

Transparent epiphany

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel defends art, among other things, against the accusation that it merely offers deceptive appearance, a kind of higher, elegant lie, and conversely sees its advantage precisely in the fact that it "points through and beyond itself, and itself hints at something spiritual."⁸ So it confesses to be appearance, does not pretend not to deceive. It does not appear as if it would proclaim the truth. It leaves that to myth, religion and - on a conceptual level – philosophy and the sciences. Rather, it plays with these forms of human self-understanding and thereby points to something spiritual. It

⁸ *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, transl. by T.M. Knox, Vol. I, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, p. 9.

shows something not like a logical proof, but like a gesture. It invites us and says: "Look and listen again, let a phenomenon affect you once more and then think again! Because phenomena, especially works of art - and even films are sometimes works of art - are not as they appear."

In this sense, Barbie is an aesthetic epiphany, appearance of a truth in which appearance and truth cannot be separated; the paradox of an artificial presentation of authenticity. Therefore, the film is also more than a mere consumer capitalist product. Undoubtedly, with this film, the Mattel corporation is pursuing a tangible sales strategy that increases its sales of Barbie dolls, and a broader business strategy that makes it comparable to its competitor Walt Disney, which builds theme parks and markets its characters from Mickey Mouse to the Ice Queen again and again for profit. But *Barbie* has become a cultural phenomenon, an aesthetic phenomenon that not only lends itself to various interpretations, but plays them out itself. In the U.S. and elsewhere, conservative and evangelical guardians of truth immediately recognized the danger therein. They would love to see this Barbie film burn in the flames of hell. But it doesn't help: the doll is reborn, transformed in the spirit of critical and deconstructive theory.⁹ Barbie has fallen from the state of innocence. There can be no return to the consumer feminist, ideal doll world. Mattel's economic interest, which in this case has doubly successfully allied itself with the cultural-critical one, ensures that. In Gerwig's film, it dawns cheerfully on the viewers, and it is not to be expected that this light will quickly go out.

REFERENCES

ADORNO Theodor W. "Culture Industry Reconsidered". In: *The Culture Industry. Selected essays on mass culture*, edited and with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 98-106.

ADORNO, Theodor W. "Transparencies on Film". In: *The Culture Industry*, loc.cit., pp. 178-186.

⁹ Cf. Bert Rebhandl, „Das Leben in Rosa“, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (faz.net), 13.08.2023: One can see *Barbie* as a „triumph of Critical Theory“ (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kino/was-uns-der-barbie-hype-ueber-die-kapitalistische-popkultur-verraet-19094851.html>).

BOHRER, Karl Heinz. *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1981.

CAMPBELL, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1949.

HEGEL, G.W.F. *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Transl. by T.M. Knox, Vol. I, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988.

HEGEL, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Transl. by A.V. Miller with analysis of the text and foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford University Press, 1977.

HORKHEIMER, Max / ADORNO, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Transl. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press 2002.

MORRIS, Beja. *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Seattle, University of Washington Press 1971. Peter Owen, 1971.

RATZINGER, Joseph. „Die Wallfahrt der Völker“ (1987), in: *Gesammelte Schriften* 14/1, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2019.

REBHANDL, Bert. „Das Leben in Rosa“, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (faz.net), 13.08.2023.

TAYLOR, Charles. *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989.