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Jessica Grose

Margot Robbie's Sly Interpretation of the Feminine Ideal

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I saw “Barbie” the day after it premiered. You probably do not need another “Barbie” take after nearly every pundit in America has already taken a whack, but I am still thinking about the movie nearly a month later. In particular, I continue to marvel at the performance of Margot Robbie, who played the titular heroine — Stereotypical Barbie — and who I think isn’t getting enough credit for holding the movie together.

For the three of you who haven’t seen the movie yet, here’s a rough outline of the plot: Stereotypical Barbie has an existential crisis in women-run Barbie Land when her body becomes less than flawless — a spot of cellulite here, an unarched foot there. She must journey to the real world, leaving an army of other Barbies behind, to get back to a state of unquestioning bliss. She grudgingly takes Ken (a perfectly doltish Ryan Gosling) with her, and in the real world he discovers the concept of patriarchy. Ken returns to Barbie Land before her and stages a coup, overthrowing the matriarchy and installing a band of “doofi” in their place. Some dance battles, terrible crooning and rousing feminist speeches ensue, and ultimately, Barbie triumphs (how could she not?), while also choosing beautifully messy reality over plastic perfection.

Despite the pro-Barbie message, I had the same reaction as The Times’s chief film critic, Manohla Dargis, who praised Robbie’s performance as “charming and subtly phased,”

while acknowledging that she is upstaged by Ken's "comic obtuseness and arc." (My 7-year-old daughter still wants Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa House.) At first, when I left the theater, it irked me that Robbie and her band of Barbies — with the possible exception of exiled Weird Barbie, who doesn't fit the mold (Kate McKinnon) — didn't get to have as much fun as any of the Kens or Allan (a hilariously disgruntled Michael Cera, who plays the only male doll not named Ken). A movie called "Barbie," and Barbie didn't always feel like the main character.

But after reflection, I wondered if that was an intentional commentary on what it means to be a woman — doing the necessary and unsung labor of plot exposition while the men in the film get to be Mr. Fun Dad. I also kept thinking about Robbie as Stereotypical Barbie. Her movements were always precise and embodied — it's not easy to play plastic. But crucially, it was quietly moving to watch the dawning realization of mortality, human cruelty and prejudice register on her luminous face.

The staying power of Robbie's performance made me want to go back and watch more of her, and a theme began to emerge in some of the more recent parts she has chosen. Robbie has a classic Hollywood beauty — she's usually blond, and she has enormous blue eyes and a glorious figure. She broke through playing a standard sexy trophy wife in "The Wolf of Wall Street." (In the screenplay, the character was referred to as "the hottest blonde ever.") But Robbie made the character magnetic and irresistible to watch, and transcended the stereotype.

Once Robbie accrued more power in Hollywood and became a producer, she chose roles that often subverted the expectations of her good looks or used them to make a point about the perils of upholding a certain kind of rigid "ideal" womanhood.

In "I, Tonya," from 2017, Robbie plays the figure skater Tonya Harding (full disclosure: My husband works for Neon, one of the companies that distributed the film). Whatever you think of Harding and the kneecapping of Nancy Kerrigan, it seems the real-life Harding was punished for her deviation from the delicate ice princess mold. As a 1994 sports commentary from The Times put it, Harding's skating persona "was always a combative, contrarian style amid the sequins and lace." Or as Robbie says in the movie, the press wanted Kerrigan "to be the princess and me to be the pile of crap." Robbie obscured her glamour for the role and convincingly portrayed a hardscrabble Harding who was more at home chopping wood and hunting her dinner than she would be in the expensive Vera Wang costumes Nancy Kerrigan famously wore.

The 2019 film "Bombshell" is another ripped-from-the-headlines story where Robbie uses her Barbie visage to expose the way women are trapped by narrow and conflicting

expectations. The movie is about the fall of Roger Ailes at Fox News and the exposure of his decades-long sexual harassment of female underlings. In the movie, Nicole Kidman and Charlize Theron play Gretchen Carlson and Megyn Kelly, while Robbie plays a composite character named Kayla Pospisil. Pospisil is young and ambitious, her doe eyes sparkling with verve. When she starts dressing the part of a Fox News anchor, her more cynical co-worker (again, the wonderful Kate McKinnon), says, “Oh, my God, it’s anchor Barbie!”

Manohla Dargis, who also reviewed “Bombshell,” described the emotional heft Robbie brings to the role, as a young woman “brutalized” by Ailes, writing, “it is Robbie — with her panicked, darting eyes and tensely resistant, then capitulating physicality — who conveys the horror of sexual harassment, a degradation that seeps into body and soul.”

The Hollywood strike has no sign of letting up in the near term, and I’m going to take the rest of the month while I’m on vacation to catch up on the Robbie performances I have yet to see (next up: “Babylon”). I’ll be back here in September — feel free to drop me a line if there’s anything you’re thinking about or would like to see covered here. In the interim, C’mon, Barbie, let’s go party.

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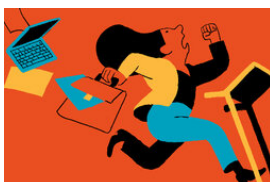


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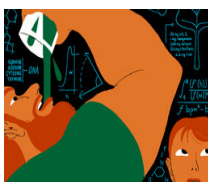
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