



MA Thesis Report
Alicja Hansen

Queer Coding of Barbie Movies: Mattel's Attempt at Saving Barbie's Image

Alicja Hansen's thesis comes as a culmination of the summer hype caused by the movie *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023). In fact, Alicja Hansen's work precedes this hype and thus suggests that the author has her finger at the pulse of the cultural moment. The work discussed overlaps with *Barbie* in its exploration of feminist interpretations of Mattel's films and in the emphasis on the overt or hidden queer play of signification. Hansen's thesis is however offering a broader reach and discusses multiple films, and most importantly starts from an interrogation of her own affective relations to Mattel's Barbie films. That situatedness of the researcher's interest brings in a personal touch and a reflection on how an important role the films seemingly enthralled to the mainstream notion of femininity and stereotyped white able-bodied and apparently straight feminine aesthetics can do for 'growing up sideways'.

The question that the author pursues is interesting and worth of exploring – is queer reading possible even in the films produced by the mainstream corporate and directed at children? “Why does Barbie appear queer in the movies?” or “Why did the Barbie movies, even though they have quite obvious queer motifs, never cause a public controversy?” might provoke an interesting reflection of what constitute a queer motif, or how those can be integrated back into the heteronormative fold and consumed safely.

Methodology and conceptual framework:

The author divides the section “literature review” into four main blocks discussing queer theory, queer media studies, feminist theory and Barbie movies. (p. 17-34) I start with a minor comment: I would have appreciated a clearer indication of these chapters in the thesis content, since it would help readability and reader's easier access to the content and thesis architecture structure. The author provides a condensed overview of queer theory (as much as they can do over 7 pages), discussing work of Sedgwick, Jagose, but also Beauvoir (why in queer theory?) through which they connect queer theory to childhood. I appreciate the attempt to anchor queer focus with the issue of growing up and childhood, since the thesis reads content directed at child and teenage audience. I would think however that work of Kathryn Bond Stockton *Queer Child*, Sedgwick's *Tendencies* would be a more suitable place from which to think queerness and child/hood.

The discussion of queer media (p. 25-29) combines some of the canonical discussion of 'celluloid closet' (though the author does not quote Vito Russo's 1981's work that coined the phrase) and some newer work more focused on fandom communities. Thus, moving between an overview of the stereotypes of queerness to more community-based practices of resignification. Especially the latter is an important concept for the work's focus. Pages 29-33 discuss postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, the third theoretical anchor of the thesis, and lastly, the author introduces girl media and Barbie films. Clearly, the author can (undoubtedly guided by her tutor) identify what are the key theoretical discussions to lean against in the analysis. Reading these sections, however, I was left

wondering what connects them all – how they relate to the overarching research questions. At times they felt somewhat haphazardly put together and I missed the author’s own work to guide us, the readers through the presentation of theory. Especially in the second part of the conceptual framing, I am finding the text itself to lack behind the promise given in the introduction: “Then the chapter moves onto feminist theory, which provides socio-political context to Barbie and will be used to explain commodification of girl power. The last part focuses on how Barbie and other girl media apply postfeminist and neoliberal feminist ideals and what is the result of that. All of those texts will help explain why the LGBTQ+ community (particularly late Millennials and early Generation Z) read Barbie as a queer, or sexually ambiguous character in the movies.” (p.17)

Also, given the topic and material of the thesis, the discussion of the ground-breaking as well as the recent works on girl media (it is a rather vibrant field), should be given more space and grounded discussion. Perhaps, I would even argue, this could have been the center of the theoretical discussion and conceptual framing – this would give the author grounding and context for the discussion of the Barbie films and a foil against which to offer her queer reading. Though, queer theory and queer interpretations have been long included in the discussion of popular culture and media content directed at girls and young women.

I would also recommend that the conceptual discussion should precede the debate on what methods are used. Simply also because the author references concepts that are discussed only later in “literature review” (e.g. postfeminism, lesbian erasure, p. 14)

Method and analysis:

Out of the long list of Barbie films, author chooses the ones they analyse based on the date of the films’ issue. This promises to capture a dynamic and development in the portrayal of the women protagonists and in their relationships and the author speaks to this in their discussion – and I would invite them to present it in more detail during the defence.

The method of choice is claimed to be content analysis to “focusing on the contents of the text” or to “analyze portrayals of women in the media, which this thesis tackles”. The method itself is in theory is well described. I am however not convinced that this is the best method if the author does not focus on the ideological structure of the signification, or on what Hall calls “the preferred meaning” (encoding), but on the various forms of interpretation, decoding or even—as it the case with queer coding—reading against the grain? Having expressed these reservations, I do want to say that the label of “content analysis” is often used rather loosely, and I am not so beholden to it. I do however want to raise an issue with not clear distinction and discussion of how the author connects queer reading/coding on the one hand and the postfeminist/neoliberal feminist reading. Why does the author put them side by side—see for instance the following quote:

To summarize, this thesis is going to use qualitative content analysis with a feminist approach, especially focusing on feminist media studies, in order to provide an interpretation of selected Barbie movies. First, I will watch the movies looking for scenes or entire narratives which I see are queer coded/display postfeminist or neoliberal feminist ideology. Then, I will analyze the scenes accordingly using the literature provided in this section and literature review section.

Or

This approach will be utilized by studying selected movies produced by Mattel starring Barbie, and then analyze them through a queer and neoliberal/postfeminist, girl power lens. (p.12)

There are concepts that are not sufficiently explained—or their relationship not clarified: “queer coding”, “queer reading”.

If the author gives us a discussion of the method in theory, they do not provide us with a description of how they work with it in praxis – this cannot be read out from the analysis either since it is organised mainly by the films and not by analytical categories. So, for the purpose of the defence, I would like to ask the author to clarify those and also explain how they arrive at reading some elements as “queer coding”, or how they were able to identify “queer reading” – and (with regards to my following commentary) – whose ‘queer reading’ was important to them?

The author does not explain if, how and why they include the visual component –mind you the films are all animated and the visuals are key to them as “texts”, or how and why they include “memes” and other elements from the social media debates and fan-reworkings of the films. They undoubtedly bring the “audience reception” and thus also support the queer readings, but this is not framed by methodological considerations.

The analysis itself is organised by the films, it does not arrive at any more abstract and analytical framing that would depart from the descriptive summary of the film’s sujet. Occasionally, the author includes references to secondary literature, but these do not quite the readings.

Style, and techne:

The introduction of the thesis is well- and elegantly written, even if the style is more fit for journalistic than academic writing. However, the style does not hold throughout the thesis and the text gets less well edited. The author is prone to overstatements, or too quick conclusions. There are long sections that are missing citation. The missing references and the fact that the theory is not well linked with the analysis lets the author down in their own interpretations.

I do recommend Alicja Hansen’s thesis for defence with the starting evaluation at B-. The final grade will reflect the discussion at the defence and the ability of Ms. Hansen to respond to the above and her tutor’s critical comments.

Mgr. Kateřina Kolářová, PhD.

In Prague, September 12, 2023