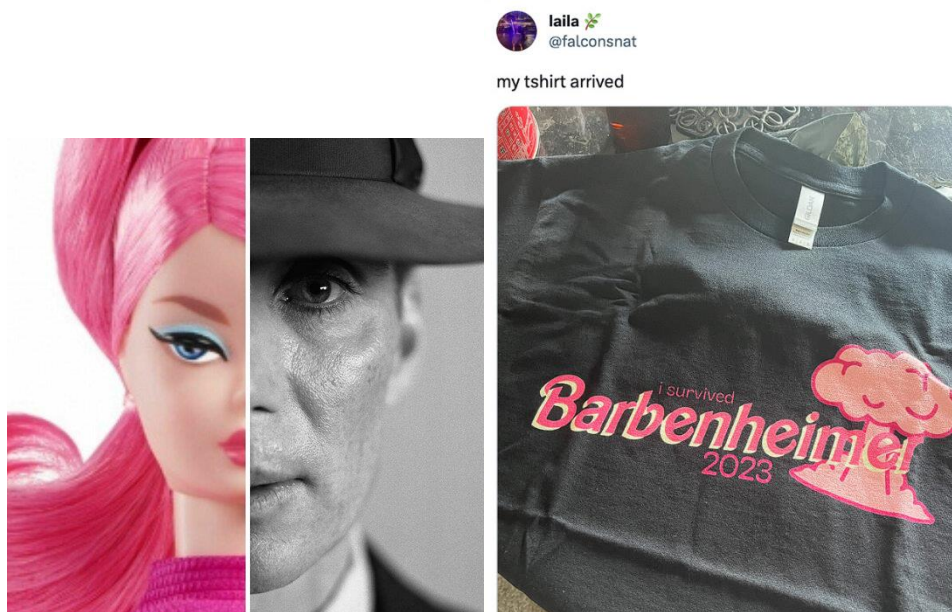


The Barbenheimer Phenomenon

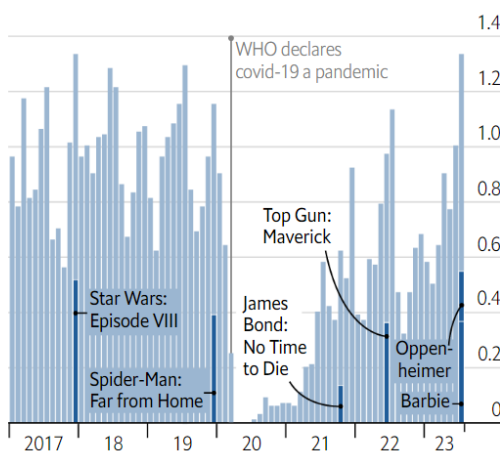
**TEXT A - “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” show that blockbusters could save the cinema**

The Economist, Graphic Detail, Aug 9th 2023

Cinemas have struggled since the pandemic. In 2022 those in America made 35% less revenue than in 2019. But in July things looked brighter: they made \$1.4bn, the highest-grossing month since December 2019. A large chunk of that money has come from ticket sales for “Barbie”, a film about a famous plastic doll, and “Oppenheimer”, about the eponymous physicist who developed the nuclear bomb. Both films were released on July 21st. Box-office sales for “Barbie” have reached a total of \$1bn, Warner Brothers, one of the film’s production companies, announced on August 6th; \$459m in American theatres alone. “Oppenheimer” made \$229m in America and \$323m abroad. In Britain, Vue, a cinema chain, recorded its second-highest weekend admissions ever.

Return of the movie-goer

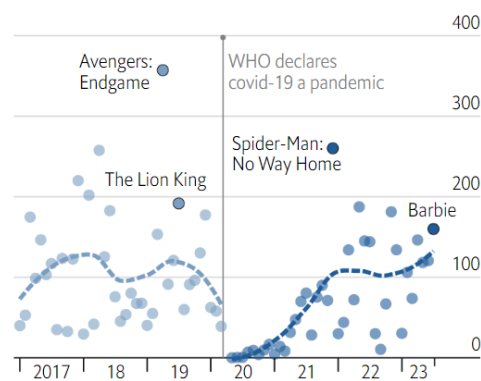
United States and Canada, monthly box-office revenue, \$bn



Source: Box Office Mojo

Barbie or bust

United States and Canada, largest film opening weekend each month, box-office revenue, \$m



Source: Box Office Mojo

The popularity of “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” lays bare why cinemas have been struggling. During the pandemic, studios cut the theatrical window—the length of time between a film appearing in cinemas and it being available to stream—from around 70 days to 45 on average. Some films skipped the big screen altogether. Reed Hastings, Netflix’s co-founder, once quipped that cinemas have innovated nothing but the taste of popcorn. But the dash to streaming has been exaggerated: cinemas still have a pull. Tom Cruise held the release of “Top Gun: Maverick”, one of the most popular films of 2022, in which he starred, for two years rather than release it online. The latest James Bond film was delayed three times for the same reason.

Although lockdowns and streaming services have played a role in cinema’s recent decline (see chart above), the main reason for its slow recovery lies elsewhere. Our data analysis shows that audiences still have a taste for the big screen, but there are fewer films to lure them in. When “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” came out, so did audiences. Films that go on “wide” release across America and Canada—that are shown in more than 600 cinemas—are still as popular as before the pandemic. But there have been fewer of them. In 2019, 130 films went on wide release. In 2020 and 2021 combined only 152 films did. In 2022 it was 110. So far this year, 97 films have been shown in more than 600 cinemas. Data show that the most widely released films are as popular as before the pandemic (see second chart).

During the pandemic many shoots had to be halted and some films were released online. While theatres have 55 further big releases to look forward to this year, such as “Wonka”, a prequel to “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory”, as well as the latest “Hunger Games” instalment, the actors and writers’ strike could lead to delays in the production of blockbusters such as “Wicked” and “Gladiator 2”, which are due on the big screen in 2024. Oppenheimer’s stars left the London première early to join the picket line. So far the strikes have carried on for just over three months. Cinema-owners and -goers will hope that one side or the other will soon say it’s a wrap. (503 words)

TEXT B – [Culture](#) | Bombs and a bombshell

Realism with “Oppenheimer”, or escapism with “Barbie”?

The Economist, Jul 14th 2023 (extracts)

They make an intriguing pair of rivals: he in a dark suit and porkpie hat, she in a gingham dress and matching hair bow. His domain is a vast scientific-research facility in New Mexico; hers is a fluorescent-pink party house with a slide. J. Robert Oppenheimer (played by Cillian Murphy, an Irish actor) spends his days corralling the finest scientific minds in America to create a nuclear bomb—work a colleague calls “the most important fucking thing to ever happen in the history of the world”. Barbie (played by Margot Robbie, an Australian actress) may seem like she has the perfect life, but she has existential worries too. Do her friends and fellow dolls, she wonders, “ever think about dying?”

No recent movie matchup has been as eagerly awaited as “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer”. Released on July 21st in America and Britain, the two films will serve as a test of whether viewers can be coaxed off their couches to return to cinemas. The incongruity in the films’ subject and tone has delighted the internet. People have created memes, remixed the trailers into jarring “Barbenheimer” hybrids and debated whether to see the biographical drama or the fantasy comedy first.

The brouhaha is partly a result of the film-makers. Christopher Nolan, the writer-director of “Oppenheimer”, is the closest thing Hollywood has to a mad scientist. He shoots on film and mostly eschews computer-generated imagery, blowing up an actual Boeing 747 for a previous film. The nuclear reactions in “Oppenheimer” were also created by producing actual explosions (albeit not nuclear ones), brightened by aluminium and magnesium powder. His films toy with narrative conventions and tricky subjects, such as the unconscious mind and theoretical astrophysics. They have earned a combined total of around \$5bn in ticket sales; “Dunkirk”, released in 2017, is one of the highest-grossing films ever made about the second world war.

Greta Gerwig, the director and co-writer of “Barbie”, has her own large fan club. She started out in the “mumblecore” genre of independent film (so named for its focus on dialogue) but has since had hits with “Lady Bird” (2017) and an adaptation of “Little Women” (2019). Her work claims humbler gross ticket sales of \$300m. For “Barbie”, she has cited old Hollywood musicals and films about the afterlife, such as “Heaven Can Wait” (1943), as inspiration. (...)

The “Barbenheimer” rivalry brings a more serious question for the public: whether to favour realism or escapism. As war rages on in Europe, and countries including China and North Korea continue to develop their nuclear arsenals, the origin story of these weapons of mass destruction may feel too real and raw. “Oppenheimer” is not a film that will ease viewers’ anxieties. It explores the physicist’s concerns about the horrifying power of his weapon and other bombs; it also shows how the American government attempted to silence him when those opinions became politically unpopular. Oppenheimer has disturbing visions of the bomb’s victims in excruciating pain, their skin peeling. “Some people leave the movie absolutely devastated,” Mr Nolan has said. “They can’t speak.”

From Hiroshima Barbie Land

Ms Gerwig’s production is much more playful. She has described the set—which contributed to a global shortage of pink paint—as “a dopamine generator”. The film’s tone is witty and slyly self-referential: it pokes fun at Mattel, here run by a team of men, and the vexed history of the toys. (The Barbies mistakenly assume that all women revere them as role models.) It has the kind of plot that only makes sense if a viewer does not think about it deeply.

“Barbie” recognises the alluring comfort of dream worlds. At one point Weird Barbie, a doll that has been handed around and mistreated, offers Barbie a choice, symbolised by a high heel and a clunky Birkenstock sandal: “You can go back to your regular life, or you can know the truth about the universe.” Barbie chooses the stiletto and is quickly chastised. “You have to want to know, ok? Do it again.”

“Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” offer another version of the Birkenstock-stiletto dilemma. History suggests more viewers will opt for escapism. During the Great Depression, many of the highest-grossing films were musicals or historical epics. The same was true during the second world war. Movies that did broach the subject of conflict, including “Gone with the Wind” and “Sergeant York”, were often set in the past; those that were contemporaneous, such as “Casablanca”, tended to tell love stories rather than tales of grisly combat. In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam war, the biggest movie in America was “Funny Girl”. In 2007, during the financial crisis, it was a film from the “Pirates of the Caribbean” franchise.

David Thomson, another film historian and author, reckons that, at a time of economic strain, war and populism, viewers will not want to see a serious film as much as they will want to see a frivolous one. “Comedies have always done well at the movies,” he says, because they do “something that the movies were made for, which is to reassure people and give them a couple of hours of escape from pretty big problems.” Who wants reality when life in plastic is so fantastic? (868 words)

TEXT C – ‘Barbenheimer’ Isn’t Funny in Nuclear-Scarred Japan

By Ben Dooley and Hisako Ueno, Reporting from Tokyo, *The New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2023

To Americans eager for signs of life in an ailing cinema culture, the simultaneous box office success of the “Barbie” movie and the biopic “Oppenheimer” has been cause for celebration, with filmgoers embracing the jarring juxtaposition of the two very different blockbusters.

In Japan, however, this jubilant fusion, including “Barbenheimer” double features and online mash-ups of Barbie’s pink fantasia with images of Oppenheimer-era nuclear explosions, have been met with a very different response: anger.

For days, Twitter users in Japan, where nuclear bombings by the U.S. military during World War II killed hundreds of thousands of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have been spreading the hash tag #NoBarbenheimer.

And on Monday, the backlash ignited a rare display of internal Hollywood corporate discord, as the Japanese subsidiary of Warner Bros. criticized its headquarters' handling of social media for the "Barbie" movie.

In a letter posted to the official Japan account for "Barbie," which will be released in Japanese theaters on Aug. 11, the Japan subsidiary lamented its American counterparts' promotion of Barbenheimer memes as "highly regrettable."

In one such instance, the official "Barbie" movie account responded to a fan-made image depicting Barbie with an atom bomb bouffant with the comment, "This Ken is a stylist." In another, it replied with a kissy-face emoji to a movie poster showing Barbie and J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, against the backdrop of a nuclear explosion. "It's going to be a summer to remember," the studio's tweet said.

Some Japanese Twitter users responded with photos of the bombing victims. Others said that they had canceled their plans to see the movie. "Nuclear weapons aren't cool," one user wrote in reply to a tweet promoting the movie.

Barbenheimer, the Japanese Warner Bros. subsidiary noted, "is not an official activity" of Warner Bros., and it said it had demanded that the company's headquarters take "appropriate action."(...) In a statement on Tuesday, the Warner Bros. headquarters said it "regrets its recent insensitive social media engagement" and offers "a sincere apology." The "Barbie" movie account's replies to Barbenheimer posts have since been removed.

While the "Barbie" movie will be released in Japanese theaters days after the 78th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, "Oppenheimer," a Universal Pictures film, has not yet received a release date in Japan.

That has led to some speculation that the movie may not be shown at all in Japan, to avoid offending local sensibilities over the legacy of the nuclear attacks. In response to a question from *The New York Times*, Universal said it was not aware of the Barbenheimer controversy.

An official ban seems unlikely: Japan has robust freedom of speech, and previous American movies touching on war-era subjects have played to modest audiences in the country. That includes the 1996 film "Infinity," about a scientist involved in the Manhattan Project, which was led by Dr. Oppenheimer and gave birth to atomic weapons.

It's also not unusual for foreign films to debut in Japan well after their releases at home. "Infinity" took nearly two years to make it to Japanese cinemas. (514 words)

TEXT D - 'Barbie' is a billion-dollar milestone for women in Hollywood

Editorial *The Los Angeles Times*, Aug.8, 2023

BY THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD, AUG. 8, 2023

Greta Gerwig's irrepressible movie about the doll has earned an estimated \$1.03 billion at the box office, making her the first solo female director to have a movie top that stratospheric billion-dollar mark. And she did it fast — in just 17 days. The movie opened in the U.S. on July 21 and has crushed it at the box office ever since. Last weekend, domestically in ticket revenue Barbie beat Oppenheimer, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and a giant prehistoric shark.

We exulted in 2017 when Patty Jenkins' "Wonder Woman," an action movie centered on a female star, Gal Gadot, earned \$103 million its debut weekend in the U.S., making it the best domestic opening ever by a woman director at the time. And we noted that it drew almost as many men as women into movie theaters. Surely this was proof to Hollywood studio heads that a woman director could make an action film about a woman and make a ton of money.

Or perhaps not. In the last 10 years, only three films with female directors — "Frozen," "Frozen 2" and "Captain Marvel" — have earned over \$1 billion and they had male co-directors.

Now, with "Barbie," Gerwig has not just broken every revenue record for a film by a woman director, she did it with an unapologetically fun, feminist and pink-lavished movie about a *doll*.

As reviews have noted, it both revels in and sends up the Barbie stereotype (actor Margot Robbie's magnificently Barbie-arched foot!) then dispatches her and a stowaway Ken on a journey from Barbie Land to real-life Los Angeles,

where Barbie is shocked to learn sexism exists in, of all places, the boardroom of Mattel, the giant toy company that created her. (Mattel, of course, in real life stands to make money from this movie as well.)

It was the genius of Gerwig (who co-wrote it with her partner, the writer/director Noah Baumbach) to create and direct a movie that is exuberant and tear-provoking in one sitting. Women of all generations have flocked to it in droves, many dressed in pink, from sequined skirts to cotton T-shirts. Some men are going as well. “Across social media, many women have been encouraging one another to use the movie as a litmus test to gauge whether their male dates can understand, or are at least receptive to, its feminist messaging,” according to an NBC News story. (...)

The box office is beginning to rebound post-pandemic — “Barbie” is outranked this year so far only by “The Super Mario Bros. Movie,” which has grossed more than \$1.35 billion worldwide — but this is still a grim time in Hollywood. Writers and actors have been on strike against studios and streamers, and among their complaints is that studios are making tons of money but not sharing it fairly.

Things have improved for women in front of and behind the camera, but there’s a long way to go to reach parity. The number of women at the helm of movies inches up at a snail’s pace. Women accounted for just 18% of directors for the top 250 grossing domestic films in 2022, up 1% from 2021. Only 11% of directors on the top 100 films of 2022 were women. (...)

Meanwhile, four high-level diversity executives in Hollywood — all Black women — either resigned or were forced out of their jobs in late June.

Although Gerwig was already successful, having directed “Little Women” and “Lady Bird” — which earned her a nomination for a best director Oscar— this milestone puts her at the top in the hierarchy of Hollywood — a credit to her talent and a wake-up call to studios that diversity of talent isn’t just good for publicity, but also the bottom line. (615 words)

TEXT E - Barbie’s muddled feminist fantasy still bows to the patriarchy

David Cox

The Guardian, Fri 4 Aug 2023

It’s a shame about the weather but, in the eyes of many, the summer of 2023 is at least furnishing a triumph of feminism, and it’s been cinema’s privilege to host it. Supposedly, Greta Gerwig’s fantasy comedy Barbie is ushering womankind on to the true path to sisterly empowerment. Really?

It sounds plausible, at least at first. “She’s everything. He’s just Ken,” reads the film’s tagline. Gerwig proclaims Barbie to be “most certainly a feminist film”, and it has frightened some male pundits out of their wits. Toby Young has accused it of “unapologetic misandry”, while the Critical Drinker considered it “114 minutes of spiteful, bitter, mean-spirited, borderline unhinged hatred of men”. And, briefly summarised, the film does indeed sound like an almost ridiculously over-the-top feminist homily.

Barbieland, the fantasy world in which females rule the roost, is a paradise. Its womenfolk are wonderfully nice; its menfolk are acceptable only because they’re subjugated. In the real world, where men are on top, they’re stupid, incapable and offensive. When masculinity penetrates Barbieland and threatens to ruin it, women use their superior intelligence to re-establish their hegemony, before helping their grateful menfolk to relinquish their toxicity. Yet somehow the film’s actual import turns out to be the opposite of its apparent message.

It has been widely remarked that Ryan Gosling as Ken, Barbie’s boyfriend, steals the show from Margot Robbie as Barbie. No mean feat, since Ken is there to demonstrate that masculinity is foolish, yucky and reprehensible. Somehow, however, Gosling’s performance countermands his brief. A supposed parody of chauvinist iniquity comes across instead as a winsome display of male charm. Masculinity becomes more beguiling than abhorrent, and Ken’s eventual repentance therefore almost ironic.

Since men are to be portrayed as silly, the patriarchy has to be incompetent. When corporate America tries to put Barbie back in her box, it is defeated by its own inanity. Ken and his peers’ regrettable competitiveness and aggression prove self-destructive, and make them easy meat for the Barbieland counter-revolution. But this vulnerability drains the supposed oppressors of any degree of threat. The male ascendancy, already sneakily attractive, turns out to be harmless as well.

Woman's lot, on the other hand, remains as knottily problematic as ever, and Robbie's challenge is consequentially an uphill one. Unlike Ken, Barbie is to be permitted no real flaws which might round out her character but undermine her gynocratic sanctity. Instead, she's left to embrace a vision of the female mission that's mired in banality and confusion.

At the film's climax, America Ferrera's Gloria, the LA mom whose angst has catapulted Barbie into the real world, presents her with a stirring litany of womanly woes. Its gist is that as long as the dudes are in charge, dames are doomed whatever they do. Gosh, it's hard to be a woman. Reportedly, Ferrera's rendition left everyone on the set in tears, even the men. Yet this speech sits uncomfortably alongside Barbie's official slogan: "You can be anything." Is aspiration a female fundamental, or an unfair imposition? (...)

Women are counselled to discard illusions and confront real life, but what this might mean in practice remains unclear. Barbie consults a mystic oracle in the shape of the ghost of Ruth Handler, the Barbie doll's inventor, but all she learns is that she's allowed to be real. This turns out to mean she can visit a gynaecologist, but that's pretty much it.

Where a real path forward is actually discernible, it turns out to be disheartening. Male domination is overcome not by open engagement but by feminine wiles, an approach that seems neither progressive nor likely to be especially productive. Rather, it fosters the fear that things won't be changing any time soon. Men are expected to abandon masculinity once women show them its folly, yet the film has inadvertently advertised its apparently irreversible appeal.

So, what are those bebies of pink-bedecked filmgoing females supposed to make of all this? They will see seductive but dubious stereotypes embellished rather than subverted. Muddled messaging may dispel rather than stimulate any impulse to crusade. (...)

If Barbie constitutes a triumph, it's a triumph not of feminism but of the patriarchy's so far most unassailable scion – capitalism. Women have been spending millions to watch a giant advertisement more likely to bewilder than inspire them. And now they're spending millions more on the merch. Mattel's (male) chairman and CEO, Ynon Kreiz, has plenty of cause to be pleased. But feminists? Perhaps not so much. (746 words)

TEXT F –

« Barbie » : « Jamais le “female gaze” ne s’est imposé à des centaines de millions de spectateurs et de spectatrices avec autant de force »

Tribune

Marjolaine Boutet, Historienne et professeure de civilisation américaine

Hélène Breda, Maîtresse de conférences en sciences de l'information et de la communication

Que son propos soit jugé suffisamment féministe ou non, le film de Greta Gerwig augure une nouvelle ère de l'histoire du 7^e art, estiment, dans une tribune au « Monde », les chercheuses Marjolaine Boutet et Hélène Breda, celle du triomphe commercial du blockbuster par et pour les femmes.

Le Monde, 16 août 2023

Pour ses 40 ans, Greta Gerwig s'est offert une entrée dans l'histoire du cinéma en devenant la première réalisatrice d'un film à rapporter plus de 1 milliard de dollars. Et si *Barbie* est un énorme blockbuster annoncé par une année entière de campagne promotionnelle plus chère que le film lui-même, il est dans le même temps, indéniablement, une œuvre d'autrice.

Au-delà du débat consistant à déterminer le degré de féminisme du film, nous voulons souligner ici la prouesse de la réalisatrice, qui a réussi à garder le cap de sa vision face aux pressions de la firme Mattel comme des studios Warner Bros. Que ce soit dans le domaine des beaux-arts ou pour des œuvres reproductibles à l'infini, une production artistique est toujours façonnée par des rapports de force entre la vision de l'artiste et les désirs du mécène.

Il a été reproché à Greta Gerwig un manque de radicalité, une dilution du propos militant dans un discours grand public aux accents capitalistes. Pourtant, jamais le *female gaze*, ce regard de femme posé sur le monde à travers l'ocille de la caméra, ne s'est imposé à des centaines de millions de spectateurs et de spectatrices avec autant de force, ni en autant de nuances de rose.

Attention polie

Au moment où on ne cesse de répéter que le cinéma se meurt, le bruit suscité par *Barbie* et, par ricochet, par

Oppenheimer, de Christopher Nolan, nous en rappelle toute la force d'impact culturel. Et ce même si, comme Gerwig le fait dire au personnage de Gloria (America Ferrera) dans un monologue – le morceau de bravoure à la mi-temps du film –, en tant que femmes, « nous devons toujours être extraordinaires, mais, quoi qu'il arrive, on s'y prend toujours mal ».

Cette affirmation est réactualisée par les critiques mêmes du film, professionnelles comme amatrices. Dans leur très grande majorité, elles célèbrent les qualités esthétiques du film de Nolan et excusent à ce titre la représentation stéréotypée, voire misogyne, des rares personnages féminins ; quand, pour *Barbie*, c'est exactement l'inverse qui se produit : la plupart des articles se concentrent sur la profondeur – ou la superficialité – du « message » et n'ont accordé qu'une attention polie mais distraite aux trente-trois films revendiqués par la réalisatrice comme sources d'inspiration.

La culture populaire contemporaine est pétrie de citations, ces « œufs de Pâques » qui enchantent les fans de Quentin Tarantino comme ceux des films Marvel ou Pixar. Celles de Greta Gerwig pour *Barbie* témoignent de sa vision d'autrice postmoderne, éminemment personnelle et construite au fil des visionnages : le *female gaze*, c'est aussi le regard que portent les spectatrices sur les œuvres.

Mythe de Pygmalion

Ainsi, on retrouve sa passion pour les comédies musicales à travers ses ballets inspirés par les films avec Gene Kelly ou John Travolta, ses emprunts explicites au *Magicien d'Oz* et aux chefs-d'œuvre de Jacques Demy. Ce dernier n'est pas le seul réalisateur européen qu'elle convoque : en bonne intellectuelle new-yorkaise, elle

s'est nourrie des univers poétiques d'Emeric Pressburger et de Michael Powell, de Jacques Tati et de l'absurde des Monty Python.

Les classiques de l'histoire du cinéma américain ne sont pas en reste, de *2001 : l'odyssée de l'espace* à *Matrix* ; de même que des œuvres issues de la culture classique occidentale, du mythe de Pygmalion aux fresques de la chapelle Sixtine.

Gerwig ne s'en tient pas là : elle ajoute à ses références « incontestables » d'autres qui sont davantage révélatrices de sa génération et de son positionnement féministe : la comédie ado culte des années 1990 *Clueless*, le blockbuster *Top Gun* et des piques explicites à la fascination des hommes pour les films violents.

Au-delà de sa dimension multiréférentielle, le film de Gerwig exploite son matériau ludique de base, tout de plastique et de froufrous roses, pour affirmer une patte de réalisatrice : l'artificialité affichée de l'univers qu'elle bâtit n'a rien à envier à celui d'un Wes Anderson ou d'un Tim Burton, pour ne citer que deux géants du panthéon cinéphilique masculin.

Considérer *Barbie* comme l'objet (pop) culturel qu'il est, c'est déjouer les dichotomies traditionnelles qui tendent à opposer le cinéma d'auteur à la culture de masse, mais aussi les productions « masculines » (supposées plus légitimes) aux cultures féminines, socialement dévalorisées.

Bien évidemment, *Barbie* ne saurait à lui seul ébranler les fondations de toute la société patriarcale, et les multiples censures de par le monde montrent que le modèle est encore solide. Malgré tout, le succès sans précédent de ce film pourra – on l'espère ! – ouvrir une brèche pour une nouvelle génération de blockbusters créés par et pour les femmes.

« Barbie » : « Ce film montre la manière dont le capitalisme et les “cols blancs” engloutissent les revendications politiques et sociales »

Tribune - Audrey Millet, Chercheuse à l'université d'Oslo

Le Monde, 26 août 2023

Le film qui met en scène la célèbre poupée distribue un message féministe de seconde zone et présente un patriarcat édulcoré, décrypte la chercheuse Audrey Millet dans une tribune au « Monde ».

Hollywood aura eu besoin de dix années pour doter Barbie d'une conscience, sous la surveillance de son fabricant Mattel. Un an avant la sortie du film, il a été annoncé que ce projet serait porté par une réalisatrice

féministe, Greta Gerwig, capable de mettre en images les maux du patriarcat grâce au plus célèbre des jouets pour enfant. Faire de Barbie une égérie woke n'était pas gagné – mais Hollywood et Mattel savent que le jeu en vaut la chandelle.

Comment s'y sont-ils pris ? Reprenons le synopsis. Un matin, la vie de Barbie s'effondre : non seulement elle est traversée d'inhabituelles pensées morbides, mais elle découvre avec horreur que ses pieds sont devenus plats. Il lui faut alors quitter Barbie Land pour aller dans le vrai monde, retrouver sa propriétaire, régler le problème et récupérer ses pieds cambrés.

A Barbie Land, les Barbie sont gentilles et règnent sur les Ken. Elles rendent ainsi acceptable la nature masculine, stupide et offensante, et constituée de besoins comme la bière, les chevaux et la guerre. Cependant, après l'incursion de la poupée dans le monde réel, Ken prend le pouvoir à Barbie Land, qui devient un monde patriarcal toxique. Ryan Gosling, hilarant dans ses chorégraphies dignes des plus grandes comédies musicales ou des pires boys bands, rend l'odieuse masculinité séduisante et finit par s'engager dans un timide repentir.

Oppresseurs idiots et sans danger

Aux millions de personnes qui souhaitaient faire la paix avec le jouet de leur enfance, cible de toutes les critiques, Warner Bros et Mattel avaient fait une promesse : « *Elle peut tout faire. Lui, c'est juste Ken.* » Voilà le féminisme du divertissement hollywoodien : les oppresseurs sont idiots et sans danger. Et surtout, semble dire le film, en cas de pieds plats, investissez dans une paire de Birkenstock ; s'il vous faut séduire Ken pour canaliser sa violence, dégainez une tenue Chanel. Dans *Barbie*, en effet, les marques sont promues au rang d'armes féministes, et les actrices – au premier rang desquelles Margot Robbie –, au rang d'égéries publicitaires.

Cette stratégie de placement de produits est pourtant éclipsée par le repentir de Mattel, qui s'exprime tout au long du film : la firme s'excuse d'avoir construit un monde idéal aseptisé avec sa poupée stéréotypée ainsi que d'avoir construit une bombe anatomique qui n'existe pas dans la vraie vie. Même la « créatrice » de Barbie, Ruth Handler (1916-2002), fait son mea culpa et avoue avoir fraudé le fisc. Mais in fine, à Barbie Land comme chez Mattel, rien ne semble avoir changé.

A 78 ans, Mattel [fondée en 1945] a l'âge des trous de mémoire. Reprenons l'histoire au début.

Dans les années 1950, Ruth Handler découvre Lilli dans le journal à scandale *Bild-Zeitung*. Hypersexy, la poupée utilisait ses charmes pour fréquenter des hommes fortunés. Ruth crée Barbie à partir des attributs de Lilli : yeux de biche, lèvres rouges et pulpeuses, seins gonflés et taille extrafine mettant en valeur ses hanches. On est loin du jouet pour enfant. Ruth est aussi condamnée dans une affaire de falsification de comptes moins légère que ce que veut nous dire le film : cinq ans de mise à l'épreuve, 500 heures de travaux d'intérêt général par an et une amende de 57 000 dollars. Pourtant, Mattel donne à Ruth les traits d'une sympathique et avant-gardiste mamie aux cheveux gris.

Parmi les omissions du film, on note les nombreux scandales sur les conditions de travail déplorables et le harcèlement sexuel sur les ouvrières dans les usines de fabrication en Chine, ou encore l'utilisation de produits toxiques.

Un patriarcat aussi sucré qu'un marshmallow

Mattel a aussi raté son coming out inclusif. Barbie a bien des copines *curvy* [tout en courbes, rondes] et en fauteuil roulant, mais elles disparaissent pratiquement de la chorégraphie centrée sur Barbie stéréotypée. Quant à Barbie bizarre, défigurée par les assauts des feutres et des ciseaux d'enfants, elle est finalement « acceptée ». Elle choisit donc un métier : sortir les ordures. Mattel et Warner Bros agitent l'étendard de la diversité pour célébrer l'imperfection, mais Barbie *curvy*, fauteuil roulant et bizarre restent des déviantes à Barbie Land.

A qui la faute ? Mattel rappelle avoir arrêté la fabrication d'une Barbie maternité et d'un Ken avec une boucle d'oreille faite de clients pour ce type de jouet progressiste. C'est l'occasion pour le film d'expliquer que le consommateur préfère des poupées irréelles.

Le film *Barbie* montre la manière dont le capitalisme et les « cols blancs » englobent les revendications politiques et sociales. Mattel et Warner Bros avalent et remâchent la tendance woke, distribuent un message féministe de seconde zone et présentent un patriarcat aussi sucré qu'un marshmallow. Être woke, c'est littéralement être éveillé, mais c'est surtout être conscient des inégalités sociales et raciales, de l'homophobie et du sexisme, et porter un regard critique sur ces injustices et ces problèmes systémiques.

Le film rappelle les mots de Milton Friedman [prix Nobel d'économie en 1976] : « *La responsabilité sociale des entreprises est d'augmenter leurs profits* ». Avec cinq millions d'entrées en France et un milliard de recettes au niveau mondial, *Barbie* montre à la perfection la capacité du marketing à étouffer les revendications sociales.

Audrey Millet est docteure en histoire et chercheuse à l'université d'Oslo (Norvège). Elle est l'autrice de *Woke washing. Capitalisme, consumérisme, opportunisme* (Les Pérégrines, 224 pages, 20 euros).

The Guardian, Fri 16 July 2021

In recent years, Cannes has become a bastion of small-c conservatism when it comes to cinema. Since 2018, organisers of the world's most famous film festival have refused to allow Netflix films to compete for its Palme D'Or, and railed against the attritional impact of streaming on traditional movie-going. If a film is not going to be shown in French cinemas, and given a three-year theatrical window before going online, it won't be seen at Cannes. This year, the festival's artistic director, Thierry Frémaux, took a veiled swipe at rival showcases such as Venice and Berlin, which have welcomed the digital disrupters. "Some festivals were first to open their doors a bit too freely," he noted testily, "to people of whom we are not sure if they actually want cinema to survive."

Such doom-mongering may be a little overdone. After a catastrophic Covid-hit 2020 for cinema, and a lost summer on the Croisette, this year's edition of the festival – which ends on Saturday – has been a stirring success. There has been critical acclaim for new films by Wes Anderson and the British director Joanna Hogg, and a stunning English-language debut from the Thai artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul. A *succès de scandale* from the Dutch director Paul Verhoeven generated gratifying headlines. The overall quality on show more than demonstrated that cinema is "not dead", as Mr Frémaux put it at the festival's outset. But it is understandable that those who treasure its traditions are feeling a little insecure. As the pandemic drove populations indoors, film studios have rushed to develop their own streaming services, and many more movies are now made without a big-screen release in mind.

The prospect of subscription models dwarfing box office receipts as a source of income for studios is spooking both cinephiles and cinema chains. In a recent essay on the films of Federico Fellini, the great American director Martin Scorsese took aim at the way streaming platforms package movies up with other kinds of "content" to be consumed on demand. "The art of cinema," he wrote, is "being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned and reduced to its lowest common denominator, 'content'." There are legitimate concerns that the need to justify subscription fees prioritises quantity over quality, and that the tyranny of the algorithm encourages the production of formulaic genre fare. But *The Irishman*, Mr Scorsese's three-and-a-half-hour gangster epic, was a Netflix film, as was the magnificent *Roma*, by Alfonso Cuarón, which was banned from Cannes but won the Golden Lion at Venice and three Oscars.

Balance must be struck. There must always be a place for the collective and immersive nature of the big-screen experience and studios and streaming platforms should do what they can to give traditional cinemas the space to breathe and flourish; not every film needs to be immediately available online. But Spike Lee, a jury president at Cannes, was right to point out that the demise of cinema was wrongly predicted in the early days of television. As Mr Lee said: "Cinema and screening platforms can coexist." Here's to a successful Venice festival in September.

(512 words)

Grève à Hollywood : les acteurs craignent d'être « remplacés par des machines »

Le Monde, Par Corine Lesnes (San Francisco, correspondante) 14 juillet 2023

Après les scénaristes le 2 mai, les acteurs américains ont entamé un mouvement de grève jeudi 13 juillet. Comme leurs camarades de l'écrit, ils réclament de meilleurs revenus du streaming et des garanties contre l'irruption de l'intelligence artificielle dans le monde de l'image et du son.

La grève a été annoncée après un vote du bureau du SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists), le syndicat qui représente 160 000 comédiens travaillant dans le cinéma, la télévision et la radio. A minuit, les acteurs américains ont cessé leurs activités, que ce soit de tournage ou de promotion des œuvres, y compris à l'étranger.

Les négociations duraient depuis plus de quatre semaines avec les grands studios pour renouveler le contrat des acteurs. Dans une conférence de presse empreinte de colère, la présidente du SAG-AFTRA, Fran Drescher, l'ancienne star de la série *The Nanny* (en français, *Une nounou d'enfer*), a expliqué que la grève était « un

instrument de dernier recours » mais que les acteurs n'avaient pas le choix devant l'intransigeance des studios. « La manière dont ils nous traitent est choquante, a-t-elle protesté. Ils crient misère, ils disent qu'ils perdent de l'argent et en même temps, ils distribuent des centaines de millions de dollars à leurs PDG. C'est écœurant. »

L'Alliance des producteurs de cinéma et de télévision (AMPTP), qui regroupe les studios historiques (Disney, NBCUniversal, Paramount, Warner Bros, Sony) et les plates-formes (Netflix, Amazon, Apple...), a regretté les revendications « irréalistes » des acteurs. Quelques heures avant la rupture des négociations, l'association avait affirmé avoir fait des propositions significatives, notamment une augmentation « historique » des rémunérations. « Une grève n'est certainement pas le résultat que nous espérons, a déclaré l'AMPTP après l'annonce de la grève. Les studios ne peuvent pas fonctionner sans les artistes, qui donnent vie à nos films et nos émissions. »

La production de films et de shows télévisés devrait être au point mort aux Etats-Unis, sauf pour les productions indépendantes non couvertes par les contrats de travail conclus sous l'égide des syndicats. Déjà, la fabrication de plusieurs séries, comme *Stranger Things* ou *The Handmaid's Tale*, a été interrompue. Les observateurs prévoient une grève longue, les deux camps étant persuadés qu'ils ont l'avantage. « Vous ne pouvez pas exister sans nous », a lancé Fran Drescher, après avoir rappelé que la grève a été approuvée par 98 % des membres de la Guilde, le taux « le plus élevé de l'histoire du syndicat ».

Les acteurs sont particulièrement motivés. Craignant que leurs négociateurs ne se laissent aller à des concessions, un millier d'entre eux – dont plusieurs grands noms comme Meryl Streep ou Jennifer Lawrence – avait publié une lettre dans laquelle ils se déclaraient « prêts à faire des sacrifices » en cas de grève.

L'industrie du divertissement risque de se retrouver quasi-paralysée par le double mouvement des scénaristes et des acteurs, et les téléspectateurs, réduits à contempler des rediffusions. Le dernier mouvement de cette ampleur avait été mené par Ronald Reagan, alors président du syndicat des acteurs, en 1960. L'épouvantail était alors la télévision. Le mouvement avait duré plusieurs mois mais les grévistes avaient eu gain de cause.

Acteurs comme scénaristes entendent ne pas rester passifs face au changement de modèle économique subi par Hollywood depuis l'apparition de Netflix il y a vingt ans. Ils demandent une revalorisation de leurs rémunérations, qui stagnent alors que le streaming multiplie les rediffusions, sans que cela n'entraîne pour eux de surplus de rémunération, contrairement à ce qui se produit pour les rediffusions télévisées. De même, ils exigent que leur salaire puisse être bonifié en cas de gros succès ; or les plates-formes ne communiquent pas leurs audiences.

Ils réclament aussi des garanties concernant l'usage de l'intelligence artificielle, inquiets qu'elle puisse générer des scripts ou répliquer leur voix et leur image. « Nous sommes à un moment majeur, a plaidé Fran Drescher. L'industrie change, du fait du streaming, du numérique et de l'intelligence artificielle. Si nous ne résistons pas, nous sommes tous menacés d'être remplacés par des machines. »

Le PDG de Disney, Bob Iger, a morigéné les grévistes et leurs attentes « irréalistes », quelques heures avant le début du mouvement. « Cela va avoir un effet très, très dommageable pour toute l'industrie », a-t-il réagi sur CNBC, en mettant en avant les « dégâts collatéraux » qui risquent d'affecter les personnels des services généraux et plus largement l'économie, bien au-delà de Hollywood. « C'est une honte, c'est vraiment une honte », a-t-il estimé.

TEXT H - Les séries et la guerre des récits : retour sur le soft power des plateformes

The Conversation, 4 janvier 2022

Auteur, **Virginie Martin**, Docteure sciences politiques, HDR sciences de gestion, Kedge Business School

<https://theconversation.com/les-series-et-la-guerre-des-recits-retour-sur-le-soft-power-des-plateformes-173860>

(I encourage you to go online. The text contains three videos, made by Virginie Martin, in which she analyses three series: *La Casa de Papel*, *Squid Games* et *It's a Sin*. There's also an interview of Darnell Moore)

La guerre, la « vraie », est largement mise en scène dans bon nombre de séries : *Homeland*, *Le Bureau des légendes*, *Fauda* et tant d'autres.

Et puis il y a une autre guerre, celle dont parlait Antonio Gramsci, intellectuel communiste italien au début du XX^e siècle. Cette guerre là est plus immatérielle ; elle est livrée à des fins d'hégémonie culturelle.

Elle n'est pas sans rappeler le soft power – par opposition au hard power – cette « puissance douce » faite pour influencer, séduire, attirer.

Gagner cette bataille culturelle c'est travailler les opinions, les représentations dominantes, construire ou déconstruire les croyances.

Ce combat possède ses propres armes que sont les écoles, les livres, les médias et le monde de la fiction. Ces armes, ces appareils sont vus par Gramsci comme

des moyens de domination, mais aussi d'attraction. Ils sont des foyers d'irradiation et des aimants. Culture cultivée et culture populaire sont primordiales dans cette bataille, les séries étant au cœur de la nébuleuse.

Gramsci ne dissocie jamais le culturel du politique, car selon lui le culturel peut mener jusqu'à l'activité pratique et collective. La *Casa de papel* n'a-t-elle pas été prise pour symbole dans de nombreuses révoltes ?

Le monde culturel et ceux qui le fabriquent sont définitivement les architectes de la chose politique ; et les séries participent de cette dynamique, elles sont des moments politico-culturels. Elles construisent un objet politique, et enrichissent les approches autour du pouvoir.

Ce monde en séries est d'autant plus efficace qu'il vient se loger dans nos intimités, dans notre environnement familial, dans notre cocon.

Le côté émotionnel de la série permet une absorption très efficace des valeurs qu'elle peut donner à voir. Ces séries peuvent créer, de manière insidieuse ou plus explicite, un individu collectif, un individu politique via la pédagogie, le familial, l'émotionnel. Pour exemple, les vêtements-symboles des héros de *La Casa de papel* ont été repris ici où là comme habits de l'insoumission au libéralisme. Lors de certains mouvements, tels les zadistes ou les cheminots en grève, ont été masques et combinaisons.

Ce monde sériel est porté par la puissance des plateformes, une puissance d'autant plus grande qu'elle sait parfaitement s'inscrire dans l'environnement liquide qui serait devenu le nôtre.

L'extra fluidité des plates-formes enjambe un monde solide

Les DAN – Disney, Amazon, Netflix – ne connaissent en effet quasiment aucune frontière. Elles sont transnationales, et dépassent largement les principes de souveraineté nationale.

Elles sont flexibles, totalement dématérialisées et correspondent au monde liquide décrit par Bauman.

Immatérielles et insaisissables, ces plateformes viennent se nicher là où sont leur intérêt, et leur fluidité leur donne une longueur d'avance pour gagner la guerre des récits dans un monde – quel que soit son degré de globalisation et de mondialisation – qui reste, lui, profondément ancré sur des nations, des pays, des territoires, des frontières.

Un soft power offshore. Elles exercent leur soft power à la façon dont Joseph Nye l'avait théorisé mais c'est un soft power qui n'est plus territorialisé.

Quand Joseph Nye parle du soft power dans les années 90 et veut convaincre les présidents américains

de livrer une guerre culturelle plutôt qu'armée, il le fait notamment via les 2 H et les 2 M à savoir : Harvard, Hollywood, Mc Donald's et Macintosh. Ces outils du soft power passent par les interstices du quotidien indispensable : la nourriture, l'école, les loisirs, les outils de travail. C'est une mainmise sur la quasi-totalité du quotidien.

Ces armes de soft power ou d'hégémonie culturelle restent des entités concrètes, et surtout rattachées à un pays : Hollywood reste ancré en Californie. Harvard au Massachusetts. Le rattachement à un au pays est la raison même du soft power ; le plan Marshall avait déjà été largement pensé comme cela.

Dans le cas qui nous occupe, les plates-formes sont quasiment hors sol et offshore dirait Latour à savoir sans réel ancrage géographique dans nos imaginaires.

Les plates-formes n'ont quasi pas de territoires, pas plus que leurs productions. Elles parviennent à s'immiscer, via des fictions, en Jordanie – *Djinn* –, en Norvège, ou en Turquie – *Bir Baskadir* – elles viennent se saisir des enjeux nationaux et, simultanément, du pays en question.

En parallèle se joue une guerre marketing, une bataille pour l'attention. La présence sur le marché des séries peut signifier, en fonction des stratégies, inonder le marché ou ciseler des objets fictionnels très qualitatifs, ou encore investir massivement dans la promotion de ses séries.

Bien sûr, celui qui maîtrise toute la chaîne de production reste américain mais, c'est comme si, culturellement, on ne le voyait plus, comme si la patte américaine avait disparu. Des premiers temps de la *Casa de Papel* à *Leila* en passant Chernobyl, où sont les Etats-Unis ? On ne le sait plus tout à fait.

Netflix représente une technologie culturelle mutante qui joue à la guerre des récits. Capable de saper la souveraineté des pays, elle se détache de son territoire originel et finit par être un objet flottant qui ne nous dit plus d'où elle parle.

Ces DAN sont si puissants qu'ils jouent tels de véritables pays dans cette guerre sérielle ; et, simultanément, tous les pays, même les plus rétifs, s'embarquent dans cette bataille en séries.

Le soft power minimum : en être

De nombreux pays – Corée, Suède, Nigeria, Brésil... – savent qu'ils n'ont d'autre choix que de produire et diffuser leurs productionsérielles via les DAN, ce, afin de compter dans les représentations dominantes du monde. Regardons la ferveur à l'égard de la Corée à partir de sa K Pop, en passant par ses dramas,

comme *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* ou par le succès de *Hellbound* ou de *Squid game*

Les grandes puissances ont compris qu'il était indispensable de participer à cette guerre des récits. En être, c'est déjà une manière de prendre le pouvoir et c'est potentiellement empêcher l'autre de le prendre. Les séries ont véritable un pouvoir discursif au sens foucaldien du terme.

Certains veulent aussi « en être », mais à leur manière, et peuvent refuser de jouer le jeu des Netflix et autres. On pense à la Chine et la Russie – même si cette dernière est en train de modérer son approche ; deux pays qui sont plus proches du « sharp power » que du soft.

Du soft au sharp power

Dans cette guerre des récits, des pays plus autoritaires entendent jouer de leur influence un peu différemment ; de façon plus aiguisée, plus belliqueuse. Les façons de faire seront celles du sharp power à savoir : gêner, voire déstabiliser les démocraties, mais aussi exister dans le périmètre régional et in fine atteindre la diaspora éparpillée de par le monde. Travailler à une certaine propagande, via l'institut Confucius ou des médias comme la chaîne de télévision Russia Today.

Le sharp power, selon les créateurs de ce concept, Christopher Walker et Jessica Ludwig, consiste à jouer avec des fake news [afin de fragiliser les démocraties occidentales]. Walter et Ludwig donnent quelques exemples, et différencient la Chine et la Russie sur ce plan.

Cette dernière va créer des rumeurs – par exemple, « le sida aurait été inventé en laboratoire par la CIA ». La Chine, elle, cible plutôt les leaders d'opinion : élites politiques, économiques intellectuelles, et cherche à convaincre que son système est conforme au modèle des démocraties libérales.

Le sharp power représente clairement une dynamique d'arsenalisation du soft power. (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2019-3-page-39.htm>)

De l'antipopulisme au wokisme

Dans cette bataille des récits restent ceux qui ne veulent pas juste « en être » mais qui « sont », Netflix en tête. Ceux-là ont bien l'intention d'évangéliser le monde au regard de deux piliers.

Le premier est la figure détestée et honnie du « populiste ». De Trump à Modi en passant par Erdogan, les figures du « mal » politique sont en joue dans de nombreuses créations : *Leila* pour l'Inde, *Dir baskadir* pour la Turquie, *Jinn* pour la Jordanie, *Years and years* pour l'Europe nationaliste, *Occupied* pour la Russie

Le second concerne la promotion du « wokisme » ou la dénonciation des discriminations et une manière d'encourager l'empowerment des minorités. Les minorités et les personnes invisibilisées par la société sont largement mises à l'honneur dans cet univers sériel : *I May Destroy You*, *Little Fires Everywhere*, *Mrs. Maisel*, *Pose*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Maid*, *It's a Sin*...

Toutes ces séries prônent une approche progressiste et intersectionnelle. Le tout orchestré – chez Netflix – par l'écrivain et activiste afro-américain Darnell Moore qui y est chargé de l'inclusivité.

Ces DAN, avec leurs séries « armées », sont tout à la fois des contenus et des contenant.

Plus que des entreprises multi- et transnationales, elles deviennent des objets culturels et politiques en tant que tels. Elles se confondent avec les séries qu'elles proposent et sont partie prenante de cette guerre des récits.

Ces entreprises toutes-puissantes sont quasiment devenues de nouveaux États, avec leur agenda, leurs budgets colossaux, leur politique, leur propre soft power. Mais des états fluides et sans territoires, annonçant les prémisses d'une nouvelle donne géopolitique.

Cet article a été rédigé avec le précieux concours de Jessica Cluzel (étudiante Kedge Business School) ; il est aussi le résultat d'une journée organisée par l'Irsem le 8 novembre 2021 autour des représentations du monde militaire dans les séries TV et le cinéma

'Barbie' and 'Oppenheimer' Have More in Common Than You Think

Both films attempt to atone for the complicated legacies of American icons. Only one succeeds.

FOREIGN POLICY, JULY 25, 2023

By [Jennifer Williams](#), a deputy editor at *Foreign Policy*.

Amid a desert landscape a visionary unveils an invention that will forever change the world as we know it.

That's the climactic scene of the Christopher Nolan biopic *Oppenheimer*, about the eponymous J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb." It's also the opening scene of the *Barbie* movie, directed and co-written by indie auteur Greta Gerwig, which opened on the same day as *Oppenheimer*.

Despite the two films' radically different subject matter and tone—one a dramatic examination of man's hubris and the threat of nuclear apocalypse and the other a neon-drenched romp about Mattel's iconic fashion doll—they have far more in common than just their release date. Both movies consider the complicated legacies of two American icons and how to grapple with and perhaps even atone for them.

In *Oppenheimer*, the desert scene depicts the Trinity test, the world's first detonation of a nuclear bomb near Los Alamos, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. A brilliant but flawed theoretical physicist and the rest of his team work frantically to develop the weapon for the United States before the Nazis can beat them to the punch; they then gather on bleak, lunar-white sands near their secret laboratory to test the terrifying creation.

The countdown timer ticks to 00:00:00, the proverbial big red button is pushed, and a blast ignites the sky—a blinding white flash that quickly morphs into a towering inferno. Everything goes silent as Oppenheimer stares in awe from behind a makeshift protective barrier at what he has created.

Suddenly, he begins experiencing flashes of a different kind, premonitions of the human horror and suffering his weapon will wreak. Nolan is unambiguously signaling to the audience that this is a pivotal moment for the world, and for Oppenheimer personally, as what was once merely a theoretical idea has become

monstrously real. The fallout, both literally and figuratively, will be out of Oppenheimer's control.

Barbie's critical desert scene comes not at the film's climax but at its very beginning. The movie opens with a parody of the famous "The Dawn of Man" scene from Stanley Kubrick's classic 1968 science fiction film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As a red-orange sunrise breaks across a rocky desert landscape, a voiceover (from none other than Dame Helen Mirren) begins: "Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls. But the dolls were always and forever baby dolls." On screen, underscored by the ominous notes of Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra," little girls sit amid dusty canyon walls playing with baby dolls.

"Until..." Mirren says. And then comes the reveal: The little girls look up to see a massive, monolith-sized Margot Robbie, dressed in the black and white-striped swimsuit of the very first Barbie doll. She lifts her sunglasses and winks. The little girls are stunned—and, like the apes in the classic sci-fi movie, they begin to angrily dash their baby dolls against the ground.

Here is the core parallel between *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*: Two iconic American creators who ostensibly meant well but whose creations caused irreparable harm.

This is Barbie's mythic origin story: Once upon a time, little girls could only play with baby dolls meant to socialize them into wanting to be good wives and, eventually, mothers. Then came Ruth Handler, who in 1959 decided to create a doll with an adult woman's body, adult women's fashions, and adult women's careers so that little girls could dream of being more than just wives and mothers. And the rest is history. Thanks to such iterations as doctor Barbie, chef Barbie, scientist Barbie, professional violinist Barbie, and beyond, Barbie opened up young girls to a world of

possibilities and, Mirren says, “All problems of feminism and equal rights [were] solved.”

Well, not so fast: Mirren adds one final, snarky beat: “At least,” she says, “that’s what the Barbies think.”

Thus Gerwig introduces the central tension that animates the movie: Handler set out to create a feminist toy to empower and inspire young girls. But we sitting in the audience in 2023 know that things worked out a little differently. In the intervening years, Barbie would come under fire from feminists and other critics for a whole host of sins: encouraging unrealistic and harmful beauty standards that contribute to negative body image issues, eating disorders, and depression among pre-adolescent girls; lacking diversity and perpetuating white supremacy, ableism, and heteronormativity; objectifying women; promoting consumerism and capitalism; and even contributing to greenhouse gas emissions.

And here is the core parallel between *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*: Two iconic American creators who ostensibly meant well but whose creations caused irreparable harm. And two iconic American directors (Nolan is British-American) who set out to tell their stories from a very modern perspective, humanizing them while also addressing their harmful legacies.

But while Nolan obviously had the much harder task—no matter how much harm you think Barbie has done to the psyches of young girls over the years, there’s simply no comparison to the human toll of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the environmental impact of decades of nuclear testing, or the cost of the nuclear arms race—oddly enough, it’s Gerwig who ends up taking her job of atonement far more seriously.

As its opening scene shows, the *Barbie* movie lets the audience know right from the start that it’s self-aware. It knows that Barbie is problematic. And it’s going to go *there*.

And it does—almost to the point of overkill. The basic plot of the movie is this: Barbie is living happily in Barbie Land, a perfect pink plastic world where she and her fellow Barbies run everything from the White House to the Supreme Court and have everything they could ever want, from dream houses to dream cars to dreamy boyfriends (Ken)—the last of which they treat as little more than accessories.

But suddenly, things start to go wrong in Barbie’s happy feminist utopia, and to fix it, she is forced to journey into the real world—our world—accompanied by Ken, who insists on going with her. When she does, she realizes that contrary to what she believed (as Mirren told us in the opening scene), the invention of Barbies didn’t solve gender inequality in the real world. In the real world, Barbie is confronted not only with the dominance of the patriarchy (she discovers, for instance, that Mattel’s CEO is a man, played by Will Ferrell), but also with the fact that young girls seem to hate her.

In a crucial early scene, Robbie’s Barbie encounters ultracool Gen-Z teen Sasha (played by Ariana Greenblatt), who delivers a scathing monologue about everything that’s wrong with Barbie, the doll and cultural symbol—basically a checklist of all the criticisms lobbed at Barbie over the years, from promoting unrealistic beauty standards to destroying the planet with rampant capitalism. Barbie is crestfallen.

Meanwhile, there’s a subplot involving Ken’s parallel discovery of patriarchy, and how awesome and different it seems to be from his subjugated life in Barbie Land. Ken proceeds to go full men’s rights, heading back to Barbie Land and seizing power. He transforms Barbie’s dream house into Ken’s Mojo Dojo Casa House, where Barbies serve men and “every night is boys’ night!”

Barbie enlists the help of Sasha and her mom (played by America Ferrera)—a Mattel employee who secretly dreams up ideas for new, more realistic Barbies such as anxiety Barbie—to unseat Ken and restore female power in Barbie Land. Along the way, Ferrera’s character delivers the film’s other major feminist monologue, about how hard it is being a woman in the real world.

The monologues are unsubtle, as are the repeated mentions of concepts like the patriarchy. In every scene and nearly every line, the movie hits the audience over the head with the pro-feminism message. Gerwig knows what her job is—to atone for Barbie’s sins (and, yes, help Mattel sell more dolls)—and she makes sure everyone knows that she has fully understood the assignment.

But it’s in the film’s quieter, more tender moments that Gerwig’s background as an indie filmmaker and her true talent shine through, and where she’s able to

communicate the message in a subtler, but ultimately more impactful, way. The scene where Barbie in the real world sees an elderly woman for the first time (old people and wrinkles don't exist in Barbie Land, obviously) and is stunned at how beautiful she is, wrinkles and all. Or the scenes where Barbie talks quietly with her deceased creator, an elderly Handler (played by Rhea Perlman), who explains that the name Barbie was an homage to Handler's daughter, Barbara, who inspired her to make the doll.

The overall result is a movie that, even if a bit ham-fisted in its over-the-top messaging, doesn't shy away from the uglier parts of Barbie's legacy. It looks them right in the face, wrinkles and all.

I said above that the Trinity test scene is the climactic scene in *Oppenheimer*, but that's not really the case. For a movie about the complicated life and legacy of the man credited with creating the world's most destructive weapon, it should be the climax. You might imagine it would follow with a denouement of the inventor confronting the reality that his creation is used to kill tens of thousands of Japanese civilians and sparks an arms race that threatens to destroy all of humanity.

These scenes are in there, but they are given short shrift next to the other story Nolan wants to tell: that of how Oppenheimer, once considered an American hero, was mistreated by his country in the postwar years. As McCarthy-era fears of communist infiltration grip the country, Oppenheimer's previous ties to the Communist Party (he never joined the party himself, but he had close family members and friends who were members, and he supported various left-wing causes) are mysteriously brought to the FBI's attention despite already being well documented. His security clearance is revoked, and his career working with the U.S. government on nuclear issues ends.

It is this storyline—not the apocalyptic destruction of two Japanese cities—that is given the most pathos. Much of the movie's three-hour run time—and nearly all of its third act—centers on what we are clearly meant to see as the great evil that was done to this man who did so much for his country. The real climax of the film is not the Trinity test, nor even the bombings of Japan (which are not even shown in the movie), but rather the moment we learn who betrayed Oppenheimer by handing over his security file to the FBI.

This is the shocking revelation that is meant to induce gasps in the audience, not the images of charred and irradiated bodies. In fact, those images aren't even shown to us, the viewers. In the scene where Oppenheimer and his team are shown photos of the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the camera stays tight on Oppenheimer's face as he reacts to the images—a reaction that consists of him putting his head down to avoid seeing them.

It is an act of cowardice on Oppenheimer's part, yes, but also on Nolan's. Indeed, the only glimpses we get of the macabre effects of the atom bomb take place in Oppenheimer's fevered imagination, and even then, they are brief flashes used for shock value: skin flapping off the beautiful face of an admiring female colleague; the charred, faceless husk of a child's body Oppenheimer accidentally steps on; a male colleague vomiting from the effects of radiation. Of the Japanese victims, there is nothing. They remain theoretical, faceless.

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Nolan has said that he chose not to depict the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki not to sanitize them but because the film's events are shown from Oppenheimer's point of view. "We know so much more than he did at the time," Nolan said at a screening of the movie in New York. "He learned about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the radio, the same as the rest of the world."

But in reading the numerous interviews he's given about the movie, it's also clear that Nolan fundamentally sees Oppenheimer as a tragic hero—Nolan has repeatedly called Oppenheimer "the most important person who ever lived"—and Oppenheimer's story as a distinctly American one. "I believe you see in the Oppenheimer story all that is great and all that is terrible about America's uniquely modern power in the world," he told the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. "It's a very, very American story."

That Nolan's film devotes so much runtime to Oppenheimer's point of view and how he was tragically betrayed by his country is partly due to the fact that the film is not an original story but rather an adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the great scientist, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*. That book also places Oppenheimer being stripped of his security

clearance at its center. But that didn't mean Nolan had to do the same in his adaptation. That was a choice. And the end result is what military technology writer Kelsey Atherton aptly described as "a 3 hour long argument that the greatest victim of atomic weaponry was Oppenheimer's clearance."

At a time when Americans are struggling to reckon with their country's past and how it has shaped the present—from fights over how (or even whether) to teach children about the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow; to debates, including in these very pages, over the role (or lack thereof) of NATO expansion in Russia's

decision to wage war on Ukraine; to retrospectives on the myriad failures of the U.S. war in Afghanistan; and beyond—the fact that the two biggest films in theaters right now are attempting to confront the legacies of two American icons, the nuclear bomb and Barbie, is understandable and perhaps even impressive.

But the impulse to look away from the ugliest parts of those legacies remains strong, and *Oppenheimer* never fully faces them.

Jennifer Williams is a deputy editor at *Foreign Policy*.
Twitter: [@jenn_ruth](https://twitter.com/jenn_ruth)

3 lessons past Hollywood strikes can teach us about the current moment

NPR July 19, 2023, By Rachel Treisman



SAG-AFTRA members and supporters protest in front Amazon/HBO in New York City on Tuesday.

Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

Actors have joined screenwriters on the picket line in a rare dual strike, effectively bringing Hollywood to a standstill for the first time in decades.

The Writers Guild of America went on strike against major studios in May to push for contract provisions including higher wages, more residuals, guaranteed staffing minimums and regulations on artificial intelligence. SAG-AFTRA, which represents Hollywood actors and performers, followed suit last week after the two sides failed to reach an agreement over sticking points including residuals from streaming platforms and the use of AI (especially when it comes to actors' digital likenesses).

SAG-AFTRA's rules prevent striking performers from acting, singing, dancing, doing stunts and promoting their projects, whether on red carpets or award shows. Meanwhile, WGA members are prohibited from providing any writing services to a struck company.

Erin Hill, an associate professor of media and popular culture at UC San Diego (who has worked in the industry but never been part of a Hollywood union), says she's both "terrified by and optimistic about" the strike, which comes at a critical moment technologically and economically.

"I just think it's a really, really, really important stand that needs to be made now, preferably yesterday, and also at every subsequent strike for the next however many cycles until this gets sorted, because this is going to become an extremely untenable — even more so than now — kind of labor squeeze otherwise," she tells NPR over Zoom. As Hill puts it, there has been a strike roughly every decade for almost a century as new mediums succeed each other, from television to cable to VHS to mobile to, now, streaming. SAG performers last went on strike in 1980, while screenwriters did most recently from late 2007 to early 2008.

This is the first dual strike since 1960, when the WGA and what was then just SAG (more on that later) collectively shut Hollywood down for about six weeks. Those strikes resulted in union members getting health care and pensions, and a residual system to compensate them when their movies aired on TV.

How — and when — might things resolve this time around?

The strike could last into the fall or even longer, which would significantly disrupt everything from fall film festivals to the fall TV lineup (and possibly next summer's blockbusters) to the Emmy Awards (which are scheduled for mid-September and likely to be postponed, with an announcement expected by the end of this month).

Ronny Regev, a historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of *Working in Hollywood: How the Studio System Turned Creativity Into Modern Labor*, tells NPR over email that it won't be surprising if the actors settle before writers do. "At the end of the day, this is all related to the position of these workers in the production process," she adds. "Since producers can survive without new written material for a while, WGA has less bargaining power than actors and directors."

Hill says the best-case scenario is that the two unions stick together for long enough to put so much pressure on studios and networks that they start to make deals. "Whoever gets left sitting alone on one side or another of the table is going to have less power in the end," she adds.

Here's a look at how earlier strikes set the stage for this latest fight — and what they can tell us about what happens next.

The industry is constantly reacting to technological changes

Every new kind of technology creates not only different arrangements of labor and management, Hill says, but new forms of content that become popular and earn revenue. She points to the rise of television in the '40s, cable (and reuse fees) in the '60s and '70s, VCR and VHS in the '80s and mobile and internet in the early aughts.

"Many, many, if not every strike, is in some way kind of trying to catch up to a technology that has already kind of emerged and/or the content and the kind of growing popularity of certain content that has come out of that technology," she says, with streaming and AI being the latest.

She says the 2007 WGA strike has a lot in common with the current one because of the "labor arrangements being negotiated for production in a new medium," since at issue aren't just streaming TV and film production residuals but also working conditions and fundamental intellectual property concerns.

Regev also sees similarities with the last dual strike of 1960, which she says was also about "the place of actors and writers in this changing world." In that case, the unions were primarily concerned about the effect of television on the film industry (they also pushed for employer-based health insurance, she notes).

The fact that the unions are talking about AI now suggests to Regev that they're not just concerned about the present moment, but trying to establish assurances about the near future as well.

Future contracts — or future strikes in protest of them — will continue to reflect technological change, both experts say. "If they reach some concessions on A.I. maybe that would entail a long period of harmonious relations," Regev writes. "If they kick this can down the road (as they did with television throughout the 1950s) then that could mean another strike/dispute in the coming years."

There's strength in numbers — but the unions aren't equal

The fact that both unions are striking at the same time puts extra pressure on studios and streamers. There are a lot of people involved: WGA says it has some 11,500 members, while nearly 65,000 SAG-AFTRA members are on strike (there are others, including many NPR journalists, who are under a different contract and therefore not on strike).

Another big difference between today's strike and those of recent decades is the makeup of the unions themselves: It was only in 2012 that the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) merged with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) to form SAG-AFTRA.

Ben Mankiewicz, *Turner Classic Movies* host and Hollywood history buff, told *Morning Edition* this week that the merger was "from a labor point of view, wise," adding that there's strength in numbers.

"I think undoubtedly that will lead to a better deal for the actors," he said. "I don't know if it'll lead to a good deal for the actors, but it'll lead to a better deal."

Hill says the primary reason Hollywood even has a stand to take at this moment is because of its relatively large unionized portion of key workers. In other industries, she says, people who are as powerful as a major TV writer like Shonda Rhimes would be management and not eligible for unions. "So because of this labor, it's possible for this kind of industry to actually put its foot down to a degree," Hill adds. "How big a degree will depend on the strike."

WGA and SAG-AFTRA are not your typical unions, Regev agrees: They are unequal. She writes that they have some highly paid members, namely the big stars, and then the rank-and-file members who are "far from rich."

"While someone like George Clooney or Fran Drescher can certainly afford not working for a while, the vast majority of actors cannot afford that," she adds. "That's what producers are counting on."

Plus, Mankiewicz notes, writers have already been on strike for 2 1/2 months. He predicts that by the early fall there will be "some fissure among producers" — and "a desire of some significant people with weight to get back to work."

Public support, which has fluctuated over time, is key

The success and failure of strikes over the years also has to do with other national, world and economic events, Hill says.

She says the current cultural and societal moment gives her hope that the unions will prevail, adding that her college students "seem to get what labor movements and strikes are about in a way that ... students I had worked with even 10 years ago did not have this kind of blind acceptance."

Hill says it's typically very easy for ordinary people to dismiss movie stars' complaints — but the public seems to be moved by renowned actors walking out of movie premieres and marching on picket lines. She points to an incident in late May, where students protested outside of Boston University's commencement as Warner Bros. Discovery President and CEO David Zaslav gave a speech.

Writers and actors are uniquely suited to make their case, she says, because of their rhetorical prowess and name recognition.

"People identify their favorite things with those people," Hill adds. "So there's a humanization that happens. ... I think psychologically in the country and in Hollywood, there's more of ... this kind of willingness to sit down and actually make a stink."

But she says these unions are, at least in some ways, able to take up a fight that many members of the public cannot. "They stand for something that people, I think, are also feeling in their jobs, where they don't have power to negotiate against somebody who's saying, 'You know what I would like you to work from home and just be moving your mouse 12 hours a day and I also want you to do X, Y and Z and I'm going to time you,' or whatever it is," Hill says. "They don't have that power. I think Hollywood needs to do it now, and I'm proud that they're doing it."

More Links and Resources

● The History of Hollywood

■ <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/hollywood>

■ From Britannica [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Hollywood-California>

Hays Office, formally **Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America**, American organization that promulgated a moral code for films. In 1922, after a number of scandals involving Hollywood personalities, film industry leaders formed the organization to counteract the threat of government censorship and to create favourable publicity for the industry. Under Will H. Hays, a politically active lawyer, the Hays Office initiated a blacklist, inserted morals clauses into actors' contracts, and in 1930 developed the Production Code, which detailed what was morally acceptable on the screen. The code was supplanted in 1966 by a voluntary rating system.

Motion Picture Association (MPA), formerly (1922–45) **Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America** and (1945–2019) **Motion Picture Association of America**, in the United States, organization of the major motion-picture studios that rates movies for suitability to various kinds of audiences, aids the studios in international distribution, advises them on taxation, works to prevent film piracy, and carries on a nationwide public relations program for the industry. The MPA, originally called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and later the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), was established in 1922 by the major Hollywood production studios in response to increasing government censorship of films, which arose in turn from a general public outcry against both indecency on the screen and various scandals involving movie celebrities. The MPPDA, popularly called the Hays Office for its first director, Will H. Hays, codified the complaints of local censoring boards and informed producers of their views. Hollywood in effect opted to censor its own productions rather than allow the government to censor them.

In 1930 the Hays Office adopted the Motion Picture Production Code, a detailed description of what was morally acceptable on the screen. Under the guidance of Jack Valenti—MPAA president (1966–2004) and former adviser to U.S. Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson—the code was liberalized in 1966 after it had become hopelessly outdated and ineffective because of the more relaxed social and sexual mores of the time. In 1968 the MPAA set up a rating board that classified films as G, M, R, and X. After various changes the MPA ratings are now as follows: G, for general audiences; PG, parental guidance suggested; PG-13, parents strongly cautioned, because film contains material inappropriate for children under 13; R, restricted to adults and to children under 17 accompanied by parent or guardian; and NC-17, no children under 17 admitted.