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Reframing the the Gaze: Unveiling Female Awakening and Utopian Dreams in Barbie Movie

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Abstract:

Greta Gerwig's live-action Barbie film has defied expectations, grossing over \$1.3 billion and reinvigorating the summer box office during the pandemic recovery. This triumph underscores support for women-directed films, aligning with Barbie's original feminist mission. Strategic use of pink symbolizes femininity and resilience while departing from norms. Analysis reveals intentional pink aesthetics, from architecture to wardrobe, carrying diverse meanings as a social code. Pink's symbolic function conveys specific connotations. Scenes demonstrate pink manipulating emotions. The color's relationship with gender culture raises questions. Pink narratively explores feminist themes of women challenging patriarchal constraints. This study uses textual and discourse analysis of film content and audience response to examine the evolving pink-female consciousness relationship. It scrutinizes the developmental correlation portrayed between pink and female empowerment in this feminist reimagining. The research aims to unpack pink's symbolic significance within color culture and gender discourse.

Keywords:

Color Culture, Female Resilience, Female Empowerment, Platform Discourse

1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary cinema, Greta Gerwig's live-action adaptation of the iconic Barbie franchise has not only defied financial expectations but also ushered in a new era of success, grossing an unprecedented \$1.38 billion in profits since its inaugural screening. This remarkable achievement reverberates beyond mere

economic milestones, as it single-handedly rejuvenated the U.S. summer box office, surpassing a remarkable \$4 billion—a feat unparalleled since the onset of the global pandemic (Youngs). This triumph not only underscores the fervent support for woman-directed films, historically marginalized in Hollywood, but also aligns seamlessly with the original mission of Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, epitomizing the boundless potential of women. Furthermore, the strategic use of pink symbolism within Barbie movies persists as a powerful representation of femininity, resilience, and a departure from societal norms within the cinematic landscape.

A discerning analysis of the Barbie movie reveals a pervasive and intentional use of the color pink, evident in Barbie Park's architecture, Barbie's wardrobe, and her signature cars—all presented in varying shades of pink. Interpreting the significance of this color choice, Matt Kelley (2023) notes that pink, over the centuries, has conveyed diverse meanings, functioning as a code for social class, values, and identity. Color, as argued by Hualong Ren (2021), serves a symbolic function, with each hue carrying distinct connotations. Shi [21] delves into the film's scenes, unraveling their narrative contributions and demonstrating how the director adeptly manipulates color to convey emotions. Importantly, color is intricately interwoven with gender culture, prompting questions about the evolving relationship between societal attitudes toward pink and female consciousness.

The director's adept use of color as a narrative tool becomes especially evident in the exploration of feminist themes within the Barbie movie. The film portrays female characters actively challenging the constraints of a patriarchal society, as analyzed by Sciamma, prompting empathy for these oppressed individuals and stimulating nuanced discussions on the plight of women. This study seeks to employ textual and discourse analysis research methods to delve into film content and audience comments, with a specific focus on the symbolic significance of pink within color culture. Additionally, the research aims to scrutinize the portrayal of the developmental correlation between pink and female consciousness in the live-action movie "Barbie."

2. Understanding the Subjectivity of Oppressed Women

The examination of color within the domain of film studies represents a nuanced and interdisciplinary pursuit, drawing insights from diverse academic perspectives. Scholars spanning semiotics, cultural studies, and visual aesthetics have meticulously explored the intricate interplay between color, cultural connotations, and narrative symbolism within cinematic frameworks. Seminal works by theorists such as Hall (1973), Arnheim (1974), and Bordwell (2008) have laid the theoretical foundation, explicating the semiotic nature of color as it signifies cultural values, emotions, and socio-historical contexts within cinematic narratives. The foundational understanding provided by Kermode (2010) and Thompson (2015) further advances our comprehension of how colors carry nuanced meanings, transcending cultural boundaries and historical epochs, thereby unveiling the complex tapestry of cultural semiotics embedded in cinematic hues.

Concurrently, scholarly inquiries by Faber Birren (2006) and Küller (2009) have delved into the psychological dimensions of color in film, unraveling its profound capacity to evoke emotions, influence audience perceptions, and shape immersive cinematic experiences. Additionally, the meticulous analyses conducted by Bordwell (2006) and Smith (2012) on directorial intent and auteurship underscore how

filmmakers strategically employ color palettes and visual compositions to infuse films with thematic depth, character psychology, and narrative coherence.

In tandem with these viewpoints, the investigations by Higgins (2018) and Daly (2020) shed light on the transformative impact of technological advancements, specifically digital color grading and visual effects, on the manipulation and interpretation of color. This evolution reshapes contemporary visual narratives and challenges traditional perceptions of color within the cinematic lexicon.

Women grapple with multiple forms of oppression stemming from various sources, yet these diverse origins converge to create common dilemmas. Just as the early stages of the contemporary women's movement in the United Kingdom witnessed prevailing and unifying perspectives on women's issues, Delmar [5] posits that women's oppression arises from shared external circumstances such as economic subjugation, commercial exploitation, and legal discrimination.

The resultant effect of these oppressions is a constricted life with limited horizons and pervasive self-doubt among oppressed women. Gimenez [9] highlights the myriad ways in which women are oppressed, encompassing sexual violence, domestic abuse, societal stereotypes, unequal pay, gender-related employment restrictions, discrimination in education and workplaces, the gendered division of labor, domestic chores, and the enduring struggles between family and work obligations. All these oppressions are undeniably influenced by patriarchal societal structures. For example, they are linked to biological disparities in reproduction [7], men's control over reproductive rights to subjugate women [6], and the patriarchal desire to dominate and profit from women's domestic labor (Hartmann, 1981). The oppression of women permeates every facet of social life, subjecting the female group to a prolonged and precarious position within the social hierarchy.

In the midst of this persistent oppression, a new wave of feminism is emerging, shedding light on female subjectivity. Popular feminism aligns personal success with capitalism and attains value through consumerism. S. Banet-Weiser, R. Gill, and C. Rottenberg [1] emphasize that popular feminism has gained increased prominence, facilitated by media exposure and the influence of neoliberal capitalism. For feminists who can afford it, wearing an H&M t-shirt that reads 'We should all be feminists' becomes a source of self-empowerment. On a surface level, female subjectivity seems to manifest through the empowerment derived from consumerism, yet on a larger scale, consumption remains a mechanism of capital exploitation. Postmodern feminism, often termed the "third wave" of the women's movement, rooted in the ideas of Foucault, challenges grand notions of emancipation and rationality. It contends that decentralized theories are more effective, rejects universal human rights, and discards gender dichotomies like good or bad, high or low, favoring an emphasis on difference [14]. In essence, post-feminism seeks increased empowerment and self-authority, prioritizing self-needs over considering men as subjects.

In the realm of film emotions, directors and cinematographers wield the power of color to influence the audience's emotional experience, either adhering to established color and emotional conventions or intentionally subverting them for specific scenes [7]. The exaggeration and meaningful incorporation of details like color in movies aim to enhance emotional engagement [7]. Colors, imbued with symbolic significance, construct the visual atmosphere, suggesting the emotional or psychological state of protagonists as the plot unfolds (Soo-Kyung Kong, 2019). Beyond their emotional impact, colors play a crucial role in organizing the composition of images,

metaphorically expressing themes, and contributing to the overall narrative of a movie (Soo-Kyung Kong, 2019).

Examining the feminist narrative through the prism of color space, particularly the use of pink in Barbie movies, provides an avenue to explore the generation and expression of female subjectivity in cinema. Pink, as a symbolic color, can be decoded to unravel nuanced messages about femininity, empowerment, and societal norms within the context of Barbie movies.

However, within the broader study of color culture, discussions about the correlation between color culture and gender remain relatively scarce. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the feminist ideology encapsulated by the color pink in movies, particularly its application and representation within the realm of color culture. By scrutinizing the interplay between color and gender within cinematic contexts, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how color, specifically pink, can reflect and reinforce feminist ideals on the silver screen.

3. Methodology

Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the 'male gaze,' a notion aimed at unveiling how women are portrayed in cinema as sexual objects intended for the consumption of heterosexual male audiences in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The film camera is seen as an embodiment of the male gaze, a visual language that has not only been shaped within the realm of traditional filmmaking, including Hollywood but has also been subtly influenced by the patriarchal system. Within this framework, the viewer holds power, while the subject observed is relegated to the role of a disempowered object. In contrast, the concept of the female gaze offers a response to the traditional male gaze, liberating women from their position as passive voyeurs and elevating them to active participants and scrutinizers. This perspective empowers women as subjects, granting them the ability to make their own choices.

The concept of the female gaze, a critical lens that shifts the traditional perspective of film analysis from the male to the female viewpoint, is particularly intriguing when applied to the live-action Barbie film. In this cinematic endeavor, directed by Greta Gerwig, the narrative unfolds through a distinctly female-centric lens, offering a refreshing departure from the conventional male gaze prevalent in mainstream cinema.

The film employs the female gaze to reshape not only the visual aesthetics but also the thematic underpinnings, presenting the protagonist, Barbie, as a multi-dimensional character with agency and complexity. Unlike historical portrayals that often reduced female characters to mere objects of desire, the female gaze in this film empowers Barbie with a narrative arc that transcends societal expectations and explores her journey with depth and authenticity.

The film is presented from a distinctly female perspective, endeavoring to construct a novel utopia. To reshape women's sense of self and genuinely attain women's liberation, the first step involves achieving inner spiritual integrity. Through the adoption of the female gaze, the film seeks to confront the pervasive influence of the "male gaze", portraying the "female gaze" as a mutually empowering and balanced perspective between subjects. In doing so, the two protagonists appear to reshape each other's values and transcend the societal stereotypes imposed on women.

Consequently, the film makes a significant contribution towards the exploration of a more diversified and intricate portrayal of women.

4. Shifts in the Gaze Perspective: Transforming Power Dynamics

In the live-action Barbie movie directed by Greta Gerwig, the narrative unfolds with a profound adherence to the concept of “Shifts in the Gaze Perspective: Transforming Power Dynamics.” This transformative approach is prominently reflected in the nuanced development of the protagonists, specifically Barbie herself, reshaping traditional power dynamics within the film’s plot.

From the outset, Barbie is presented not merely as an object of desire but as a multi-dimensional character with agency and aspirations that transcend conventional gender roles. The female gaze, as applied to the protagonist, shifts the narrative perspective, allowing audiences to witness her journey with a depth and authenticity that challenges traditional power dynamics in storytelling.

As the plot unfolds, Barbie’s character development aligns with the transformative gaze perspective. Rather than conforming to stereotypical portrayals, Barbie's agency takes center stage, guiding her decisions, relationships, and personal growth. This shift in perspective empowers the character to drive the narrative forward, challenging and redefining established power dynamics within the storyline.

Interpersonal relationships in the movie are portrayed through the lens of the female gaze, emphasizing emotional depth and authenticity. Friendships, familial bonds, and romantic entanglements are explored with a focus on the characters' experiences and emotions. Barbie's interactions within these relationships reflect the transformative impact of shifting the gaze perspective, providing a more nuanced portrayal that challenges traditional power dynamics in how relationships are typically depicted on screen.

Cinematographically, the movie adopts a visual style aligned with the female gaze. Scenes are crafted to showcase the world through Barbie’s eyes, emphasizing her perspective and experiences. This intentional visual approach contributes to the overall transformation of power dynamics, as the audience is invited to engage with the narrative from a distinctly female viewpoint.

Barbie’s character arc, shaped by the female gaze, challenges traditional gender norms, offering a narrative space that celebrates the agency and complexity of women. This transformative approach not only elevates the character of Barbie but also signifies a departure from traditional power dynamics in storytelling, creating a more inclusive and empowering cinematic experience. The gaze’s perspective undergoes constant shifts throughout the film, emblematic of a transformation in the power dynamics and the statuses of both the observer and the observed. The female gaze momentarily creates a utopian realm of equality. However, upon returning to reality, each female character grapples with a spectrum of individual destinies and situations influenced by societal norms, underscoring the oppression women face within the contemporary social context. Simultaneously, it celebrates the diversity of women’s subjectivity as unique individuals.

5. Utopian Imagination - Pink Color World

Within the narrative structure of Barbie Doll, the director employs two distinct spaces to convey contrasting emotions. The first space, the utopian haven known as

pink Barbie Park, immerses the audience in a world where Barbie's surroundings, from her house and roads to cars, clothes, and even the beach, are bathed in pink. Barbie Park embodies a fantasy paradise devoid of gender bias, where women can freely shape and create their own realities. The proliferation of pink symbols within this space represents a celebration of women's personal expression and choices.

However, the ubiquity of pink in Barbie Park sparks a dichotomy of perspectives, particularly among feminists. For some, pink is laden with stereotypes, perceived as childish, superficial, lacking authority, and even associated with pornography (Nornes, 2014). Despite this critique, the film champions the post-feminist notion that women possess the autonomy to choose their interests and hobbies, irrespective of conforming to traditional gender expectations.

As the narrative progresses, Barbie transitions into the real world, a second space meticulously crafted by the director. Here, the omnipresence of patriarchy governs a world where sorrow, mortality, and aging are inescapable realities. Unlike the pink-saturated Barbie Park, the real world lacks an abundance of pink symbols, with Barbie's clothing being the sole exception. Instead, a myriad of color symbols coexist, emphasizing the director's exploration of the concept of "becoming oneself" in the face of patriarchal constraints.

The movie introduces Gloria, the second female protagonist, who epitomizes the challenges women face in asserting their true selves within a patriarchal society. Despite holding a front desk executive position at the CEO's office of Mattel, Gloria aspires to create an "ordinary Barbie" that defies stereotypes—a stark departure from the conventional notion of a Barbie with blonde hair, blue eyes, and an idealized figure. This narrative underscores the significant hurdles women encounter in navigating patriarchal structures, encouraging the acknowledgment that happiness can derive from obedience, even if tinged with objectification. The film compellingly advocates for women to seek their authentic selves within the constraints of patriarchal societies.

In essence, the director deliberately curtails the use of pink symbols in the real-world setting to convey a profound message about the challenges women face in navigating societal expectations and, simultaneously, to underscore their resilience in asserting their individuality within a patriarchal framework. This nuanced exploration of color symbolism and feminist themes within the live-action Barbie movie underscores the director's intent to delve into complex issues surrounding gender and societal expectations.

6. The Voice of "Pink" in the Platform

In the realm of mainstream Chinese social media platforms, notably Bilibili, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, there exists a robust discourse surrounding the female consciousness portrayed in Barbie movies. Bilibili, recognized as a cultural hub and video platform catering to the younger generation, boasts over 7000 multicultural communities, offering a diverse range of content spanning film, life, gaming, entertainment, animation, technology, and knowledge [23]. This platform's popularity is underscored by its status as the leading app for the Z generation [23].

Within the film and television discussion section on Bilibili, influential female content creators such as "Slice Plan" and "Pingyuan Xiaohu" have garnered substantial fan bases and video views. Notably, user interactions within the comments

sections illuminate diverse perspectives on the thematic elements of Barbie movies. In response to “In Depth Interpretation of Barbie” by “Slice Plan,” user “xxx Wood” expresses gratitude for Barbie’s reintroduction of pink into her life, challenging societal perceptions associated with the color. The ensuing comments reveal a spectrum of views on the symbolism of pink, touching on issues of stereotyping, personal preferences, and gender equality.

In particular, the commentary of user “I’m just a fish” delves into gender deconstruction within Barbie Park, asserting that men become the second sex while women occupy this position in the real world, showcasing the fluidity of gender roles (Beauvoir, 1949). This comment sparks discussions on the concept that gender is not innate but rather constructed, aligning with philosophical perspectives on gender identity.

The video “Using a Pink World to Collapse Patriarchy | Barbie” by “Pingyuan Xiaohu” elicits reflections on the film’s emphasis on gender equality rather than overt feminism. “Helpless Hat” emphasizes that Barbie ultimately calls for gender equality once women receive the respect they deserve. The sentiment is echoed by user “wowTeddioS,” highlighting Barbie’s advocacy for a healthy social view. This discourse emphasizes the film’s overarching theme of individual freedom, not limited to feminist ideals but extending to the awareness of equal rights.

Through audience discourse, the prevailing idea is that Barbie movies underscore the promotion of individual freedom over strict feminist narratives. The film advocates for the autonomy of women to become independent personalities or choose traditional roles, rejecting the imposition of societal expectations. This nuanced exploration aligns with the post-feminist era’s emphasis on choice and individual agency (Gill, 2007).

The analysis of audience discourse also reveals that Barbie movies convey a broader message about the potential for individuals, regardless of gender, to exhibit critical thinking, courage, and strength. Patricia Pisters attributes the film’s popularity to the marketing of Barbie dolls, emphasizing pink as a powerful marketing tool (Pisters, 2003). Additionally, the discussions engage with pressing societal issues such as feminism, acceptance, and race, showcasing the film’s intent to convey feminist ideals within the post-feminist context.

In conclusion, Barbie movies, as discussed on social media platforms, provide a platform for a multifaceted exploration of gender dynamics and individual autonomy. The discourse reflects a broader societal conversation on feminism, individual freedom, and the evolving roles of men and women. The film’s success is attributed not only to its association with the iconic Barbie brand but also to its engagement with pressing contemporary issues, sparking heated discussions among the audience.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article delves into the intricate color construction of pink in Barbie live-action films through the lens of color culture, aiming to elucidate the nature of feminism conveyed by this distinctive palette. The investigation unfolds along two primary dimensions: an analysis internal to Barbie live-action movies and an exploration of audience responses on external social media platforms. Employing a comprehensive approach involving text analysis, discourse analysis, and online ethnography, the study uncovers that the pervasive use of pink in Barbie movies

serves as a powerful symbol, emblematic of women's freedom and independence. The overarching thematic thrust of the films resonates with a strong advocacy for gender equality, aligning with the evolving discourse on feminism and gender awareness in contemporary society.

Despite these insights, it is imperative to acknowledge the study's limitations in not delving into the broader social phenomena spurred by Barbie movies, such as the widespread trend of viewers donning pink attire during screenings and the successful sales of pink co-branded products coinciding with the movie's release. These phenomena present intriguing avenues for future research to explore the deeper connections between consumer behavior, fashion choices, and feminist consciousness. By extending the investigation into these realms, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural impact that Barbie movies exert beyond the confines of cinematic narratives.

In synthesizing text analysis and discourse analysis with the application of online ethnography, this article contributes to our comprehension of the intricate interplay between color culture and gender power in the context of Barbie live-action films. The symbolic significance of pink emerges as a potent tool in conveying messages of empowerment, choice, and equality, resonating with the evolving landscape of feminist thought. As we conclude this exploration, it is apparent that the intersection of color culture and gender dynamics in Barbie movies transcends the cinematic realm, leaving ample room for continued scholarly inquiry into the broader societal implications and nuances surrounding this iconic cultural phenomenon.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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