



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Barbie in the Digital Age [Review of: M. Rogers, J. Cassel (2000) Barbie Culture]

Pisters, P.P.R.W.

Published in:
European Journal of Cultural Studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Pisters, P. P. R. W. (2000). Barbie in the Digital Age [Review of: M. Rogers, J. Cassel (2000) Barbie Culture]. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3(2), 279-283.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Book reviews

Barbie in the digital age

Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999. 171 pp. ISBN 0–7619–5888–6. £12.99

Justine Cassell and Henri Jenkins (eds) *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1998. 360 pp. ISBN 0–2620–3258–9. £22.50

Barbie turned 40 in 1999 and could celebrate her birthday with the fact that 99 percent of all girls in the USA between three and ten years old have at least one Barbie doll; the average girl has eight. In the past 40 years Barbie has not gained an ounce of weight nor got one wrinkle in her white skin, let alone a grey hair in her long blond mane. She did acquire a boyfriend, Ken, a sister, Skipper, a friend, Midge, and a great many pets. To meet demands of political correctness, Barbie also has black and hispanic friends (since 1964, in fact). Most noticeable is the enormous material wealth Barbie has collected over the years: 19 houses, several cars (such as her red Ferrari, white Porsche and pink Mustang), a Beach Bus, a treasure-chest full of jewellery and a heap of clothes, designed by Oscar de la Rente, Versace, Chanel, Paco Rabane and Donna Karan (to name but a few of the famous designers who felt challenged to dress her up).

Barbie is obviously a white, heterosexual and above all materialistic girl. It is difficult to see her popularity as other than a damaging influence on little girls: propagating a sexist and racist world view, inciting girls to become anorexic shoppers, mindless decorative ‘objects’ or obsessive collectors. Mary Rogers does not agree. In her book *Barbie Culture* she proposes a much more complex picture of this cultural icon. Like every icon, Rogers argues, Barbie does not present only one dimension or axis of culture. Barbie is ‘multiplicity in plastic, adaptability in vinyl, versatility in polystyrene’ (p. 29). Rogers

interviewed Barbie fans and collectors from different age groups and social backgrounds, went to Barbie-auctions and looked at Barbie magazines such as *Barbie Bazaar* and *Mondo Barbie*. The creative appropriations of Barbie by many different groups took away Rogers's initial scepticism. One collector, for instance, told Rogers that her collection is an investment, meant to put her daughter through college. Barbie furthermore is connected with many childhood memories and multiple fantasies that are easily projected onto Barbie's 'hollow' image, ranging from fantasies of romance and fantastic careers to aggressive attacks on Barbie's innocence (tearing heads off, burning her hair or even entire 'Barbie-ques'). Obviously there are different ways of incorporating Barbie into your fantasy world. An example of this is how pink, Barbie's favourite colour (the colour of innocent and fragile femininity), is associated in *Mondo Barbie* magazine with the pink triangle, symbol of homosexuality. The magazine carries stories such as: 'Barbie Comes Out' in which Barbie is a 'femme' whose closest associate is post-surgical transsexual Kendra. We can also read about Big Dyke Barbie, Drag Queen Barbie, Hooker Barbie and other unconventional Barbies such as Carrie Barbie in a blood-soaked prom dress.

Besides these varied testimonies from girls, collectors and other Barbie (ab)users, Rogers places Barbie in broader cultural contexts. In the other chapters she looks at aspects of femininity, heterosexuality, race, consumerism, corporate marketing strategies and finally postmodern concepts of 'plastic' bodies and selfhood in relation to the doll. Barbie's emphatic nice girl femininity ('neither loud nor critical, good-mannered and respectable') can be related to sociological ideas about selfhood in an age of appearances and images.

In 1959 when Barbie entered the market, Erving Goffman published his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. His key concept of 'impression management' (the way we act is meant to control how other people see us) can easily be applied to Barbie: always the right dress for whatever situation she is in, Barbie never fails to 'manage her impression'. But there is more to Barbie. Her relatively easy-going femininity involves no subordination to parents or to a man, no unfair division of household labour, no constant mothering. As Rogers puts it, Barbie is no abject icon of oppressed womanhood. Instead she takes signs of women's subordination – bodily preoccupations, niceness – and turns them into the stuff of success, fun, excitement and glamour. As shown by *Mondo Barbie*, the fact that Barbie has neither husband nor child leave her open to even more radical readings in sexual terms. She may be a drag queen, lesbian or bisexual. Barbie's skin colour is of course less ambiguous. Although she now has many friends in different skin colours, she remains predominantly an icon of whiteness (there are few black Barbie collectors, the white Barbies are still the best-sold and most privileged dolls).



In terms of class, Barbie's status as ambiguous icon holds true. Barbie is 'Everywoman from lower-middle-class office workers to upper-middle-class professionals'. In the last two chapters, Rogers relates Barbie to postmodern conceptions of 'plastic bodies' and 'plastic selves'. Here Barbie stands for 20th-century trends of transformation of the body through consumption, sports, surgery, fashion and other 'masquerades'. Barbie signals the emergence of the perfect and attainable 'technobody' or 'cyborg body'. Barbie's eternal youth, perfect body and fashion style appear to make these available for all girls and women. Pop star Cher is but one real-life example. Barbie's plastic body is also related to postmodern ideas of selfhood, ranging from pastiche performer to flexible improviser and image consultant. Barbie has an open-ended identity that reflects postmodern conceptions of non-fixed selfhood. At the same time Barbie is too perfect to be true, and a worrying example for girls who may be led to body distortion and constant dieting by trying to imitate her. Throughout the book, Rogers keeps critical distance but demonstrates at the same time how around the figure of Barbie many of the ambiguous complexities of contemporary culture come together.

Considering Barbie's cyber body, it is hardly surprising that at the end of the 20th century she started to appear in cyberspace itself as well. One might have expected that in the 1990s, with the enormous increase in various video and computer games, girls would have found other toys to play with. However, the first time a computer game for girls was commercially successful was in 1996: Mattel's *Barbie Fashion Designer*. Otherwise digital toys are still predominantly for the boys. The recent 'girls' games' movement addresses this exclusion of girls from electronic games and tries to find out how to (better) prepare girls for participation in the digital world. In this movement feminist activists ('who want to change the "gendering" of digital technology') and the game industry ('who want to create a girls' market for their games') have found each other. In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* Justine Cassell and Henri Jenkins have brought together views on this topic by media and technology scholars, educators, psychologists, developers of games, industry insiders and girl gamers.

In the first chapter the editors explain that most video games are violent and without any positive representation of women, which puts girls off. The core question in relation to computer games for girls seems to be whether to construct a type of games for girls only ('a rom of their own', as Cassell and Jenkins put it) or whether to encourage girls to beat the boys at their own games (making those games more attractive by introducing strong female characters is part of this strategy too). However, both strategies are problematic. The danger of girls taking over traditional male games is that their (invisible masculine) norm is not questioned. But by targeting the games on girls (more emphasis on



character development, communication, emotions and looks) there is a huge danger of strengthening stereotypical girlhood.

In their chapter, Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia Greenfield relate the success of *Barbie Fashion Designer* to Yasmin Kafai's research (also in the volume) on gender differences in video-game designs by girls and boys. The reasons for the success of the game are not just that it is Barbie-related. It is also successful because it has everything girls seem to like and nothing they dislike. A few examples show that this game is highly feminine indeed: *Barbie Fashion Designer* has no violence, even though it allows for action (the girls have to design on the computer, print and make Barbie clothes); it has no good versus evil fight, which is what boys apparently like; it allows for cooperation instead of competition and it is related to real-life situations rather than to a fantasy setting of an imaginary city or a deserted island that is again more related to the world of boys. Nevertheless, the authors feel that giving girls their own game, however stereotypical, provides them with a useful familiarity with digital technology at an early age. Similar points are made by Brenda Laurel (Purple Moon), Nancie Martin (Mattel) and Heather Kelley (Girl Games) in the interview sections of the book.

Theresa Duncan and Marsha Kinder, who, contrary to the game developers mentioned above, do not work in a commercial environment, try to develop games that can satisfy and develop alternative tastes and more critical sensitivities. Duncan's games (*Chop Suey*, *Smarty Pants*) feature curious and somewhat anarchistic girls, whereas Kinder's game *Runaways* (about teenage runaways) asks players to import their own picture and specify among other things their biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race. Asking for such specific information invites players to think about the differences between these aspects of identity. Justine Cassell explores the possibilities for truly interactive games, in which children (both girls and boys) tell their own stories. Her digital projects are sympathetic, self-knowledge and self-expression their main feminist (as she calls it) goals. The difference from a traditional diary remains a little unclear, however.

In a highly inspiring article Henri Jenkins explores the similarities and differences between 19th-century boy culture (boys leaving the house and the garden, exploring their surroundings, building tree houses, dams and secret cabins, far from the eye of their mothers) and contemporary computer games (that allow for the exploration of different spaces in the same way, albeit under the parental eye). He then compares this to the more girlish spaces of the magical garden and the microworld of the town, that he encounters in the games of Brenda Laurel and Teresa Duncan. Although here again we find warnings about stereotyping, his historical reconstruction is full of insight and stimulating to read.

282 The last words come from Game Grrlz, gamers who comment on the



girls game movement on the internet. They rage against girlie Barbie (no Barbie-ambiguity here), against sexist creation Lara Croft with her big boobs, and end by suggesting that maybe Lara is not so much developed for the boys as because of what the industry thinks boys want. Whatever the case, we have to conclude that, in spite of all the digital promises of flexibility and plasticity, questions of stereotyping, and the importance of providing material for 'boys' and for 'girls' in the marketplace keep on popping up like an unexpected 'hotspot' in the world of computer games and in this book. Jenkins and Cassell do not offer clear-cut solutions, other than expressing the need for games that are more gender 'neutral' and for more variety, so that both girls and boys have something to choose from. When it comes to representations of gender, apparently the best we are able to get are still the ambiguities of 'Barbie culture'.

Patricia Pisters
University of Amsterdam

Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. ISBN 0-8122-1673-3. £18.95.

Whether to slay the Prince of Darkness or meet up with their pals for sodas at the shopping mall was a predicament never confronted by Jonathan Harker and Dr van Helsing. However, while Bram Stoker's heroes did not have to wrestle with such a testing dilemma, it is the kind of quandary faced regularly by the lead character in the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Since its launch in 1997 the Warner Brothers series has won over an international legion of devotees, fans eagerly following the exploits of teenage heroine Buffy Summers. Part high-school cheerleader and part occult demon-stalker, Buffy is a cross between Gidget and Peter Cushing. Feisty, resourceful and a master of the martial arts, Buffy is one of the latest additions to the ranks of a growing army of 'tough girls' who have become a staple feature of contemporary popular texts. Characters like Ripley (from the *Aliens* film series), Dana Scully (from television's *The X-Files*) and Xena, the warrior princess, seem to herald the rise of a new brand of powerful and challenging femininity in the American popular media. It is these representations of bold and resilient women that Sherrie Inness explores in her volume *Tough Girls*.

Inness elaborates an ambivalent response to the rise of the 'tough girl'. Charting three decades of representations of women in comics, books, film and television series, Inness identifies a trend towards stronger, more active and intrepid female protagonists. Attributes once coded as exclusively 'masculine' have, she argues, become increasingly identifiable



in female characters – a shift which has worked to question and undermine traditional gender stereotypes, as well as highlighting a new variety in the social roles and cultural identities available to women. For Inness, however, the ‘tough girl’ is an image shot-through with paradoxes and contradictions. Traits of power and autonomy are, she contends, consistently ‘limited, confined, reduced and regulated’ as either the femininity, sexuality or maternity of a ‘tough woman’ is emphasized (p. 178). Inness acknowledges that the containment of ‘visions of female power and independence’ is never comprehensive and absolute, yet she maintains that textual strategies of regulation and incorporation invariably work to perpetuate gender inequalities and often ‘bind women more tightly to traditional feminine roles’ (p. 5).

An accessible and engaging writing style, combined with a range of excellent illustrations, distinguishes *Tough Girls* as a lively and entertaining study of the construction of gender within the contemporary popular media. Moreover, as Inness herself points out, while the figure of the ‘tough guy’ has long been established as an important subject of academic scrutiny, the ‘action-girl’ is only recently being afforded scholarly attention in her own right. In these terms, *Tough Girls* represents an important contribution to a field of enquiry which promises to become a growing area of media analysis.

The strength of *Tough Girls* lies in the breadth of its remit – Inness’s analysis encompassing a wide range of films, television shows, novels, comics, magazines and advertisements. Thus Inness discusses representations of ‘tough girls’ in popular action-adventure programmes such as *The Bionic Woman* and *The X-Files*, as well as those appearing in less mainstream texts – for example, the comic-book heroine Martha Washington and the science-fiction fantasies of author Nicola Griffith. Many of the observations Inness offers, moreover, are perceptive. Her examination of *Tank Girl*, for example, explores the character’s transposition from her origins in the jungle of the comic-book underground to the glitzy world of Hollywood – Inness suggesting that this journey ‘embodies the battle between femininity and toughness that engages many tough girls’ (p. 136). Her fervent account of *Xena: Warrior Princess* is also intriguing. For Inness, this statuesque hell-cat’s penchant for self-reflexivity not only cunningly subverts conventional conceptions of heroism, but also undermines the familiar conventions of television action and adventure series.

Inness’s most adept observations draw attention to the generic and cross-generic codes that operate across the spectrum of popular media. Her regard to wider issues of media production, circulation and consumption, however, is rather less rigorous. Especially disappointing is her scant attention to the relationship between her textual examples and their broader historical, social and cultural contexts of production. It is



significant landmarks in the 'tough girl' canon. For example, seminal 'tough girl' TV shows such as *Honey West* (the 1960s trail-blazer for the many 'action girls' of the 1970s) and the *Girl from U.N.C.L.E* get barely a mention. There might also have been room for some elements of comparison between the fiery resilience of the 'tough girls' and other representations of independent femininities that exist beyond the immediate parameters of the 'action' genre – for instance, those generated in such texts as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–7) or *Dr Quinn: Medicine Woman* (1993–present). Neither Mary Tyler Moore nor the redoubtable Dr Quinn could, by any stretch of the imagination, be thought of as 'tough girls'. Nevertheless, though such characters may not measure up to Inness's yard-stick of 'toughness', Bonnie J. Dow (1996) convincingly argues that they paved the way for further representations of strong and independent feminine identities. *Tough Girls* also overlooks several other important popular constructions of femininity. One of the most glaring absences must be the omission of any reference to the multifaceted, and sometimes 'tough' femininities conjured with by Madonna during the 1980s – an area that surely could have been explored productively in relation to the discussion that Inness elaborates regarding the relation between femininity and masquerade.

Comprehensive accounts of the rise of the 'tough girl' in the realm of popular fiction inevitably demand attention to the economic, institutional and technological conditions of her production. In relation to these considerations, Inness advances a largely impressionistic case in which she enjoins us to remember that television shows are mainly produced and scripted by men. Here, her somewhat flimsy analysis ignores evidence suggesting that shifts in genres are not the simple outcome of a patriarchal conspiracy but are, at least partly, the consequence of transformations in the political economy of the media. In the 1970s, for example, ABC's bid for network supremacy in the USA, together with the established popularity of the 'action' genre among younger audiences, were the key motivations behind the development of *Charlie's Angels*. On top of this, however, the programme-makers also had to consider the interests of advertisers and their demand for representations of femininity that were congruent with their commercial imperatives. The impact of commercial and business dynamics on the development of texts such as *Charlie's Angels* or *The X-Files* are, therefore, too important to be ignored.

Tough Girls undoubtedly boasts flashes of originality and insight – though is ultimately let down by an analytical framework lacking in sophistication. Time and again Inness refers to the quality of 'toughness' and its role in contemporary cultural life, but when it comes to defining the precise meanings and connotations that distinguish this trait she is evasive. In her chapter 'What Does it Mean to be Tough?' Inness struggles to come to grips with her terminology. 'Toughness', she



cogently observes, does not simply denote physical attributes such as muscles and brawn, but more specifically relates to the performance of an empowered masculine identity. Beyond this, however, we are left relatively unenlightened as to the particular qualities and behaviours that mark out the 'tough' persona. Part of the problem lies in the lack of historical specificity to Inness's frame of reference. 'Toughness', we are told (rather glibly) is 'primarily an attribute of men' – a quality intrinsic to the construction of masculine roles and identities across the history of American popular culture, from Popeye to Marlon Brando and Chuck Norris (p. 15). What this approach lacks, however, is any recognition of the historical dynamism and heterogeneity of social constructions of gender in general and masculinity in particular. As work by figures such as Peter Stearns (1990), E. Anthony Rotundo (1993) and Michael Kimmel (1997) all testify, concepts of masculinity are not fixed and immutable but have changed and developed across time. At any one moment, meanwhile, there will exist a plurality of different and competing masculine identities. In these terms, while Inness might be justified in classing both Ernest Hemingway and Jean-Claude Van Damme as 'tough guys', she fails to recognize the way they elaborate sharply divergent constructions of 'tough' masculinity. Like the 'tough girl', the 'tough guy' is not a static cultural icon, but has undergone significant development and transformation between different temporal and cultural contexts. Inness's cavalier attention to issues of cultural relativity and historical context, therefore, marks out her approach as somewhat simplistic.

Despite its flaws, *Tough Girls* remains a thought-provoking and sometimes perceptive study. It is, moreover, sure to encourage others to reconsider and re-evaluate cultural texts all too easily dismissed as shallow and without consequence. If Buffy Summers flicked through the pages of *Tough Girls*, however, she might be aggrieved to find that she does not warrant any mention. This being the case, we would not want to be in Sherrie Inness's shoes.

References

- Dow, B. (1996) *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kimmel, M. (1997) *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press.
- Rotundo, E. Anthony (1993) *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Industrial Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books.
- Stearns, P. (1990) *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*, 2nd edn. New York: Holmes & Meier.