

CORE CULTURAL ICONS

BARBIE CULTURE

Mary F. Rogers

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 1999

Reprinted 1999

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash – I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 5887 8

ISBN 0 7619 5888 6 (pbk)

Library of Congress catalog record available

Typeset by Mayhew Typesetting, Rhayader, Powys
Printed in Great Britain

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Core Cultural Icons

SERIES EDITOR: George Ritzer, Professor of Sociology, University of Maryland – College Park

Core Cultural Icons aims to combine theoretical and practical analysis. The series, edited by the author of *The McDonaldization of Society*, George Ritzer, focuses on key icons in contemporary consumer culture and analyzes them using the latest cultural theories. In this way, the series seeks to further our understanding of contemporary culture and to make theoretical issues more accessible to students who complain that theory is often too forbidding or daunting. Core Cultural Icons offers a route map for understanding contemporary culture and the leading cultural theories of today.

for
Don Eisman

PREFACE

To all the people who participated in this research I owe an enormous debt. Without their stories and insights this study would have lacked life and vibrancy. While most of these research participants must remain unnamed as part of the agreement I made with them, the help of a few individuals need not remain anonymous, let alone confidential. Among them are Rae-Ellen Koenig and Jane Koenig of The Doll Express, Inc. in Stevens, Pennsylvania. Both agreed to share their experiences with me under busy circumstances when they were tired and ready for a long day to end. Similarly helpful was one of the co-owners of Diamonds and Dolls.

I thank Phillip Lott for sending me many clippings about Barbie. I am also indebted to Shawn Lang for downloading material about Barbie from the Internet. Similarly, I thank Christy Stillman for getting seven Barbie collectors online to participate in this research by sharing some of their experiences. I also thank Ira Cohen for his steadfast friendship and collegiality. His is always a receptive ear as well as a critical, insightful one. Then, too, I thank Gloria Mattingly for reading several chapters at a crucial juncture in this work. Her feedback not only encouraged me but also helped me clarify my thinking on several key matters. Christy Garrett steadily helped me in similar ways, even when her schedule barely allowed her to keep pace with her own projects and commitments. Her unflagging generosity, support, and intellectual

companionship helped keep me going. I also appreciate the contributions of John Rogers, who took notes when I was nearly overwhelmed by the wealth of material on Barbie. John and I also had several conversations where his own thoughts pried open my consciousness in crucial ways. Above all, the pleasure of his company as my own energies were running low made all the difference in the world.

I dedicate this book to Don Eisman whose contributions to this research are considerable, though mostly invisible. His technical assistance and witticisms were crucial from beginning to end, as were his patience, his skills at keeping a household running on an even keel, and his steadfastness in making a home with a prodigal researcher.

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INTRODUCTION

Before launching this project, I shared the prospect with a close friend and colleague. Like me, he teaches sociology and is an *aficionado* of social reality. Imagine my dismay when he urged me *not* to do the book. His concerns, which were multiple and not unreasonable, revolved around the dismal prospect of yet another work on popular culture that says little about anything else. I took seriously his strong reservations. Indeed, they have guided this effort more than he (or I) will probably ever know.

The more I pondered my friend's misgivings, the more I saw the value of looking in depth at Barbie or any other cultural icon. At its best such an endeavor shows that a single artifact can shed brilliant light on that dense tangle of ideas, values, and norms called a *culture*. Thus, I set out to convince my friend that Barbie has a great deal to show us about who we are, who we want to be, and who we fear we might be or might become. Here "we" is ambiguous and ambitious. It refers to everyone affected, consciously or not, by Barbie's presence in the marketplace, at home and at school, in the childcare center, and elsewhere; it refers to all of us who have opinions about, memories of, or experiences with Barbie; it refers to children, parents, consumers, collectors, grandparents, childcare workers, teachers, and unexpected others (as we will see). "We" thus embraces all of us who find Barbie cool, fun, silly, beautiful, disgusting, trashy, or glamorous. This "we" is big enough to

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include diverse subcultures as well as contemporary Western culture at large.

On the pages that follow, we will look closely at this heterogeneous, encompassing "we." In particular, we will hear the voices of students, colleagues, friends, family members, and others who accepted my invitation to share their thoughts on Barbie. (For a description of these participants in the research, see the Appendix.) On the pages that follow, we will also explore Barbie's diverse and contradictory meanings. Like every cultural icon, she cannot be reduced to a small set of meanings. Her nature as an icon is to brim with multiple meanings capable of attracting multiple types of individuals.

My effort begins with a swift survey of what "icon" means in people's actual lives. Above all, an icon provides a point of recognition widely shared with other members of one's society. It means, in effect, never having to say "Who's Barbie?" or "I never heard of her." Icons provide common ground. They let people experience commonality amidst diversity, shared interests amidst conflicting ones, participation in the same broad culture amidst many subcultures. In secular societies like those of North America, New Zealand, Australia, and Western Europe cultural icons like Barbie fill in the holes once stuffed with religious symbols like the crucifix or statues of saints. It comes as little surprise, then, to learn that an Islamically correct Barbie is marketed in Iran. Nor did shock waves ripple across American society when in 1981 William J. Janklow, then governor of South Dakota, defended the Nativity scene in his state's capitol with the observation that "the Nativity scene is part of the American scene. To some people it's like Barbie dolls."

In some people's minds and in some theoretical models cultural icons like Barbie represent the lowest common denominators of mass culture. By now, though, researchers have documented the rich, multifaceted character of cultural icons. No icon represents only one dimension or axis of a culture. Instead, icons become such because of their versatility, thick folds of meaning, adaptability to diverse individuals' needs or interests, ultimate ambiguity, and open-ended nature.

In a sense, then, a cultural icon is paradoxical. At one and the same time it evokes commonality and difference. It offers a shared point of reference for society's members while adapting itself to the cultural differences built up among them.

Cultural icons include flesh-and-blood people such as Madonna, Eva Peron, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and Michael Jackson. More often than not, though, they are inanimate artifacts such as a country's flag, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, or London's Tower Bridge. Often such artifacts are fictive or fantastic objects. A *fictive icon* contributes to a culture by letting members act *as if* something is real or true even while they "know" it is not. Like Barbie, Aunt Jemima and Scarlett O'Hara are fictive icons that let people imaginatively explore race, sexuality, and femininity. Often such icons evoke no *conscious* thoughts along those lines even while evoking racism and misogyny among some people and outrage and protest among other people.

A *fantastic icon* contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable. Such an icon invites fantasy by taking the as-if or the fictive toward its outer limit. Barbie is such an icon, as are Superman and *Playboy* centerfolds. Fantastic icons are capable of releasing people's imaginations from the constraints of their culture's definitions and requirements. Advertisements for Barbie dolls allude to their fantastic character. Appearing over and over again in those ads are "dream," "enchantment," "fairy tale," "magic," "romance," and "nostalgia" as well as "fantasy." Fantastic icons like Barbie can burst cognitive and emotional limits on consciousness, but whether they actually work this way in any instance depends on individuals' motives and interests. To a substantial degree, then, icons are what people make of them in the thickets of their own circumstances.

Barbie thus takes iconic shape in people's experiences with her. This piece of molded plastic represents many statuses in society – female, young adult, and white person, for starters. What she represents also derives from what her plastic persona leaves out. Barbie has no husband, daughter or son; she has no boss, no teachers, no minister or rabbi or priest, no neighbors.

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Her world revolves around herself and her friends, including her boyfriend Ken. Barbie may thus represent the rugged individualist in a feminine mold. She may represent the alienated daughter, the ultimate narcissist, the penultimate monad (or isolated ego). For most people, though, Barbie is first and foremostly feminine. We begin in Chapter 1, then, with an exploration of her distinctive femininity.

In the meantime let me share some facts about this particular cultural icon and my experiences getting acquainted with her. The pronoun ending the preceding sentence points to the powerful character of inanimate icons. They take on a life of their own so that it becomes difficult to refer to them with neuter pronouns reserved in English for mere objects. The Statue of Liberty becomes *Lady* Liberty, just as Barbie becomes “she” instead of “it.” What animates icons are the experiences, memories, and fantasies of large numbers of individuals. Yet those individuals make meanings in nonrandom fashion. Mattel, Inc. helps to shape the meanings Barbie has, for instance, just as social studies teachers help to shape the meanings the Statue of Liberty has among children. Mattel is an enterprise I tackle later. For now, let me bow both to its power and the force of people’s experiences by emphasizing that throughout these pages Barbie will be “she” rather than “it.” That usage attests to her iconic status, yet it is only the tip of this glittering iconic iceberg.

I thought I knew what a cultural icon was until I started immersing myself in Barbie’s world. Little did I know! Not many months ago, I thought “Barbie doll” meant one thing – one inanimate doll-thing dressed in some fashionable outfit or other from a huge wardrobe. I knew not about Hispanic Barbies or Norwegian Barbies; about Astronaut Barbies and Army Barbies; about Bob Mackie Barbies and Coca Cola Barbies; about limited-edition Barbies sold exclusively at Target, Osco, FAO Schwarz, J.C. Penney, Sears, Service Merchandise, Toys ‘R Us, Wal-Mart, or Bloomingdale’s; about porcelain Barbies or vintage Barbies. I had never heard of Barbie talk, Barbie rooms, the Barbie community, Barbie art, Barbie cakes, Barbie dioramas, or even *Barbie Bazaar*, the monthly magazine for

Barbie collectors that has over 20,000 subscribers in twenty-five countries. I had no idea that Barbie is marketed in 140 countries and that licensing agreements link her with brand names like Kool-Aid, Kraft, Little Debbie, Russell Stover, and Pepsi as well as Coca Cola. Those same agreements link Barbie to food-and-entertainment sites such as Chuck E. Cheese's, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Disney World. I had no idea that Barbie herself has become what Mattel President and CEO Jill Barad calls a "global power brand." Nor, closer to home, did I have any notion that one could inspect at least seven different Barbie watches at Service Merchandise by asking to see its Barbie Nostalgic Watch Collection or that in 1976 Barbie had been included in the US Bicentennial time capsule. I had no idea, then, that Barbie shows up just about everywhere, even on Ivy League campuses like Cornell. Cornell Cinema titled one of its Fall 1996 film series "Barbies, Binges, Bodies and Beauty." The series began with Tula Asselani's *I, Doll: The Unauthorized Biography of America's 11.5" Sweetheart*, featuring Barbie and Ken among many others.

All those years, I was also in the dark about the national Barbie doll collectors' meeting held each year, about the wax-museum Barbie in the Musée Grévin in Paris and the Barbie on display at Monaco's national museum, about the Barbie dolls gracing the cover of *The Smithsonian* a few years back. I had no idea that well-known Barbie doll collectors range from Roseanne to Princess Caroline of Monaco, daughter of the American film star Grace Kelly. I would have been stunned to know that Barbie club members in Australia number at least 250 individuals and that at least a quarter of a million people worldwide collect this fashion doll. A full-page ad for a doll lovers' cruise to Alaska would have struck me as incredible. To be sure, I was vaguely aware that virtually every American woman knows who "Barbie" is and that Barbie often evokes negative reactions as a symbol of women's sexual and aesthetic objectification. Back then, though, I would have laughed uncontrollably had anyone told me my mother would ever send me a Barbie birthday card, compliments of Hallmark. A gala Barbie, her hands filled with pink balloons, appears on the

front of the card "For a Sweet Daughter." Inside in pink script is the message

Because you are so precious
With your sweet and charming way,
Barbie has this wish for you –
Have a very special day!
HAPPY BIRTHDAY

What my mother did was what my friend Lola also did, again with Hallmark's help. The message inside this second card told me that I am "just like Barbie" – "You don't look a day older, but your value has soared." Indeed! Until recently, I would never have believed that Bob Mackie's "Empress Bride" had gone for \$1,000 at an auction near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Had I not attended that auction in April 1997, I might still be incredulous.

Now I am starting to know more concretely what "cultural icon" means. It means a great deal more than widespread recognition. It means identification of one sort or another as fans, collectors, designers, or consumers; it means keen interest or sometimes dedication, even obsession and addiction; it means small social worlds building up around the icon; it means a hobby, pastime, or avocation; it often means hard choices, monetary expenditures, travel, new skills, and fresh knowledge. A cultural icon means, then, that a piece of culture – a cultural object that exemplifies some set of values, beliefs, and norms in a society – gets a strong grip on a sizable part of the population. In North American and other cultures, for instance, Barbie attracts many young girls and growing numbers of Barbie doll collectors; she also attracts those who "love" fashion in affordable, accessible forms and those attuned to glamour and romantic fantasy. A cultural icon gets enmeshed in people's everyday lives and social relations; it can even claim center stage in the extreme as some fans become fanatics and some enthusiasts become addicts. To say the least, an icon is no mere idea in people's lives. For countless people, it is an *experienced* presence, a *memorable* something

or someone threading together parts of one's past while offering glimpses into one's future.

People like me are hard pressed, then, to pursue cultural analysis and critique of a given icon while also paying our respects to people's experiences with that icon. Early on, I knew that I could not steer smoothly between the rock of cultural criticism and the hard place of people's lived experiences. On the pages ahead you will thus find homage and critique interwoven – homage to people's resourcefulness, skills, knowledge, common sense, and hard-won pleasures; critique of exploitation, commodification and consumerism, homophobia, and ageism. Above all, you will find various social and cultural data dissected for the purpose of illuminating the diverse purposes, meanings, and uses this particular cultural icon encompasses. To illustrate that range, let me introduce you to Margie (a pseudonym, as is the case with all the research participants identified here).

Margie, the first Barbie doll collector I interviewed, is a white woman in her thirties who lives in a Philadelphia suburb. She first caught my eye at the auction near Lancaster. Margie was the only person there attired in Barbie clothing – a black denim jacket emblazoned with Mattel's Barbie signature. On its lapel Margie sported several Barbie buttons, including one shaped like an old 78 rpm record that read "Barbie and American Bandstand." That button was a matter of great pride to Margie, since it had been designed for the 1996 annual Barbie doll collectors' convention which her collectors' club had sponsored that year in Philadelphia. Like virtually every other woman at the auction, Margie was wearing slacks. She wore no visible makeup, and her dark hair held a few hints of silver and gray.

When I introduced myself to her outside the auction hall where people gathered to smoke cigarettes, Margie immediately agreed to a taped interview. She was extremely responsive. Margie reminded me of the working- and lower-middle-class girls I had hung out with from elementary school through high school. She was unpretentious and down to earth as well as friendly. What she told me infused me with energy and ideas as well as no small amount of awe.

Margie started collecting nearly ten years ago when her daughter Kimberly was about two years old. Margie dragged out her childhood Barbies for Kimberly but then decided they were too beautiful for a small child's play. Those seven dolls became the first in Margie's current collection of about 600 Barbie dolls, which she stores and displays in every room of her home except the bathroom. That's where her husband Rob draws a gentle but firm line. Yet Rob is Margie's helpmate when it comes to enlarging her collection. On weekends they take Kimberly and head for flea markets, garage sales, auctions, and other sites where they might find good Barbie buys. If they go to a large site such as a flea market with many stalls, Rob goes one way while Margie and Kimberly head the other way. Later they meet up with one another to compare notes or even do an occasional show-and-tell when one of them has come across a rare find. Sometimes, Margie admits, Rob has to come and find her because she is busy "gabbing and socializing" with interesting people she has met.

Margie concedes that her collection takes a lot of work. Although finding its members seems to be a pleasurable pastime, keeping them "dusted and all" can be tedious and time-consuming. Margie also has to study various price guides and other printed resources for Barbie collectors so that she knows a good deal when she sees one. At the auction Margie found none and thus went away empty handed after spending five hours watching more than 400 lots of Barbie dolls and accessories cross the auction block. Margie is a disciplined collector, to say the least. Perhaps her discipline derives in large measure from the serious purpose her collection serves. "These dolls are going to put my girl through college," she told me. "I've about got the first two years paid for already."

I had been awestruck when Margie told me what her collection meant to her. Never had I considered the possibility that Mattel's best-selling fashion doll might be the means whereby a young woman would have her college education financed by a mother who had no job outside the home. Margie's resourcefulness and determination – indeed, the realistic character of her plan to pay for Kimberly's college