

Below text from email sent to CFR at work on Thu 8/17/2023. The Executive Director is [Michelle Ciulla Lipkin](#), of the [National Association for Media Literacy Education \(NAMLE\)](#). A very fine organization. I would have linked to this on the Web but alas I couldn't find it. - CFR

August 2023

"I would never wear heels if my feet were shaped like this."
—Barbie

A Letter from the Executive Director

Dear (subscriber),

You may have noticed there's a **Barbie** movie out. Hard to miss, right? It's like the color pink vomited all over the world. (It even found its way into my newsletter!) I recently traveled with a small pink suitcase and felt the need to tell several strangers I had it before the **Barbie** movie was out.

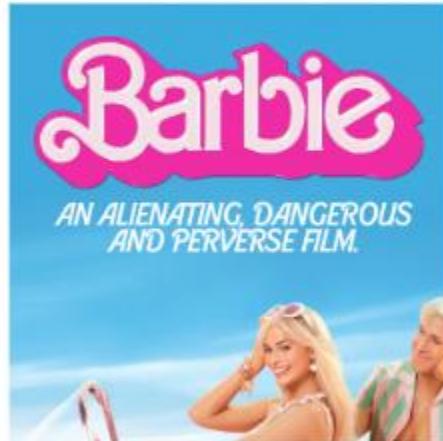
I can't speak for all women out there, but I can say with almost certainty that the great majority of us have had a relationship with **Barbie**. It's kind of unavoidable despite the fact that parents usually dread the moment their child asks for one. [This commentary](#) from The New Yorker entitled "Why Barbie Should Be Punished" by Leslie Jamison about the film, and **Barbie** in general, really stuck with me. Here's an excerpt:

*For more than sixty years, in fact, daughters have wanted **Barbies** that their mothers did not want them to have. This, too, was part of Mattel's vision for the doll, and part of the reason it was the first toy company to market directly to children, via television, rather than parents. There's nothing a girl wants more, perhaps, than a toy it seems like her mother does not want her to have.*

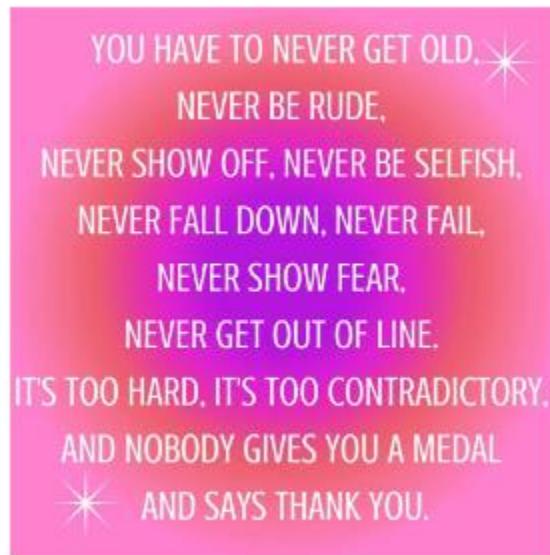
As the character Sasha says so poignantly in the film, **Barbie** has been making women feel bad about themselves since she was invented. Me included. Yet, the **Barbie** movie is on track to be the highest-grossing film of the year domestically. I've seen it twice. Once with my daughter who made me and my husband go, forewarning me that I would love it and that I would laugh and cry. (*Who would cry at a **Barbie** movie?* I asked myself. Well, I did. But we will get to that later.) The second time I went by myself with a notebook and a pen and sat furiously taking notes as I watched a movie about the doll who warped my body image from an early age inspire me to think deeply about what it means to be a woman today. This is an impressive rebrand, Mattel. I didn't see it coming.



There are a lot of ways we in the media literacy community could analyze and evaluate this film. We could look at the attempt at rebranding **Barbie** as a “feminist icon.” (Check out [this episode](#) of The Daily that looks at this idea.) We could explore the pervasive, overbearing, and incredibly successful marketing campaign for the film. (It’s not your sunglasses. The world really did turn pink this summer.) From [Burger King](#) to the [ACLU](#), everyone was getting into the **Barbie** game. (Check out some of the “best” **Barbie** brand collaborations [here](#) and [here](#).) We could take some time to analyze how the **Barbie** movie saved Hollywood this summer amidst strikes by actors and writers. Or we could take a look at the cultural criticism of **Barbie**. (This viral tweet with movie posters from one-star reviews is worth [its own discussion](#).)



What I really want to talk about is the monologue that made me cry. If you saw the movie, you know. If you haven't, [here it is](#). When America Ferrara's character, Gloria, started talking about how hard it is to be a woman, how utterly contradictory it is, I could feel my energy change. Somewhere between *you have to be thin, but not too thin and always stand out and always be grateful*, the tears started. By the time it ended, I was full-out sobbing. I turned to my daughter, and she smiled, knowingly. "That's what it's like," I said to my husband afterwards. "That's exactly what it's like." And it's in the *Barbie* movie. Talk about a contradictory experience.



The monologue lingered with me, and I found myself down a rabbit hole of *Barbie* movie promotional content. (If you were wondering, there's plenty of that to be found:) I got stuck on a moment [in this clip](#) where some of the cast members are talking about Gloria's monologue, and co-star Ryan Gosling references America Ferrara's [Ted Talk](#) about identity. The way America is completely stunned by the fact that he had watched the Ted Talk says so much. About her. About him. About the way our messages travel unbeknownst to us.

Of course, I watched [her Ted Talk](#). And, darn it, she made me cry again. It's a truly stunning 13 minutes about her path in the entertainment industry as a Latina woman. It is a poignant and honest talk about how she tried to fit in without trying to change things. She shares:

I was never actually asking the system to change. I was asking it to let me in, and those aren't the same thing. It is possible to be the person who genuinely wants to see change while also the person whose actions keep things the way they are.

She talks about the message she'd like to share with her younger self.

My identity is not my obstacle. My identity is my superpower. Because the truth is, I am what the world looks like. You are what the world looks like. Collectively, we are what the world actually looks like. And in order for our systems to reflect that, they don't have to create a new reality. They just have to stop resisting the one we already live in.

I didn't know what path the **Barbie** movie would take me on, but it led me somewhere profound. Who knew a movie about a doll could make me think so much? I think Mattel was probably betting on it.



Be well,

Michelle Ciulla Lipkin

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