

Casting off the hyperbole of disabling society: Barbie as a political icon

By Katie Ellis

Posted Thursday, 21 January 2010

Celebrating her 51st birthday in 2010, no other doll has influenced popular culture as widely and enduringly as Barbie. Boasting a cult following of adults and children alike, she has become a brand name spawning a range of merchandise including magazines, stationary and clothing.

Barbie's reach into popular culture extends across and beyond television, the internet, cinema, music and art. From the explicitly titled *Barbie Girl* by Aqua to the less obvious but nevertheless clear references in *Polyester Girl* by Regurgitator and Pink's *Stupid Girls*; from internet sites about the doll to sites about actual women engaging plastic surgery to look more like the doll (see www.cindyjackson.com); from Andy Warhol's 1985 painting of Barbie to the 1974 decision to rename part of Times Square Barbie Boulevard for a week; from Lisa Simpson's Malibu Stacy dolls to the 1997 Nissan television commercial featuring Barbie ditching Ken for GI Joe driving a Nissan; from the real life Paris Hilton to the "Barbie is a Slut" T-shirt I bought also in 1997 - the trace of Barbie is everywhere.

During the 1980s my sisters and I owned and played with a large number of Barbies (we counted once - 60), including accessories such as a Corvette, Ferrari, Jeep and Campervan. Far from instilling a warped body image in us Barbie allowed us empowerment and escape from the Protestant social environment that was our reality. We dressed Barbie in clothes we'd never be allowed out of the house in and bossed Ken around - Barbie (or us, through her figure) was in charge. Although we did marry Barbie off to our Michael Jackson doll she rode down the aisle in a red Ferrari rather than be "given away".

Barbie is a fashion icon and her image and body shape and colour have changed in response to social and political changes. In 1971 her eyes were adjusted to look forwards rather than to the side, and while her waist was reduced during the 1980s it was again increased during the 1990s to a more "realistic" proportion to compensate for changes in fashion. Her teeth and smile have changed over the years and she has gained a belly button. There have also been a number of culturally diverse Barbie's varying in skin colour beginning with "Coloured Francie" in 1967, and peaking with Shani, Nasha and Nichelle in the early 1990s.

Then in 1997, eight months after I had turned 18, and three months after a massive stroke had left me in a wheelchair with paralysis down one side of my body and a shaved head from brain surgery, Barbie joined me on my journey to adult identity once again with her friend Share a Smile Becky. Of course I was too old to play with dolls but her very existence comforted and excited me, I remember the satisfaction I felt when news hit that Barbie's new friend used a wheelchair (like me). She sold out in two weeks.

With her purple wheelchair and pink leggings Becky epitomised 90s street fashion. Unlike Barbie's "unpractical clothes" Becky's comfortable clothes signal towards a feminist critique of Barbie as the fashion icon, while Becky casts off the hyperbole of feminine fashion with all its restrictions for clothes that allow movement and agency.

Yet Becky's wheelchair could not fit into a number of Barbie's accessories, including most notably the Barbie Dream House. While this inaccessibility was a disappointing oversight on Mattel's side it did highlight the issue of an accessible built environment for people with disability. Mattel was criticised in the media and forced to admit their error and pledge a commitment to accessibility.

Becky has also been criticised for perpetuating damaging stereotypes about people with disabilities. Her prefix "Share a Smile" suggests people with disability must be overly cheerful in order to be accepted by a disabling

society. This aspect of Becky individualises disability as an individual's problem where personal attitude is of most importance.

Becky carries a camera and is the school photographer, an aspect of her identity that suggests people with disability should be relegated to the sidelines, perpetually watching the able bodied live their lives. However, another reading invoking both feminism and queer theory places Becky in a more empowering position. As a photographer she can meet and control the gaze and by gazing on Barbie she challenges the heteronormative ideals Barbie is accused of enforcing.

Share a Smile Becky revolutionises the image of disability in popular culture as she challenges long held preconceptions regarding people with disabilities in medical, social pathology and business contexts.

Two incarnations of Becky have a job, first as school photographer and then as an elite paralympic athlete: therefore Becky is not aligning disability with illness, she doesn't need support and isn't a drain on resources. Further, by locating and marketing Becky alongside Barbie (white) and Christie (black), she represents disability in terms of cultural pluralism - as part of 1990s multiculturalism.

By being marketed to children with disability, Becky highlighted people with disability as a consumer group. The idea that people with disability are a consumer group with a disposable income marks a radical shift in thinking from the idea that people with disability are a social pathology and drain on resources.

Community outrage at the inaccessible Barbie Dream House highlights civil rights and legal activism and media coverage of such issues potentially has a flow on positive effect on the social position of people with disability who struggle with these issues daily.

Prior to the 1990s, children's toys that had or explored themes of disability were virtually nonexistent although disability has always been present in children's literature (see *Three Blind Mice*, *Snow White* and *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*). Following the increasing politicisation of disability in the early to mid 1990s toy brands such as Barbie and American Girls began acknowledging people with disability as a consumer group and built on the increasing visibility of disability in popular culture to produce and market disability somewhat in line (or at least friends) with the American Dream. The fact that accessibility issues arose in relation to accessories that excluded disability only serves to further empower disability and highlight the importance of a social model of disability in terms of forcing society to meet the needs of people with disability.

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