

The Impossibility of Being a Woman

Gendered Expectations and Rhetorical Appeals in *Barbie*

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Keywords

Film dialogue
Popular feminism
Barbie
Rhetoric
Telecinematic
discourse

Abstract

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* film (2023) has attracted much attention within and outside of academia, although research from a linguistic perspective has not to date been extensive. *Barbie* is a satirical, subversive comedy and key themes include patriarchy, feminism, gender roles, beauty standards, capitalism, existentialism, and unrealistic expectations placed on women. Towards the end of the film, the character Gloria, played by America Ferrera, gives an impassioned speech related to the paradoxes of gendered societal pressures to which women are often subjected, and this becomes a turning point for the narrative. The monologue is conceptualised here as a form of telecinematic discourse. The focus of this paper is predominantly on applying Aristotelian rhetorical strategies (especially appeals to *pathos* and *logos*) to the speech, considering how the linguistic techniques are intended to provoke an emotional response in the audience(s). The analysis is situated within relevant literature on constructions of both femininities and feminisms, especially the film's relationship to popular feminism and consumption.

1. Introduction and context

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*¹ (2023) is currently the highest-grossing Warner Bros. movie of all time (Fuster 2023). It shared a release date with the biopic *Oppenheimer* (charting the life of the physicist who played a pivotal role in the creation of the atomic bomb), which actually resulted in the promotion of both films benefiting one another. This incident of counterprogramming gave rise to the term "Barbenheimer" and to countless social media memes before the film's release, often drawing on existing cultural assumptions around masculinities and femininities as "much of the humour found in Barbenheimer memes plays with the notion that Barbie was for girls and Oppenheimer was for boys" (Faux 2024, 670). The *Barbie* movie follows Stereotypical Barbie (played by Margot Robbie) and Ken (played by Ryan Gosling) as they leave

¹ The *Barbie* film is credited as being based on Barbie (the doll and brand) by Mattel and written by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach.

their home of Barbie Land² and venture into the Real World, where they connect with mother Gloria (Stereotypical Barbie's 'owner') and her daughter Sasha, played by America Ferrera and Ariana Greenblatt respectively. There are three main 'worlds' in which the action takes place, each with particular gender(ed) norms: (1) Barbie Land, where explicit markers of misogyny and gender-based violence are absent; (2) The Real World, which broadly maps onto the actual real world in contemporary North American society and shows evidence of patriarchal norms and gendered expectations; and (3) Kendom, a result of the Ken dolls taking over Barbie Land and creating an exaggerated and satirised version of patriarchy (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 165-166³).

The movie touches upon a range of topical themes, including but not limited to gender ideology, such as patriarchy, feminism, gender roles and stereotypical femininities, and aesthetic norms, such as body image and unrealistic expectations on women. One particular aspect of the film attracting much critical discussion in popular culture and in the academic literature has been the broader question of how truly subversive a mainstream Hollywood film can (or should be expected to) be. Gerwig – who also holds the current title for the highest-grossing movie directed by a woman (Lang 2024) – has explained in interviews that she wanted the film to do many things: to critique problematic elements of the Barbie doll and wider gendered structures; to reflect on the transition from girlhood to adolescence; to entertain through its 'unhinged' quality; and to explore more about what it means to be human (Tong, Perkins Mastromarino and Hagan 2023; Moshakis 2023). Bramesco's (2023) review for *The Guardian*, to take just one such example, neatly sums this up in describing the film as "a project often conflicted about its opposing mandates as a critical work of art and a commercial good for sale." *Barbie* has given rise to a plethora of academic literature across wide-ranging disciplines (explored in more depth in Section 2).

Both within and outside of academic research, the speech delivered by Gloria towards the latter part of the film has garnered much attention and is a core moment in the film's narrative arc. As a monologue, the speech deviates from much of the other dialogue in the film. Before this point in the storyline, Barbie Land has become Kendom and the Barbies are feeling disillusioned and demoralised by the Kens' insufferable sexist behaviour and attitudes. The speech explores the struggles and pressures women face as a result of patriarchal systems, and is a catalyst for the Barbies and other characters to realise what the Kens have done and to work together to restore Barbie Land to its former glory, removing the last sexist vestiges of

² Sometimes rendered as 'Barbieland.' Barbie Land is the spelling used here but quotations that use Barbieland are replicated as in the original.

³ See also Adam and Ghintuială 2025 for a detailed exploration of worlds in *Barbie*, including the "slippage" between them and the world-building elements involved in their creation.

Kendom (Arguedas-Ramírez 2025, 137). Although there has been much commentary on the speech itself, including debates on whether it is a good example of feminist-consciousness raising or an overly simplistic representation of white feminism (or even both these things concurrently), it has not yet to the best of my knowledge been explored extensively through a linguistic lens. Overall, at present there is limited academic research on Gerwig's *Barbie* from a linguistic perspective, with one notable exception being Adam and Ghintuială (2025) who take a multimodal stylistic approach to *Barbie*'s ontological structure. The linguistic and rhetorical analysis of this speech helps to illuminate how its core feminist message and potentially empathetic responses are operationalised through language features.

The focus of this paper is on the rhetorical strategies of the speech as a piece of telecinematic discourse, considering how the linguistic techniques are intended to provoke impassioned emotional responses in the audience(s), and situating this analysis within relevant literature on constructions of both femininities and feminisms, especially the film's relationship to popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018). The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on Gerwig's *Barbie* and Section 3 presents the speech and introduces the framework for analysis. The analysis and discussion begin in Section 4, where the speech is explored as a piece of scripted film dialogue in relation to features identified by Bednarek (2018; 2010). Once the speech has been analysed on this broader level, Section 5 provides a more detailed rhetorical analysis, drawing on Browse's 2018 work on the application of Aristotelian rhetoric (Aristotle 1983). Section 5 considers in particular appeals to *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, and connects these to existing literature. Section 6 offers some concluding remarks on the speech and its wider themes.

2. Relevant literature on Gerwig's *Barbie*

Gerwig's *Barbie* has been the subject of several pieces of academic research across disciplines, including media studies, gender studies, sociology, and philosophy. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the popularity of the Barbie doll over time and across many cultural contexts – and her often-problematic relationship to beauty ideals, gendered expectations, and body image standards.⁴ This section does not provide exhaustive coverage of all *Barbie*-focused research, but rather draws out key themes, particularly in terms of the complex way that the film relates to constructions of femininities and feminisms.⁵ This review also provides context for the

⁴ See for example Webb, Ford and Padro (2023) on contemporary Barbie dolls and body image.

⁵ Feminism is often divided into different 'waves' that are often mapped onto different goals and time periods, although this mapping does not always accurately reflect the complicated and nuanced realities of feminisms (see Malinowska 2020 for a critical overview). For the purposes of this article, feminism(s) broadly refers to specific movements and belief systems that are underpinned by women's rights and/or advocacy for gender equality across many spheres.

linguistic analysis of Gloria's speech in Sections 4 and 5. Specific research commentary on Gloria's speech is considered in more detail as part of the analysis and discussion in Section 5.

Barbie Land, as noted previously, is marked by its lack of gender-based violence and patriarchal norms (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 165-166). By extension, misogyny and sexism in the real world are made explicit and critiqued (Burke 2024, 496). As the voiceover narration (by Helen Mirren) tells us: "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him." The film also satirises a 'girl power' version of feminism: everything within *Barbie* is both extremely pink with the stereotypical trappings of femininity⁶ (Gillis and Pellegrini 2024) and has the overwhelming message of 'women [Barbies] supporting women [Barbies].'

To consider the relationship between Gerwig's *Barbie* and feminism (especially contemporary forms), it is important to set the scene for the film in terms of popular feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018, 1) conceptualises popular feminism as (1) a feminism that occurs on prominent media (including social media) spaces; (2) a feminism that is liked or praised by individuals and groups; and (3) a feminism that currently has some power or currency at a cultural moment, but this power or currency is not guaranteed and can come up against other competing ideologies. Celebrity feminism and corporate feminism tend to be more media-friendly, visible, and easily branded. By contrast, other feminisms that focus on explicit critiques of patriarchy, racism and violence – and those that go beyond the experiences of white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual women – are backgrounded or obscured (Banet-Weiser 2018, 4; 12-13). Indeed, "the visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media and on bodies, is important, but it often stops here, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 4, original emphasis). Individual empowerment is often prioritised over collective liberation. As Banet-Weiser (2018, 17) puts it: "empowerment is the central logic; with little to no specification as to what we want to empower women to do." Elements of popular feminism have laid the foundations for a film like Gerwig's *Barbie* firstly to be produced and secondly to succeed within a mainstream media context, and some elements of popular feminist culture are "preemptively turned into satire" in the movie in order to critique them and to subvert possible criticism (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 161). Versions of feminism in the mainstream, however, also provoke counterreactions in the form of sexism and violence against women. Popular feminism, Banet-

⁶ One visible sign of Stereotypical Barbie's (the protagonist's) 'dysfunction' is cellulite, which provokes a horrified response from the other characters. Some other markers of beauty are more unique to Barbie, such as her feet becoming flat (a humorous commentary on Barbie constantly being on tiptoes to fit into her shoes). In terms of body size and shape, there are some Barbies who do not align with the typical 'thin ideal,' although these are not the main characters in the narrative.

Weiser (2018) argues, should therefore be viewed in relation to popular misogyny. Indeed, the mixed reception to the film – with some viewing it as anti-men (Wade 2024; Laws 2023; see also Saucier, et al. 2023) and several countries banning it⁷ – can be viewed through this lens. As Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir (2025, 159) suggest: “the film’s mixed reception is a good case in point for the corresponding anti-feminist backlash and the surge of misogyny happening in popular media following and in response to growing feminist visibility.”

A key strand of popular, visible feminism is its intrinsic connection with consumerism and consumption. Academic literature on *Barbie* has explored this relationship between feminism and commodification. This is not least because of the film’s marketing, product tie-ins and spin-off commercial ventures, and Mattel’s involvement in the film including the financial benefits they reaped from its success (e.g. Khader 2025; Gillis and Pellegrini 2024), although some scholars acknowledge the self-aware nature of this aspect (e.g. Burke 2024). Other research has proffered that the film focuses more on the individual rather than radical or systemic social change and in this way it epitomises popular feminism (e.g. Khader 2025; Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025; Gillis and Pellegrini 2024). In an emotionally-charged scene at the end of the movie, Stereotypical Barbie is encouraged by her creator to follow her own path, although Burke (2024, 496) argues that “this celebration of female creativity and agency triumphing over corporate greed is somewhat diluted by the success of *Barbie* prompting Mattel to promise 45 different adaptations of their properties including Polly Pocket, Hot Wheels, Rock’Em Sock’Em Robots, Uno, and Magic 8 Ball” (see also Arnold 2024).

Research across disciplines such as gender studies, political theory, philosophy, film studies, bioethics, and education has also explored the *Barbie* movie’s relationship to intersectionality. Much of this work has argued that, despite a diverse cast, the feminism in *Barbie* is not truly intersectional (e.g. Zentell, Matthews and Katz 2025; Khader 2025; Byrnes, Loreck and May 2024) but is rather a form of white feminism. As Khader (2024, 58) outlines: “a hallmark of the multifaceted phenomenon known as white feminism is seeing the world that treats gender as the only, or the most important, vector of social inequality shaping women’s lives.”⁸ Acknowledging and engaging with critiques of the film – especially those related to commercialism and commodification – other scholars have nonetheless argued for a more radical, subversive reading. To return to the lack of intersectionality, this can be viewed through a slightly different lens:

⁷ Often citing a portrayal of sexuality that does not align with their values; see for example Hassan 2023.

⁸ Kahder (2025, 54) also notes the lack of explicit commentary on Gloria’s “familiar role” in the movie, which is that of “a woman of color who provides emotional labour to white women.”

In keeping with the focus on empowerment and intersectionality in fourth-wave feminism, Robbie's character is one of a large collection of laudable Barbies including President Barbie, Physicist Barbie, and Dr Barbie who are played by a diverse cast drawn from popular film and TV (Issa Rae, Emma Mackey, and Hari Nef). This is in keeping with other films and TV shows Robbie has produced where there is a celebration of women working together. (Burke 2024, 495)

The feminism in *Barbie* is one that satirises and therefore challenges (biological) gender essentialism and trans-exclusionary definitions of what it means to be a woman, since, for example, the Barbies perform stereotypical gender roles yet they have no genitals⁹ (Burke and Kon-Yu 2025; Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025). The dolls on the margins of Barbie Land, such as Weird Barbie, Allan, and other discontinued Kens such as Sugar Daddy Ken and Earring Magic Ken can also be viewed as representations of queerness within this world (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 165). Alongside humans, some of these dolls on the margins work together despite their differences to overthrow Kendom, something Burke and Kon-Yu (2025) conceptualise as a form of coalition feminism. They argue that, as well as challenging gender-critical feminism, this coalition-building also critiques those feminisms that lack collectivism (e.g. choice feminism, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism¹⁰):

It is also important to note that the coalition that secured change was propelled forward by those on the margins – the Latina humans, Weird Barbie, Allan and others. Contrary to popular or lean-in feminist narratives, the titular Barbie was not the decisive force in the formation, planning and execution of the coalition. If anything, Barbie was positioned as marginal and her popular feminist protestations against Kenland were presented as self-indulgent in comparison to the decisive action taken by the coalition. Other Barbies and humans narrated the steps to change and were more active in producing the distractions that destroyed the rule of the Kens. (Burke and Kon-Yu 2025, 11)

Of course, the glossy, pink feminism the movie was advertised as may well have enabled its popularity and its success (Burke and Kon-Yu 2025, 12), even if Mattel executives have publicly stated that the movie is not a feminist one (Dockterman 2023).

Biano (2025) views the feminism in *Barbie* as aligning with Gerwig's vision for the movie and Gerwig's own brand of feminism, which she categorises as “a personal feminism rooted in storytelling and female bonding” (2025, 3). The *Barbie* movie, she argues, “invites reflection on the ways in which feminism, commodification, and cultural narratives intersect, rather than

⁹ Sex is also not explicitly addressed in *Barbie*. In one scene early in the film, Ken tells Barbie he might stay over at her Dream House because they are girlfriend and boyfriend. Barbie asks “to do what?,” to which Ken replies: “I’m actually not sure.”

¹⁰ Burke and Yon-Ke note: “There are, of course, differences between popular feminism, choice feminism and neoliberal feminism, but all three strands share a focus on individual struggles and have been noted for their elision of collectivism and their lack of focus on structural changes” (2025, 5).

offering a neat resolution to them” (2025, 6). Gloria’s speech in particular invites reflections on these narratives, and the following section provides more information on the speech and the analytical framework that is used in this paper.

3. Data and framework for analysis

As noted in the introduction, Gloria’s monologue becomes a turning point for the film’s narrative. It is a monologue, a discourse type not typically frequent in many mainstream films (with some exceptions often related to genre), not least because they take up a lot of screen time (Edwards 2023). The monologue is from the screenplay written by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach (Gerwig and Baumbach 2023) with some input from Ferrera herself (Aguilar 2024). Before the speech, the Kens have overtaken Barbie Land, Stereotypical Barbie is malfunctioning and she has travelled to the Real World to find out why, and the relationship between Gloria and her daughter Sasha has broken down. Edwards (2023) summarises the speech and its impact as follows:

Gloria’s monologue not only hits at the heart of what modern women experience in society today, but it also serves as a battle cry for Barbie [...] She feels doomed to live the life of an unhappy plastic toy forever and never know the beauty and mystery of the human world. But Gloria’s monologue may offer Barbie a light at the end of the tunnel.

A transcript of the speech is provided below with line numbers for ease of reference in the analysis. No paralinguistic features have been included here as the focus of the analysis is text-based, but it is worth noting that the visual language and Ferrera’s impassioned delivery add to the empathy-inducing potential of the speech.

1 It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it
2 kills me that you don’t think you’re good enough. Like, we have to always be
3 extraordinary, but somehow we’re always doing it wrong.
4 You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You
5 have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have
6 money, but you can’t ask for money because that’s crass. You have to be a boss, but
7 you can’t be mean. You have to lead, but you can’t squash other people’s ideas. You’re
8 supposed to love being a mother, but don’t talk about your kids all the damn time.
9 You have to be a career woman, but also always be looking out for other people. You
10 have to answer for men’s bad behaviour, which is insane, but if you point that out,
11 you’re accused of complaining. You’re supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so
12 pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because
13 you’re supposed to be a part of the sisterhood. But always stand out and always be
14 grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge
15 that but also always be grateful. You have to never get old, never be rude, never
16 show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out

17 of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says
18 thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but
19 also everything is your fault.
20 I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into
21 knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just
22 representing a woman, then I don't even know. (Gerwig 2023)

I argue that this speech should be seen as an example of fictional political discourse. Politics, and by extension political discourse, should not just be restricted to political professionals, especially as “whole myriads of complex networks of power, politics and policy affect the citizenry of anywhere” (Statham 2022, 139; see also Browse 2018, 2-7). Gloria's speech considers the overarching themes of gender ideology and aesthetic norms within patriarchal societies, and she draws on both her own experiences and those of many other women outside the *Barbie* cinematic universe. This encapsulates exactly the second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1969), as individual women's experiences reflect wider gendered, societal norms and expectations. Although the speech takes place in a fictional film that includes fantasy worlds, the content of Gloria's speech reflects real world issues, especially those faced by middle-class and above women in North America. The fictional and the non-fictional interact with each other, as on-screen narratives express not only characters' identities but also often negotiate dominant cultural ideologies (Bednarek 2010, 7-10; 184). In the case of Gloria's speech, we can consider how these relate to gender and identity.

The first part of the analysis (Section 4) applies Bednarek's (2018, 19-23; 2010, 64-68) list of prototypical features of television and film dialogue that differentiate it from naturally-occurring speech to Gloria's monologue. This is intended to give a sense of the speech in terms of genre and discourse features as a whole before moving on to specific details of the linguistic features. Definitions of 'genre' vary, especially across disciplines and is used here to refer to the “particular set of conventions, features and norms” that constitute a category or class (Neale 2001, 1 qtd in Bednarek 2010, 13). Bednarek's taxonomy is based on key features identified from a range of relevant research literature (Quaglio 2009; 2008; Bubel 2006; Sanger 2001; Kozloff 2000). Although the *Barbie* movie contains fictional characters and worlds, the dialogue for the most part follows generally expected norms of speech and conversation, in adherence with the “code of realism” on screen, referring to “the imitation of reality” achieved through all elements of the film text including “carefully crafted dialogue” (Bubel 2006, 43; see also Bednarek 2010, 21).

The second part of the analysis (Section 5) considers the rhetorical appeals of the speech, with a focus on *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (particularly the latter two). These three categories refer to arguments based on (respectively) the speaker's character, reason, and emotions. The

framework is based on Browse's (2018) work¹¹ which applies Aristotelian rhetoric (Aristotle 1983) to contemporary political discourse. The rhetorical appeals of the speech are discussed with reference to academic literature on femininities and feminisms in *Barbie*. Political discourse analysis often combines traditional approaches such as classical rhetoric with more recent critical approaches to discourse analysis in order to consider their persuasive potential (e.g. Charteris-Black 2018; Chilton 2004). The approach taken in this article follows suit, analysing Gloria's speech on both macro and micro levels to provide a linguistic and rhetorical perspective on why this speech may have garnered a high level of attention.

4. Gloria's speech as fictional scripted film dialogue

Bednarek (2018, 19-23; 2010, 64-68) provides a list of prototypical features of television and film dialogue that differentiate it from naturally-occurring speech and these are applied here to Gloria's monologue. Bednarek's taxonomy is based on general features identified from a range of relevant research literature (Quaglio 2008; 2009; Bubel 2006; Sanger 2001; Kozloff 2000). It should be noted that these are broad tendencies and not necessarily strict guidelines; there may be deliberate reasons for not using them. For example, as Bubel (2006, 44) suggests, "some filmmakers, however, place greater emphasis on realistic dialogue, not shying away from redundancies, unintelligibility, and verbal affluence." Gloria's speech does happen within an existing conversation, so her monologue is prompted by the previous turn. Following Bednarek (2018, 19-23; 2010, 64-68), the subsequent paragraphs apply these features to Gloria's speech as a whole, providing context for any apparent deviations.

Television and film dialogue *favours comprehensibility/intelligibility* (e.g. *is more clearly enunciated, is less vague*). As part of this, it also shares similarities with stage dialogue. This applies to Gloria's speech, especially because it is a monologue delivered by one character, and arguably not unlike one that would be delivered on stage in terms of its content and delivery. The speech is supposed to be kind of a 'natural' outburst for this character that has been building, unvoiced, for years. This monologue is a deliberate deviation from the usual dialogue pattern in the *Barbie* film, which follows more usual turn-taking conversational patterns in combination with voiceover narration. Screen dialogue also *tends towards focus, coherence, fluency* (e.g. *is less narrative, has different turn lengths and organisation, has fewer interactive and performance features*). This tendency is apparent in Gloria's speech: everything is clearly

¹¹ This adapted framework for rhetorical analysis follows that of Statham and Ringrow (2026). It should be noted that Browse 2018 also considers reader reception/response work, which is not applied within the confines of this current paper. However, given the myriad of nuanced and sometimes conflicting responses to this speech in academic and popular literature, this is an important avenue for future work. For example, research could consider if the potentially emotional effects on the audience identified in the analysis are borne out with listeners/viewers/readers.

articulated and none of the other characters jump in or interrupt her, for example. The turn length is somewhat anomalous, however, as this is a fairly extended conversational turn for a character to take, therefore emphasising its significance. The monologue also has a specific focus – the ways in which women are affected by gendered expectations in (especially North American) contemporary society – and is therefore less varied in terms of topic/theme.

Film and television dialogue *has a focus on emotionality and entertainment* (e.g. *is more emotional, may focus on conflict or humour, may feature exaggerated/stereotypical language use*) and Gloria's speech provides ample evidence of this. As the subsequent analysis of appeals to *pathos* illustrates, the speech is arguably designed to provoke an emotional and empathetic response from the target viewer. Screen conversations often have a higher frequency of informal language, and although this speech is quite formal in terms of the structure (with significant use of repetition and parallelism), it is still fairly accessible in terms of language and uses discourse markers such as “**like**” (2); mild swearing e.g. “all the **damn** time” (8); and more ‘everyday’ expressions such as “it **kills me** that you don't think you're good enough” (1-2). Television and film dialogue often comprises certain stock lines, i.e. overused, formulaic or even clichéd phrases that are repeated across films or television shows (e.g. “what's the worst that could happen?,” “I have a bad feeling about this;” “we've got company;” “it's a trap;” “this isn't what it looks like,” etc.). There are no obvious stock lines in Gloria's speech, with one exception perhaps being “**all the damn time**” (8).

Conversation on screen also *permits the use of devices that foreground the 'constructedness' of the dialogue* and may therefore *contain aesthetic devices, for example, repetition, rhythm and surprise*. Gloria's speech arguably deliberately employs repetition and rhythm for stylistic effects, as will be explored in the next section in more detail, but her speech also advances the narrative, especially the use of parallelism to contrast the impossible expectations placed on women (e.g. “You have to be thin, but not too thin” (4); “You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass” (5-6)). Gloria's speech is important not only because it represents a significant juncture in terms of the film's narrative but also because the content of the speech has been the subject of much discussion. Section 5 provides a more in-depth rhetorical analysis of the text.

5. Gloria's speech as a political rhetorical appeal

Gloria's monologue draws particularly on the classical rhetorical appeals to *pathos* and *logos* (and, to a much lesser extent, *ethos*) in order to express the “double binds” that she (and many other women) have experienced, i.e. “the contradictory expectations women face in a modern patriarchal society” (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 163; see also Frye 1983). These

expectations relate to both gender ideology and aesthetic norms. Gloria responds to Barbie's distress and despondency by sharing all the ways in which women are made to feel "less than" (Zentell, Matthews and Katz 2025, 123).

Starting with appeals to *ethos*, these are somewhat less explicit in the text than the appeals to pathos and *logos*. *Ethos* relates to the authority, expertise and reliability of the speaker or author, setting them up as someone to whom the audience(s) can listen and trust (Statham 2022, 156-167). The appeal to *ethos*, for Aristotle, is considered "one of the most effective persuasive weapons in the speaker's arsenal" (Browse 2018, 28). This is because if there is not enough trust and goodwill secured from the audience(s), then the speaker's message might not be well-received. In this way, Browse (2018, 28) argues, "the appeal to ethos is therefore a critically important rhetorical proof which forms the foundation for all others." In this case, Gloria positions herself as an authority to be listened to and qualified by virtue of being a woman herself within a patriarchal system and having experienced the litany of issues she outlines. This is discursively backgrounded in the speech: she does not, for example, open the speech with 'As a woman...' or 'From someone who has experienced unequal treatment based on gender....' It is taken as axiomatic that Gloria can speak to these issues and this is set up in the first line: "It is literally impossible to be a woman" (1). Gloria is presenting this statement (and subsequent ones) not as an outsider commenting on women's struggles but as part of this group, claiming this membership categorisation for herself and therefore, in Chilton's terms, legitimising her position through self-identification (2004, 47). Her position is also evident through her use of pronouns (discussed further in the appeals to *pathos* section). Traditional ethotic arguments include the speaker establishing their trustworthiness and authority through emphasising their credentials or authority (Statham 2022, 157) but Gloria does not do this explicitly. I argue, however, that her sharing examples of what she has apparently personally experienced functions as a more backgrounded form of *ethos* to secure her credibility.

Commentary on the speech has focused on its emotionally-charged nature (e.g. Khader 2025; McKeown 2025; Zentell, Matthews and Katz 2025) which relates primarily to the rhetorical appeal to *pathos*. The persuasive strategy of *pathos* intends to leverage the audience's feelings in a way that leads them to agreement with the speaker (Browse 2018, 153). Arguments operationalising *pathos* can be carried out through the strategies of highly emotive lexis and shared pronoun usage (Statham 2022, 164-166). The emotive lexis in the speech follows two broad patterns. The first is in how Gloria expresses her feelings in response to the impossible gendered pressures she experiences, voicing her frustration at the situation through emotive lexis. For example, she describes being a woman as "**literally impossible**" (1) due to these demands: "the system is **rigged**" (14); "it's too **hard!**" (17), "it's too **contradictory!**" (17).

Women, she argues, “have to answer for men’s bad behavior, which is **insane**” (10). She is angry at the effects of the sexist systems on Stereotypical Barbie – “it **kills me** that you don’t think you’re good enough” (1-2) – and on other women in the Real World, herself included: “I’m so **tired** of watching myself and every single other woman **tie herself into knots** so that people will like us” (20-21). In some of the examples cited above and elsewhere in the speech, adverbial intensifiers are used to add further emotional weight e.g. “it’s **too** hard;” “it’s **too** contradictory” (17); “I’m **so** tired” (20). Adverbial intensifiers (amplifiers) are frequently used for emphatic or emotional purposes (Quaglio 2008, 203; see also Biber, et al. 1999, 564-566) and here they highlight Gloria’s reaction to the paradoxes of being a woman, to being, as McKeown puts it, “set up for failure,” and this failure is “a convenient distraction from the harms of patriarchy” (2025, 145).

The second pattern is in terms of the emotive lexis used to describe the gendered double binds themselves. It is important to note that these lexical items – a combination of adjectival, noun and verb forms – may not be emotionally charged in all contexts, but here they have particular gendered connotations in terms of expectations around femininity and women’s behaviours. This is especially relevant in terms of language surrounding women’s weight, bodies, and workplace behaviour. Parallel syntactic structures are repeated several times to foreground the more “positively evaluated” lexis first and the more “negatively evaluated” lexis second, e.g. “women must be **thin**” but not “**too thin**” (4); they have to be a **boss**” but never “**mean**” (6-7); they are expected to “**lead**” (7), but never “**squash other people’s ideas**” (7). Gloria argues that: “You [women] have to never **get old**, never **be rude**, never **show off**, never be **selfish**, never **fall down**, never **fail**, never show **fear**, never **get out of line**” (15-17). Women are expected to not “talk about their kids **all the damn time**” (8), with ‘damn’ functioning both as an adverbial intensifier (amplifier) for emphatic or emotional purposes (Quaglio 2008, 203) and as a mild swear word, with expletives being strongly associated with the expression of emotion (Quaglio 2008, 204-205; Stenström 1991, 240). Within this context, these lexical items have a certain emotional resonance potential in terms of gendered expectations, at least for many in the audience.

Pronouns are another key component of arguments using *pathos*. In Gloria’s speech, first-person plural pronouns help to create a shared collective identity which she has already set up by her axiomatic ethotic argument: she is part of this group (womanhood) and can speak about these difficult experiences e.g. “Like, **we** have to always be extraordinary, but somehow **we’re** always doing it wrong” (2-3); ‘I’m just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like **us**” (20-21). The first-person plural pronouns also seem to include Barbie here. The second-person pronoun ‘you’ is repeated several times. The

“you” begins as a specific address to Barbie only as the addressee: “**You** are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that **you** don’t think you’re good enough” (1-2), but the remainder of the speech tends to use a somewhat more generalised ‘you’ (Herman 1994), although arguably this ‘you’ is intended to address (all) women as a group and to include Barbie as part of this broader categorisation (and indeed Gloria herself). Another potential addressee could be Gloria’s daughter Sasha, as her mother is painting a picture of what her future could be like e.g. “**You** have to have money, but **you** can’t ask for money because that’s crass” (5-6); “**You** have to be a career woman, but also always be looking out for other people” (9); “And it turns out in fact that not only are **you** doing everything wrong [...]” (18-19). In addition to second-person pronouns, reflexive pronouns and possessive adjectives also indicate a sense of shared struggle e.g. “I’m just so tired of watching **myself** and every single other woman tie **herself** into knots so that people will like **us**” (20-21). Although not explicitly named, the ‘agent’ behind these expectations is that of a patriarchal society.

The third rhetorical appeal is *logos*, which attempts to convince the audience through providing evidence (Statham 2022, 157). This often takes the form of statistics or figures and/or the structure of the text. There are no specific statistics or figures in the speech, although in a broader sense it could be argued that the experiences Gloria outlines are intended to be examples of the experiences of many women¹². What is very frequent in the monologue, however, is the structure which contributes to the construction of a logical-seeming argument. This is operationalised through the use of connectives or “conjunctive adjuncts” (Halliday 1994, 36 qtd in Statham 2022, 157-158). Gloria’s speech often combines these in order to present a logical argument. For example, adversatives are repeated several times to create a parallel structure and to emphasise the paradoxes e.g. “You have to say you want to be healthy, **but** also you have to be thin. You have to have money, **but** you can’t ask for money because that’s crass. You have to be a boss, **but** you can’t be mean. You have to lead, **but** you can’t squash other people’s ideas” (4-7). Additives are used to connect sub-clauses and build up a pattern of the mounting expectations e.g. “**And** you can never say you want to be thin” (4); “You have to say you want to be healthy, but **also** you have to be thin” (4-5); “But always stand out **and** always be grateful” (13-14); “It’s too contradictory **and** nobody gives you a medal or says thank you!” (17-18); “**And** if all of that is also true for a doll just representing a woman, then I don’t even know” (21-22). Conditionals demonstrate what happens if these double binds are verbalised e.g. “You have to

¹² Khader (2025, 48) argues that: “the list of grievances in Gloria’s final speech are those shared among almost all women, but would be especially likely to be the main faces of oppression in the lives of very privileged women – the expectation that they be thin and perfect, that they not lead too hard or be more abrasive, etc.”

answer for men's bad behaviour, which is insane, but **if** you point that out, **[then]** you're accused of complaining" (9-11), and the absurdity that all these pressures seem to additionally apply to a children's toy: "And **if** all of that is also true for a doll just representing a woman, **then** I don't even know" (21-22).

The logetic arguments are further intensified through sentence structures that combine multiple conjunctive adjuncts e.g. "You have to say you want to be healthy, but **also** you have to be thin" (4-5); "You have to have money, but you can't ask for money **because** that's crass." (5-6). Additionally, appeals to *logos* in the monologue include high textual modality, linked to Chilton's (2004, 118) "cognitive coercion" in which arguments may be presented as factual. This is especially evident through deontic modality to indicate obligation by an external force e.g. "You **have to** have money [...] you **have to** be a boss, but you can't be mean. You **have to** lead" (5-7).

Overall, the appeals to *pathos* and *logos* in particular add to the speech's compelling nature and potential for emotive or empathetic responses from the audience. The final section offers some concluding remarks in relation to the wider feminist themes of the speech.

6. Conclusions

The previous linguistic analysis can be considered with reference to the beauty standards of stereotypical femininity and with reference to the text as an example of feminist discourse. In terms of the former, the speech outlines the pressure on women under the male gaze to look a certain way: to be pretty but not too pretty which might threaten other women; to be thin but not too thin; and to pretend health is more important than thinness. The focus on 'health' and 'wellness' has in some cases replaced explicit societal discourses of weight loss, even if weight loss is still the underlying goal (see for example Eberhardt 2024)¹³. Some contemporary media narratives focus more on what Orgad and Gill (2022) term 'Love Your Body' (LYB) discourses – often from those same corporations that have presented women's bodies as problematic – in which body confidence is strongly encouraged: "These LYB discourses are positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-influenced messages, targeted predominantly at girls and women, that exhort them to believe they are beautiful, incredible, and powerful" (36). Although not all these messages are necessarily disingenuous or without merit, there is a focus on the individual mindset over systemic problems (Orgad and Gill 2022, 45). These discourses could also, even

¹³ "Contemporary neoliberal discourses of the body thus move away from, for example, explicit talk of dieting for weight loss, but still demand discipline, regulation, and control, and bind these choices closely to morality, virtue, and individual responsibility. The risk has shifted, or perhaps expanded, to an inescapable, ever-present entity – so that sleeping, eating, breathing, indeed merely existing in the environment is cause for constant, sustained vigilance" (Eberhardt 2024, 65).

accidentally, reinforce assumptions that women's bodies are difficult to love (37). What is particularly complicated here in the context of the speech is that the character Gloria calls out the impossible beauty standards in a Mattel-affiliated film, and Barbie is also regarded as a victim of these gendered expectations. This anthropomorphising of Barbie potentially obfuscates critiques of Barbie as a Mattel doll which (in the actual real world outside of the *Barbie* film) may have been a part of reinforcing these gendered, racialised beauty standards, especially the "thin ideal" of Barbie's body shape and appearance (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 161; Gillis and Pellegrini 2024; Černoša and Ritchie 2023). Of note here is the especially controversial and relatively short-lived 1965 edition of Slumber Party Barbie, who came complete with a set of weighing scales set to 110 pounds and a diet book containing one piece of advice: "don't eat" (Bhagwandas 2023, 34-35; Ashman, Beach and Patterson 2023, 23). Seen by many as a cynical ploy to help boost sales and as a response to body image criticism, Curvy Barbie launched in 2016. A 2019 research study of 84 girls aged three to ten found that Curvy Barbie was the least favourite to play with and tended to be given more negative attributes such as "has no friends" and "not pretty" (Harriger, et al. 2019; see also Hains 2021 on the politics and reception of Curvy Barbie). Although men face increasing pressures regarding their appearance, beauty continues to define women (Craig 2021, 3) and women face more pressures in terms of advertising and media discourse to defy ageing and look perfect through consumption (Ringrow 2016).

In relation to the feminist themes of Gloria's monologue, critical discussions have grappled with whether it represents a powerful feminist message for our current society or if it is an overly simplistic, non-intersectional, and outdated view of feminism. McKeown (2025) argues that asking if the speech offers a ground-breaking feminist message is the wrong question, suggesting that the speech is important because of its "emotional resonance," not because the audience will definitely learn something new from it (142; see also Peters 2023). She suggests that the speech is best viewed as a "passionate utterance" (2025, 149-150) – as the appeals to *pathos* have demonstrated – "a kind of initiation or invitation into a space of acknowledgement." Barbie recognises her suffering, the suffering of other women and girls, and the suffering of Barbies, bringing them into a community with one another (McKeown 2025, 147-150), an intergenerational community that includes Gloria's daughter. From this community comes the possibility of collectivism and the space for political action¹⁴, realised here in the form of "deprogramming" the Barbies who then take back Barbie Land (McKeown 2025, 143; Rome

¹⁴ Stereotypical Barbie summarises the speech's impact as follows: "By giving voice to the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under the patriarchy, you robbed it of its power!"

2024, 3). In an interview with America Ferrera (Gloria), she argues that some of the content could be new information for some listeners, not least men and boys:

If you are well-versed in feminism, then it might seem like an oversimplification, but there are entire countries that banned this film for a reason. To say that something that is maybe foundational, or, in some people's view, basic feminism isn't needed is an oversimplification. Assuming that everybody is on the same level of knowing and understanding the experience of womanhood is an oversimplification. (Aguilar 2024)

Even if the film is in many ways uncritical of conventional femininity, the speech does point out certain aspects of gendered oppression (Þorgerðardóttir and Brynjarsdóttir 2025, 166). Given recent developments such as the rolling back of abortion rights in the United States where these were relatively well-established, maybe more fundamental feminist principles still need to be articulated (Zentell, Matthews and Katz 2025, 123), even – or perhaps especially – within the capitalist context of a mainstream blockbuster film.

This paper has intended to analyse this speech as an example of telecinematic political discourse which made use of rhetorical strategies (particularly appeals to *pathos* and *logos*) in order to create a potentially emotional effect in the audience. In considering Gloria's monologue in relation to relevant literature on femininities and feminisms, fictionalised discourses arguably strongly intersect with our non-fictionalised and nuanced understandings of gender, oppression, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Bionote

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