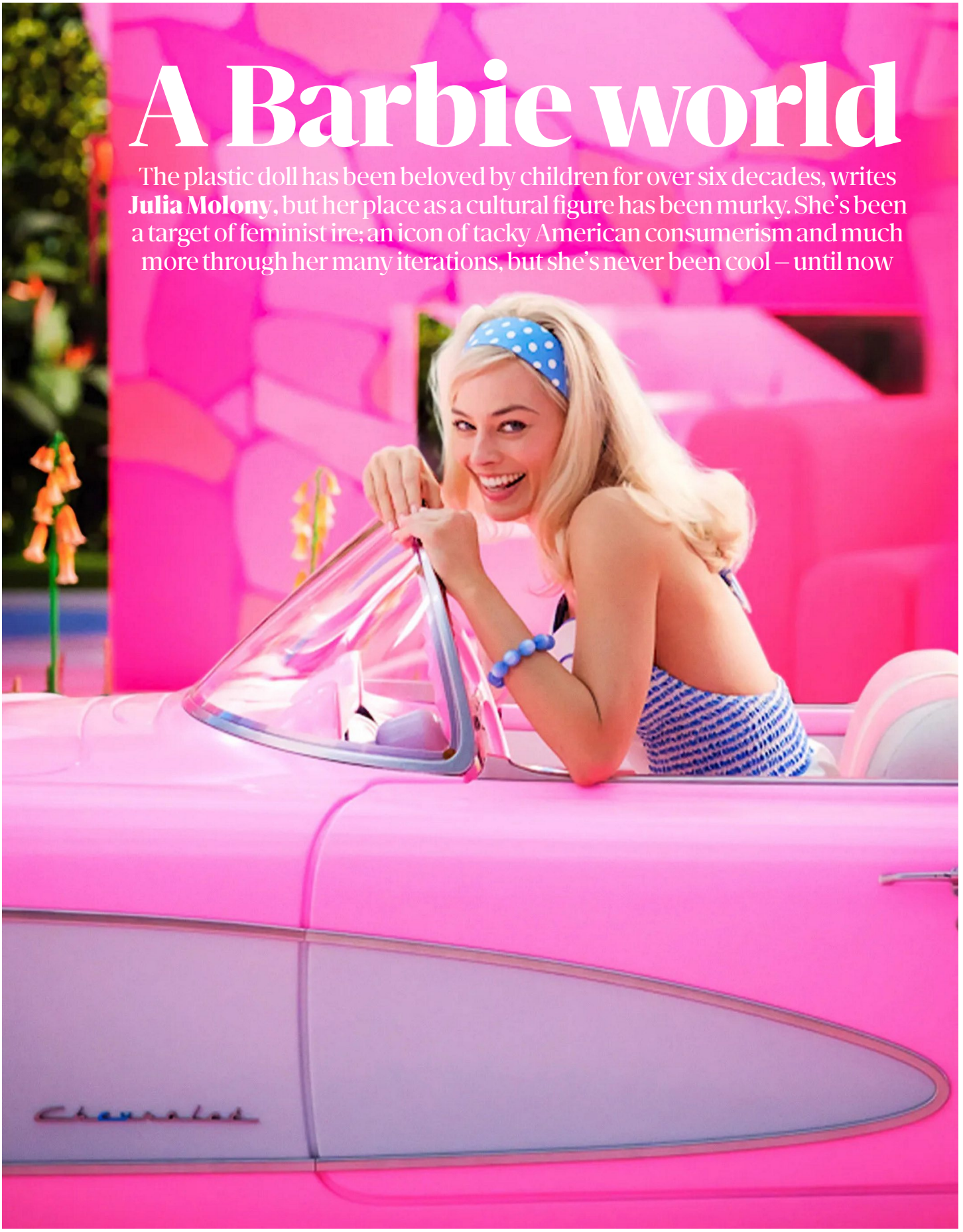
A Barbie world

The plastic doll has been beloved by children for over six decades, writes **Julia Molony**, but her place as a cultural figure has been murky. She's been a target of feminist ire; an icon of tacky American consumerism and much more through her many iterations, but she's never been cool – until now



They were the pictures pop culture didn't know it needed; a neon-coloured shot of visual dopamine, delivered directly into the dulled eyes of the joy-starved, doom-scrolling masses, at just the right moment.

They were stills from *Barbie*, the live-action movie due for release next year, taken during filming this summer on California's Venice Beach and leaked to the press.

There was Margot Robbie, strapped into a pair of bright yellow rollerblades, and clad in a day-glo aerobics two-piece. Her vanilla blonde hair cascaded over the band of her 1990s' sun visor. Her smile radiated the white-hot brilliance of a magnesium flare. Skating along beside her was a peroxide-blond Ryan Gosling. Wearing matching neon Spandex, he accessorised the look with an expression of benevolent vacancy that was perfectly Ken.

Before those pictures went viral, the *Barbie* movie had been an off-the-radar project in production. Overnight, it became the one of the most talked-about cultural events of the decade.

The pictures were more than just a one-hit-wonder on social media, however. Their success marked the genesis of a brand new pop-culture zeitgeist. It's called Barbiecore. It's not exactly a new thing (just ask Nicki Minaj, who has been fervently channelling Barbie for at least a decade). But 2022 was the year that Barbiecore – a burgeoning bubblegum-pink aesthetic seen across various subcultures, from the runways of Paris Fashion Week to remote corners of TikTok – coalesced into a mainstream trend.

In March, the fashion house Valentino launched a new collection for men and women based entirely around a new, patented shade of fuchsia. In Paris, in October, fashion's self-styled Lord of Darkness, Rick Owens diverted dramatically from form – sending models down the runway trailing flounces of bright magenta and wearing matching thigh-high platform boots.

On TikTok, posts labelled #Barbiecore had, at last count, 8.1 million views. Bursts of hyper-girlie colour were everywhere, a riposte to the prevailing apocalyptic mood. Pink became 2022's colour of rebellion – a defiant paint-bomb of exuberant cheer. If the dominant colour of 2022 had a Pantone card, its label might be: 'f**k it all pink'.

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Left: Margot Robbie as Barbie. Picture by Warner Bros

According to Mattel, Barbie's manufacturers, Barbie's age is forever fixed at 19. But in chronological years, she is 63. Throughout her six decades in existence, she has been a consistently blockbusting toy for the company. In 2019, the company counted one billion Barbies sold since her launch in 1959. But her career as a cultural figure has been more chequered.

At various points in her existence, she has been an object of ridicule, a pop art muse (Andy Warhol painted her in 1986) and a nexus of moral panic. Now, however, Barbie and her signature pink have risen to new heights of cultural dominance. Barbie has always been popular, but 2022 was the year she became cool.

Much of this momentum can be credited to the *Barbie* movie. The project, which has been doing the rounds of studios for more than a decade, was originally due to star Amy Schumer, based on a script by Diablo Cody. But bringing to life the plastic princess for contemporary audiences turned out to be a tricky proposition.

That first attempt fell foul of creative differences, with Schumer and Sony – the studio behind the project – reportedly unable to align their respective visions for Barbie's foray onto the big screen.

In 2021, new life was breathed into the film when Greta Gerwig was hired as director of a new script she'd penned with her long-time collaborator Noah Baumbach, who also happens to be her partner.

The couple brought their Brooklyn-hipster pedigree and arthouse credentials to *Barbie* – Gerwig is the Oscar-nominated director of *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*; Baumbach became an indie darling as the writer/director of *The Squid And The Whale*. The mere mention of their names immediately brought a revisionist, ironic mood to a brand that has frequently been seen to almost revel in its reputation as tacky, and hype started building fast. This summer, speaking on *Entertainment Tonight*, Ryan Gosling said it was the best script he had ever read.

For now, that's about all anyone connected to the project will say. Further details on the story are non-existent. All we know is that a roll-call of well known names, including *Ugly Betty*'s America Ferrera and *Sex Education*'s Emma Mackey, have been brought on board to play Barbie in her manifold incarnations. Cast members' vows of secrecy are presumably iron-clad in law.

"It's not what you think it is, unless it is," said Gosling, who in response to direct questioning resorted to speaking in riddles. "And then you know what it is, but I don't think that's what you think it is. Wait, what are we talking about?"

All anyone has got out of his co-star Margot Robbie is that the film promotes positivity and is aspirational.

It's thanks, in no small part, to Gerwig and Baumbach that Barbie's new golden age has, thus far, gone relatively uncriticised by contemporary feminists.

This despite the fact that, since the 1970s, Barbie has been something of a *bête noire* for the women's movement. She's long been viewed by feminists as an undercover agent for the patriarchy, charged with insinuating herself into the hearts, minds and bedrooms of successive generations of impressionable young girls. She's been accused of promoting unrealistic beauty standards, of triggering eating disorders, and of brainwashing the young women of the future into perpetuating reductive performances of high femininity.

If Barbie is no longer the avowed public enemy of the feminist movement, the reasons for this are probably complex and manifold. In a summer when Roe vs Wade was overturned in the US and, »

» in Iran, where women risked their lives by taking to the streets to protest after Mahsa Amini died in custody having been arrested by the 'morality police' for allegedly wearing her headscarf too loosely, perhaps the resurgence of Barbie's throwback high-femme aesthetic seemed pretty low on activists' lists of priorities.

But there's also a revisionist narrative of Barbie's history – one that has argued that the 11-inch doll with the improbable curves has always been an accidental feminist. Through her, this argument goes, young girls growing up in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were able to imaginatively break free of societal expectations of women's primary role as homemakers and mothers.

Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, would not have described herself as a feminist. But she was a self-made woman and a corporate power player, who in the 1950s, when the cult of the housewife gripped America, was well on her way to becoming a captain of industry. In her book, *Forever Barbie*, the journalist and cultural critic MG Lord explains that Barbie, as imagined by Handler, occupied a position that was "antithetical to the proscribed role of women at the time". Though conceived as a fashion model, Barbie's professional repertoire quickly evolved into a range of glamorous careers – from air hostess to astronaut.

This was closely aligned with Handler's own self-image. A consummate career woman, she once said: "If I had to stay home I would be the most dreadful, mixed-up, unhappy woman in the world." Barbie's dream house, when it emerged in 1962, was a model of autonomous living – the opposite of a housewife's prison. It was designed for a woman whose domestic sphere was a mere support to her life out in the world.

Despite immense pressure, Handler refused to issue an iteration of Barbie as a mother. The iconic blonde has remained, throughout her six decades, resolutely unwed and without child. This ideological stance was, from inception, baked into the Barbie brand.

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Barbie has always been the star of her own imagined life. And while her body shape is an archetype of female beauty as seen through the male gaze, her status as putative object of desire is, at most, merely incidental to her identity as a self-determining woman of the world.

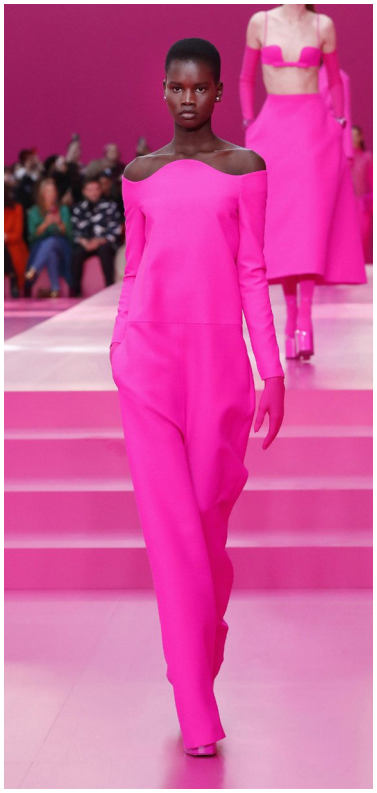
"The whole idea of woman as temptress, or woman as subordinate to man is absent from the Barbie cosmology," writes MG Lord. "Ken is a gnat, a fly, a slave..." It is Ken, Lord says, who is an accessory of Barbie's, not the other way around.

With her unashamedly adult, hourglass proportions, Barbie's sexual persona has always been an undeniable part of her identity. This aspect of Barbie has European roots. The first Barbie ever created was modelled on a bawdy figurine from Germany named Bild-Lilli conceived as a novelty object for adult men.

Handler had discovered Lilli during a trip to Europe and became determined to reproduce her for the toy market back home. The first Barbie was dressed in a black-and-white swimsuit. She wore red lipstick and dark eyeliner, and looked out at the world with the heavy-lidded, languorous gaze of the vamp. Only in 1977 would she be reimagined as the ultimate Californian girl, her gaze directed firmly into a bright future, her upfront, toothsome grin a frank engagement with the world at large.

If her roots were European, Barbie's plastic soul was pure, heady Americana. The international reach of her brand spread during the 1960s and 1970s in lockstep with American cultural dominance, and she became an agent for American soft power in the wider world.

An emblem of the creed of female emancipation through consumerism, Barbie's outfits and possessions were her magic weapons in the restless pursuit of self-actualisation. Day-to-Night Barbie of 1984 moved effortlessly from the boardroom to the



ballroom thanks to a suit that transformed into a cocktail dress when turned inside out.

Over the latter half of the 20th century in America, as consumerism took on quasi-religious proportions, and the shopping mall became the cultural and spiritual centre of American life, Barbie represented the ultimate material girl. She pulled off the paradoxical trick of perennial reinvention, while her essence, her core attitude, remained perfectly preserved in aspic, despite changing fashions.

All she needed was new stuff – new clothes, a new car, a new house, to become a better, fresher version of herself.

But as a totem of western values, Barbie has become a lightning rod for global culture clashes. Around 2003, a Barbie ban swept the Middle East, where her sale was forbidden in many jurisdictions because she was seen as too promiscuous. In 2002, she was banned in Russia for the crime of "encouraging consumerism in Russian infants".

If Barbie of 2022 has achieved an *entente cordiale* with the feminist movement, she has also been a surprising winner in the culture wars. Mattel has a long history of social justice. As far back as 1940, it







was one of the first American companies to integrate its production line, meaning that workers were not segregated by race but worked together side by side.

In 1968, it invested in an African-American-run company, donating $150,000 to Shindana Toys to fund a factory producing ethnically diverse dolls aimed at non-white American children. That same year, Mattel brought out its first African-American doll, Christie – Barbie's Black friend.

In recent years, Mattel has doubled down on those progressive principles, both as an ideological stance and also as a savvy commercial strategy, likely conceived to quell the disquiet of millennial parents who baulk at the notion of gendered toys – let alone hyper-feminine dolls with porn-star proportions. While classic blonde Barbie is still very much the centrepiece of the brand, there has been significant investment in a series of diverse Barbies, who together strive to challenge and contradict the rigid beauty standards of the original.

In 2016, Mattel released curvy, petite and tall Barbie lines which have since expanded into nine different body types – with Ken also being made in 'slim, 'broad' and 'original'.

"Barbie is the most diverse and inclusive doll line on the market yet," says Mattel. Today, parents can buy Barbie dolls in an eclectic range of ethnicities, as well as a collection of body-positive Barbies; one has the skin condition vitiligo; another is in a wheelchair; yet another has a prosthetic leg. In May of this year, the company produced its first ever trans Barbie, modeled on the transgender actor and activist Laverne Cox.

"I'm just so grateful that I've been able to be in this process. It's a process of reclaiming my inner child, healing her, giving her what she didn't have the first go-round. So to be turning 50 years old and be transgender and have a Barbie in my life, that feels just like a full-circle kind of healing moment," said Cox, at the time.

And so Barbie finds herself, in 2022, in perfect ideological synchronicity with Generation Z – a generation that has reinvented gender codes, like the Barbie-style hyperfemininity trending on TikTok and beyond. No longer repressive dictats that crush individuality, these codes are being embraced as joyful performance, open to be liberally appropriated by anyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social class.

Barbiecore, and its essential girliness exists now, like the toy itself, to be played up in life and online for likes and for fun. ●

Top left: A model for Valentino wears the brand's patented shade of fuchsia

Top: Mattel launched new body shapes for both Barbie and Ken dolls in 2016

Above left: Ryan Gosling as Ken and Margot Robbie as Barbie in the movie *Barbie*

Above right: The original Barbie doll as she was in 1959