

Beauty Made Plastic: Constructions of a Western Feminine Ideal

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Abstract

This article examines the visual trope of a plastic and Barbie doll-like standard of beauty in contemporary representations of feminine embodiment and subjectivity. Considering its technological, historical, linguistic, and aesthetic origins, this article traces how a cultural narrative of woman-as-doll has set the stage for such contemporary manifestations, and how plastic has slipped into the discourse. It grapples with the traditional implications of the phenomenon of woman-as-doll on feminine subjectivity in the West, and suggests the potentialities and limitations that a visually plastic and Barbie doll-like corporeality might have for the feminine subject in posthuman terms.

Keywords: *beauty, dolls, femininity, plastic, subjectivity*

In *Mythologies*, his collection of short essays published in 1957, Roland Barthes interprets the significance of a series of cultural objects or practices from the post-war Western world. In “Plastic”, he calls attention to the eponymous substance, which he qualifies as one of the “‘imitation’ materials”.¹ The purpose of plastic, he contends, is to mimic both the “luxurious” and the “prosaic”, providing objects for art and everyday life.² Barthes’s “Plastic” marvels over the many functions of the sleek and synthetic material: from “buckets” to “jewels”.³ The essay concludes with the writer wryly speculating that “the whole world *can* be plasticised, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas” (emphasis in original).⁴ Indicative in his analysis is that plastic is a slippery substance, both physically and symbolically. Through imitation, it has the power to slide between materialities and meanings—even transgressing corporeality.

Barthes’s analysis of plastic’s ability to shift and flex was a timely one. Concurrent with the penning of his pithy essay, the substance was undergoing a momentous modification. Kim Toffoletti explains: “As plastics boomed in the post-war period, its reputation as a wonder material was accompanied by its growing status in the vernacular”.⁵ Her observation reinforces Barthes’s recognition that the substance could

¹ Roland Barthes, “Plastic,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, [1957] 2000), 98.

² Barthes, “Plastic”, 98.

³ Barthes, “Plastic”, 97.

⁴ Barthes, “Plastic”, 99.

⁵ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 69.

mimic both the “luxurious” and the “prosaic”. However, it also calls attention to plastic’s past as a “wonder material”, as well as its future in the West. From the mid-century onward, the substance edged toward the superfluously quotidian in design and, thus, in meaning. In *American Plastic*, Jeffrey L. Meikle elaborates that at this time “[m]odern science was making former luxury goods available to democratic man and woman”.⁶ The kind of mass-produced kitchenware, fashion accessories, furniture, and toys that Meikle is referring to even caused Barthes to remark that the substance was becoming “ubiquity made visible”.⁷ As a result of this transition, plastic lost some of its lustre. The move brought about a tension in the material’s signification that remains in contemporary cultural discourse. Today, plastic is both a material of endless potential and of hopeless artifice.

Plastic’s simultaneous transformation towards cultural ubiquity and ambiguity prompted it to become “the definitive symbol of the mid-twentieth century”.⁸ In its shift toward the everyday, plastic relocated to a more intimate domain. The material navigated the domestic and the corporeal spheres, its power to imitate eventually leading to a commingling of the synthetic and the somatic. Plastic’s ability to replicate enabled it to replace fleshy organs, as Barthes describes in his once extreme example of “plastic aortas”. Yet, over the years, the material’s fusing with the somatic became a common practice in the contemporary West. Highlighting this phenomenon, Toffoletti states that “plastic has penetrated the human body in the form of prosthetics, artificial joints and valves” and “has seamlessly replaced organic components, both within and outside of the anatomical body”.⁹ Through both medical and cosmetic procedures, plastic’s imitation of, and fusion with, the corporeal has become critical to Western understandings of the substance. In fact, Meikle goes so far as to argue that: “Plastic has been naturalized”.¹⁰ Its application is so vast, he explains, that it is “taken for granted” as an essential part of daily life.¹¹ With this assertion, it becomes important to consider not only how plastic designs have been created to replicate fleshy bodies, but how now, more than ever, fleshy bodies are attempting to replicate plastic. The suggested appeal of a visually plastic corporeality is especially apparent for feminine bodies in the West. This article investigates this relationship and its implications for understanding feminine embodiment and subjectivity in contemporary and posthuman terms. It also explores how this relationship is often exemplified by one plastic icon in particular.

Becoming Barbie

Aglow with a plastic sheen, a fashion model poses in what is staged to be the inside of a high-gloss carton box. This image, a print-media advertisement, spans two pages. Dark-wash denim clothing, shiny shoes, and a pink belt with matching handbag hang neatly on the left side of the spread. Each item appears to be held in place with a familiar type of wire, secure in its position. On the adjacent page, the model’s tan, minimally clad figure contrasts against the cobalt blue interior of the box. Her limbs are askew, and

⁶ Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 2.

⁷ Barthes, “Plastic,” 97.

⁸ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 69.

⁹ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 69.

¹⁰ Meikle, *American Plastic*, 1.

¹¹ Meikle, *American Plastic*, 1.

she, too, is fastened upright with the same recognisable wire tethered around both wrists, ankles, and at one bent elbow. Her coif is on trend for the year 2000; it is stylishly voluminous, with full curls and just the precise amount of golden highlights. She is wearing sunglasses. Several pink beauty products have been positioned around her, which are pinned in a similar, tidy fashion. At the bottom of the page, “Moschino Jeans” shines in a metallic typeface that scrolls across the model’s extended legs.¹²

Without mentioning it by name, Moschino’s image of a stiffly posed fashion model alludes to the iconic Barbie doll. For the Italian fashion house, a visual reference to the plastic doll offers a persuasive way to retail its high-end merchandise to middle-class and affluent consumers. The advertisement is compelling not simply because the doll is a cultural icon with decades of tried and tested marketing prowess, however. Its potency also springs from how the image playfully engages with a common visual trope of idealized femininity in the West.¹³ By visually rewriting the model’s fleshy body into a plastic and Barbie doll-like figure, the Moschino advertisement adheres to a promise that the consumer, too, can become Barbie doll-like.

Popular visual media representations are dominated by images of white feminine embodiment in which the subject possesses smooth, hairless, pore-less, and tanned skin; slender, elongated, toned limbs; pneumatic breasts; a whittled waist; and shiny, long blonde hair. Often digitally generated (or “enhanced”), these characteristics have been both naturalized and idealized in popular culture, while simultaneously being described as plastic and Barbie doll-like in appearance. Indeed, referential depictions of the Barbie doll in the mass media—from the doll’s branded image to unauthorized representations of Barbie doll-like figures in beauty and fashion advertising—abound, marketing merchandise with the implication that a plastic and doll-like body is both desirable and achievable. Consumers are assured that they will look like the plastic doll once they purchase a product off-the-rack or over-the-counter, or even when they go under the knife.¹⁴ Far-reaching online social networks extend this guarantee as a plethora of tutorials are dedicated to encouraging a specifically plastic and Barbie doll-like corporeality. One *YouTube* video promises its viewers that they will look “like the perfect plastic Barbie doll” if they follow its precise makeup instructions.¹⁵ Another online guide reminds women and girls that “Barbie may be plastic, but, remember, [...] that’s what makes her perfect: she has even, unblemished skin”.¹⁶ Thus, the doll’s presence in visual popular culture is used to define plasticity of the flesh as aspirational. Correspondingly, plastic and Barbie doll-like attributes are sought after, consumed, and written onto the feminine body.

¹² Image available at: “Buying Barbie,” accessed October 1, 2013, http://people.southwestern.edu/~bednarb/su_netWorks/projects/henderson/buying.html.

¹³ This image was divisive. While in circulation, the advertisement garnered consumer praise—for its tongue-in-cheek playfulness and postmodern creativity—as well as condemnation—as an outright example of feminine objectification.

For two consumer perspectives, see “Buying Barbie” above, and “BEST fashion house ad?” accessed October 1, 2013, <http://forums.vogue.com.au/archive/index.php/t-141868.html>.

¹⁴ Consumers can buy Barbie-inspired Uniqlo outfits and Louboutin high heels, as well as MAC makeup. There is even a form of genital cosmetic surgery named after the doll.

¹⁵ “Barbie Transformation Tutorial,” last modified October 7, 2009, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4-GRH2nDvw>.

¹⁶ “How to Be like Barbie” (step 5), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.wikihow.com/Be-Like-Barbie>.

This type of contemporary visual media representation, especially conveyed through the digitally edited photograph, suggests a crucial moment for how we might come to understand feminine bodies and subjectivities in popular culture. The editorial processes and narrative themes therein confound many of the distinctions between the feminine subject and the plastic and Barbie doll-like object. The Moschino advertisement's visual conflation of the plastic Barbie doll with a fleshy fashion model, in particular, signals this occurrence. Before turning to a discussion of how plastic intersects with the posthuman moment, it is necessary to understand the Western trope of woman-as-doll. While Barbie doll-like representations allude to a cybernetic future, they also recall a symbolically complex technological, linguistic, and aesthetic past. By locating not only the contemporary tools used to create such doll-like representations, but also by identifying the cultural history of doll-like femininity in the West, we can begin to trace the "overlap between the now and the then, the here and the always" required for a posthuman analysis.¹⁷

Imitating Beauty

"The story of plastic begins", Meikle tells his reader, "in theme as well as in time, with a material that often pretended to be something it was not".¹⁸ The Moschino advertisement highlights the capability of digital tools to continue and reinvent this narrative, as flesh is rendered plastic in the visual sphere. Adobe Photoshop is the key programme that enables the proliferation of this kind of visual corporeal plastic.¹⁹ Its techniques of photographic retouching and digital editing are used in all types of contemporary popular media to alter feminine flesh in a way that recalls Barbie doll-like plasticity. Offering a fastidious outline of the process that ensures that a digital image is print or internet-ready, Susie Orbach explains that "photoshoots which produce the raw pictures" of subjects "are carefully lit to exaggerate features prized today and then further perfected by being Photoshopped, airbrushed and stretched".²⁰ She elaborates:

There is the photographer and his or her team, the make-up artist, the stylist, the dressmaker, the fashion designer, the hairdresser. Behind them are the art directors, the account executives from the advertising side, the corporate sponsors or the magazine editors with their set of art directors, and so on. The finished product is the work of many people, mainly a skilled Photoshopping photographer and art director who stylise the image so that the finished product is far from being the outcome of a simple engagement between a pretty young woman or man whom "the camera just loves" and a stylish photographer.²¹

As Orbach sums up, one outcome of this process is that "little girls" are turning into doll-like "facsimiles".²² By providing the specifics, she allows her reader to see the

¹⁷ Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁸ Meikle, *American Plastic*, 10.

¹⁹ Manual photographic manipulation, from darkroom processing and painting to airbrushing, was the tool of the advertising trade before digital retouching entered the scene in the 1980s. While these techniques are still used today, with the introduction of Adobe's Photoshop programme in 1990, graphic design was transformed, and along with it so, too, was every landscape or interior, machine or body that came in contact with its magic wand editing tool.

²⁰ Susie Orbach, *Bodies* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 89.

²¹ Orbach, *Bodies*, 89.

²² Orbach, *Bodies*, 2.

design and the considerable labour that goes into one published photograph. The extent to which this work is executed is quickly realized when editing tools are used to generate entirely new plasticized bodies for models and celebrities alike.²³

Orbach's statement sheds light on how contemporary, plastic, and Barbie doll-like femininity is standardized through the production and manipulation of images. Corporeal uniformity did not appear with the digitization of images, however. In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf outlines how the idea of reproducing a feminine beauty standard dates back to the very invention of the modern camera.²⁴ She argues that, even in the earliest days of camera photography, the practice was already being used to make visible a set of definitive markers of white Western feminine beauty. Beaming out from the sepia-tone and black and white photographs of the 1840s were the nude figures of prostitutes, while "advertisements using images of 'beautiful' women first appeared in the mid-century".²⁵ Technologically and materially driven (re)production practices arising during the Industrial Revolution created the means to distribute these images, presented by way of artistic prints, postcards, pamphlets, catalogues, and magazines, to an insatiably curious public. This type of widespread circulation provides the background for a similar "dissemination of millions of images" present in contemporary culture in the West.²⁶ Wolf's analysis of the technology of the photograph, the gaze behind the lens, and how images of beautiful women were distributed in abundance elucidates a hegemony of beauty in the visual field that is still at work today.

All Dolled Up

From the articulation, production, and distribution of these grainy images, glimmers can be seen of a contemporary plastic and Barbie doll-like beauty standard. Indeed, although idealized bodily proportions have shifted in the last century (and continue to do so), Wolf's description of the Victorian beautiful woman seems to suggest that she fits—or, perhaps set—this increasingly plasticized mould. Characteristically read as racially white, with delicate (and increasingly made-up) facial features, slender limbs, a coifed hairstyle, and a narrow waist, the Victorian ideal of beauty proposed by Wolf has much in common with the Barbie doll. Like the iconic cultural figure, this woman, who modelled the most up-to-date fashions or was modestly draped in luxurious fabrics or jewels, also signalled a specific lifestyle of leisure and privilege. Together, these visual cues illustrate that, while the Western beauty standard certainly has not always referenced the Barbie doll, there existed something within photographic representations

²³ Jenna Sauers, "H & M Puts Real Model Heads on Fake Bodies," last modified December 5, 2011, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/5865114/hm-puts-real-model-heads-on-fake-bodies>.

²⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (London: Vintage, 1991), 15.

²⁵ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 15.

²⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 16. Aside from photography, Wolf goes on to state that "[c]opies of classical artworks, postcards of society beauties and royal mistresses, Currier and Ives prints, and porcelain figurines flooded the separate sphere to which middle-class women were confined" (15). Of particular note to this research is that "porcelain figurines" also informed modern beauty. In terms of its material properties, and the signification therein, it seems that porcelain may have been a precursor to plastic. Historically, both porcelain and plastic are connected to clay, and the modelling of the substance. From smooth and shiny figurines to smooth and shiny Barbie dolls, this material connection deserves acknowledgement.

of the beautiful woman that—from the start—paralleled a contemporary Barbie doll-like femininity.

The contemporary standardization of fleshy beauty in the visual field was born with the earliest photographic images. While bearing resemblances to the contemporary plastic and Barbie doll-like ideal, the archetypal beautiful woman of these images preceded the invention and manufacture of the Barbie doll by nearly one hundred years. She did not, however, precede the trope of woman-as-doll. The etymology of the word “doll” clearly links it with womanhood, girlhood, and femininity from its start. Popular usage of the word first came into the English language in the sixteenth century, when “doll” was used “as pet name for ‘Dorothy’”.²⁷ It very quickly seems to have taken on a more fluid meaning to describe anything small and pet-like in nature. This evolved into its use as a description for miniature models of human beings—“commonly a child or a lady”—and, from there, its most recognized denotation: a child’s “plaything”. Significantly, during this same period, “doll” became equated with the word “mistress”. Most striking of all, however, is that as early as the seventeenth century, “doll” grew in connotation to signify:

A pretty, but unintelligent or empty person, esp. when dressed up; a pretty, but silly or frivolous woman. Also in more general sense: a woman; a girl; esp. a very beautiful or attractive woman; also *occas.*, a pleasant or attractive man. A *doll's face*, one conventionally pretty, but without life or expression. Now *slang*. (Emphasis in original.)

Many of these symbolically rich definitions have avoided obsolescence and become a part of modern-day vernacular. Moreover, these meanings help to inform other popular colloquial descriptions especially prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of particular note, the phrase “dolloed up” came into slang usage at the turn of the century to describe one who had undertaken a regime to become “pretty”, “dressed up”, and “attractive” through the use of makeup, fashion, and cosmetic tools.²⁸ This idiom, alongside the etymological roots of “doll”, indicates with precision the intimate connection between the word “doll” and the discursive practices of beauty in modern Western times. Considering the dates of these linguistic trends, it is fair to say that modernity’s myriad technological advances, that gave rise to the world of beauty, have worked in conjunction with a longstanding cultural theme.

The merging of photographic uniformity with the white Western feminine beauty standard and specific doll-like colloquialisms comes to the fore in the earliest days of cinema. Visually, cinema has featured embellished representations of femininity from its debut, where rouge and powder were just the beginning of the cosmetic alterations viewed as necessary in the industry. In conversation with the technology of still photography, filmic practices developed many creative ways of enhancing and editing representations of feminine beauty. Indeed, as historian Julie Willett points out, the black and white films of the silent era relied on “shadows and radiance [...] to sharpen actors’ features”, while “whitewashing” was a typical practice to eliminate “any number of flaws”.²⁹ Eventually, the advanced technology of cameras, filters, lighting, and airbrushing were all considered essential tools of the trade. As a result of such technology and the public’s accessibility to images that deployed it, Willett asserts that

²⁷ “Doll”, in *OED* (2013), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/>. The next three definitions can be found in the same source.

²⁸ “Doll” and “dolloed up,” in *OED*.

²⁹ Julie Willett, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 115.

“singular models of beauty and aesthetics were becoming more standardized, more uniform, more hegemonic as larger and larger audiences were bombarded with examples of what beauty looked like”.³⁰ With doll-like themes assembling in filmic discourse both on and off the silver screen—from early movie star Mary Pickford’s nickname of “Doll Divine” to films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Doll Face* (1945)—it is apparent that this uniformity was perpetuating a specific doll-like ideal through both visual and linguistic allusion.³¹

Photography, and later, film, were intrinsic to how beauty was represented from the nineteenth century onward, and, indeed, provide the *mise-en-scène* for how and why image alteration is still utilized today. Moreover, these media seemed to take the popular trope of doll-like femininity and codify it by way of visual signification, and their influence is extensive. Photography (especially by way of advertising) and film, as Willett notes, “transformed” the “world of makeup”.³² These media gave momentum to the burgeoning cosmetics industry, which promised real-life, corporeal actualization of doll-like fantasy images.³³ Cosmetics giant Max Factor, an international company that got its start on the film sets of Hollywood, is exemplary of this phenomenon.³⁴ An industry staple since 1909, Max Factor promoted a “kewpie doll” style lip-shape for starlets to don during the silent era.³⁵ Striking in its thematic constancy, nearly sixty years later the company explicitly marketed its lipstick by using the doll as an aspirational figure. An exuberant print advertisement endorsed the product by exclaiming: “The doll faces are here!”³⁶

The cosmetics industry was further bolstered by a surge in middle-class women’s visibility in the public sphere.³⁷ An increase in women-centric office work, and the newly established public space of the department store had some women finding themselves outside the home for the first time. Other social reasons account for this collective “dolling up”. Film theorist and historian Shelley Stamp explains that for many women in the early twentieth century:

Dressing up, or “putting on style”, at leisure venues was an especially important element in working women’s fantasies [...]. Purchasing elaborate outfits and cosmetics, then parading

³⁰ Willett, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia*, 116.

³¹ Gaylyn Studlar, “Oh ‘Doll Divine’: Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze,” *Camera Obscura*, 16: 3 (2001): 196.

³² Willett, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia*, 115.

³³ Before the twentieth century, the doll-like aesthetic seemed to exclusively refer to delicate feminine characteristics represented by wax, clay, plaster, and porcelain miniatures. Max Factor’s earliest makeup formulas seem to align with these materials as his foundations first produced a clay-like, or cakey appearance; yet, very quickly in his career he developed recipes that became thinner and more translucent, reflecting the subtle drama of porcelain figurines. See: Willett, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia*, 115.

³⁴ “Max Factor “About” Website,” accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.maxfactor.co.uk/uk/about/aboutmax.html>.

³⁵ “Lip Service,” (para. 8), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://moviestarmakeover.com/category/max-factor/>.

³⁶ “1967 The Doll Set by Max Factor Retro Ad,” accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.atticpaper.com/proddetail.php?prod=1967-max-factor-doll-set-ad>.

³⁷ For more on this topic see: Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: First University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

themselves at cinemas, dance halls, and amusement parks allowed working women to transform themselves through consumption and exhibitionism.³⁸

Of particular note, at the dance halls, tunes like the 1911 ragtime classic “Oh, You Beautiful Doll” and, later, Duke Ellington’s 1933 jazz number “Satin Doll” were the typical accompaniment. Such evidence securely locates the practice of “dolling up” within the broader scope of the modern, public woman, and also further illustrates how the trope of woman-as-doll is inextricable from ideas of beauty and femininity in the West.³⁹

Industrial Artifice

Traditions in language, expedited by modern technology and women’s changing roles, promoted the figure of the doll in the visual field. Yet, the trajectory of this trope still does not account for how plastic slipped into the mix to such an effect that in contemporary culture the substance is inseparable from modern connotations of both “Barbie” and “doll”. So, how did the doll-like aesthetic shift from being reproduced on the gloss and celluloid of Barthes’s “‘imitation’ materials” to emulating such synthetic substances? Certainly, the common materials of the doll—especially wax, porcelain, and plaster—were precursors to plastic, and, as such, perhaps the answer is straightforwardly economic. Manufacturing costs and processes allowed for a relatively smooth transition to plastic, but there is another essential component to consider when equating plastic with the doll. This figure, representative of the technology of the day, can be found slinking around one public space in particular.

Umberto Eco recalls in *On Beauty* that the “beginning of the twentieth century” marked the “heyday of industrial aesthetics”.⁴⁰ What he means by this comment is that, with industrialization, machines actually became items of beauty and aesthetic value. The quintessential representation of the feminine figure by way of the industrial aesthetic was found in the modern mannequin. The mannequin is etymologically linked to the doll—its origins are in the Dutch for “little man” or “little doll”.⁴¹ Materially, it also followed a similar track to that of doll. Early versions of the figure, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were made of wood, wax, fabrics, and porcelain and were more curvaceous in shape and size. But by the 1920s, a slender plaster mannequin began to materialize in shop showrooms and department store windows. Debuting in France, this model rapidly gained cultural prominence in Britain and America. Tag Gronberg, in her essay “Beware the Beautiful Women”, explains that in addition to its distinctive shape, the mannequin was also gilded in metallic paint, bent into sharp angles, and displayed with a featureless visage.⁴² By the 1950s, its plaster frame was replaced with plastic. Highlighting Eco’s assertion, Gronberg’s article suggests that as the mannequin was streamlined it aligned with the aesthetically modern, machine-driven tastes of the era.

³⁸ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 21.

³⁹ From E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” to Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls*, woman-as-doll occupies a significant place in literary tradition as well.

⁴⁰ Umberto Eco, *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea* (London: Penguin, 2011), 394.

⁴¹ “Mannequin,” in *OED*.

⁴² Tag Gronberg, “Beware Beautiful Women: The 1920s Shopwindow Mannequin and a Physiognomy of Effacement,” *Art History*, 20. 3 (1997).

Gronberg observes that the modern mannequin took its place “across a whole range of discursive sites; in advertising manuals, fashion journalism, [...] arts magazines”, as well as within department store walls.⁴³ Minimalist in appearance, this figure was designed to serve in focusing consumers’ attention onto the commodity; taking on the signification of a machine, its simple function was to display merchandise.⁴⁴ However, as Toffoletti attests, the modern-day consumer’s relationship with the mannequin was, and continues to be, complex. Toffoletti argues that the mannequin worked to “legitimate women’s presence [...] as active consumers and spectators” while simultaneously “position[ing] them as part of the public spectacle”.⁴⁵ Thus, while the mannequin’s purpose was to be a blank signifier, its machine-like features were demonstrative of how to dress, while directing women towards particular products. As such, it very quickly became an aspirational and identifiable figure of feminine beauty in the public sphere. In this way it took on and redefined the early twentieth-century material manifestation of the doll-like ideal. From this history, Toffoletti argues, the mannequin became located as the “modern emblem of consumerism, femininity and artifice prior to the advent of Barbie”.⁴⁶ Indeed, Barbie’s introduction into the marketplace as a plastic fashion model, ultimately, was a very logical material and linguistic continuation of the plastic mannequin.⁴⁷

“The Stuff of Alchemy”⁴⁸

After being constructed as a symbol of ideal femininity in the West for centuries, in the 1950s the doll collided with plastic technology to produce the mannequin and then the Barbie doll. With the emergence and advancement of the technologies of photography, film, and cosmetics—as well as the aptly named *plastic* surgery—this plasticized feminine beauty ideal is recreated in the visual field in print and on the flesh.⁴⁹ These modern-day doll-like manifestations illustrate how the trope of the doll continues to

⁴³ Gronberg, “Beware Beautiful Women,” 379.

⁴⁴ Gronberg, “Beware Beautiful Women,” 382.

⁴⁵ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 65.

⁴⁶ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 64.

⁴⁷ The *OED* defines “mannequin” as both “a person employed [...] to model clothes” as well as a “model of (part of) a human figure, used for the display of clothes, etc.”

The plastic Barbie doll and the corresponding doll-like images in fashion magazines, websites, and film posters are a result of the glittering techno-aesthetic that created the mannequin of the industrial West. However, there is another fashion tradition to consider in the cultural narrative of doll-like femininity. As Juliette Peers details in her exhaustive study *The Fashion Doll*, the fashion industry had been relying on other doll-like figures that were distinct from both the dress form and the mannequin. Made of wax, paper, porcelain and ceramics, these fashion dolls distributed fashion information to consumers prior to—and concurrently with—the modern mannequin. The French bébé doll was one such example, which Juliette Peers explains: “illuminates the rapid consolidation of fashion in Anglo-European culture into industrial practice, the commodification and mass marketing of an image of high fashion luxury and the development of a quasi-industrial system of selling high fashion” (p. 71). The mannequin functioned as a way to bring industrialization and mass production into the world of early twentieth-century consumption; however, as Peers asserts, the fashion doll existed as a similar, albeit more localized, phenomenon. See: Juliette Peers, *The Fashion Doll: from Bébé Jumeau to Barbie* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

⁴⁸ Barthes, “Plastic,” 97.

⁴⁹ For more on the history of plastic surgery, see Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

work in insidious ways to standardize and marginalize bodies. Moreover, its ubiquitous presence—from its inception through to its contemporary plastic forms—seems to promote what Tony Davies calls the “commitment to classical beauty”.⁵⁰ This contention, rather than simply reasserting an aesthetic ideal, raises troubling ontological questions for how feminine subjectivity is defined and negotiated in a Western context.

Western “classical beauty” has been constructed within the doll-like ideal to secure “successful” femininity to a static place. Christine Battersby describes the physical components of what makes a classically beautiful object. She states that, in traditional Western philosophy, “beauty” is understood as the “mental state of relaxation produced by the physical encounter with objects that are small, smooth, without sharp contrasts or angles, and with delicacy of form or colour”.⁵¹ Small, smooth, and delicate, not only is a beautiful object invariable, but, most significantly, it is also contained and easily mastered. The “mental state of relaxation” is traditionally produced to affirm the (masculine) authoritative subject, while defining traditionally feminine qualities in opposition; indeed, the beautiful relegates the feminine to the position of object. Thus, through the traditional ideas of beauty in Western thought, binaries of the masculine subject and feminine object are reaffirmed and compounded. Doll-like characteristics—the small, smooth, and delicate—appear to perfectly exemplify this traditional definition of Western beauty.

The introduction of both visual and material plastic enables the appearance of smooth edges and angles all the more. Barbie, and representations of Barbie doll-like corporeality, seems to affix precisely to the tenets of the beautiful. However, as Barthes insinuates in “Plastic”, the smoothness that defines plastic also makes it a slippery substance. Thus, while plastic can be read as another factor in the promotion of the Western doll-like beauty standard, it is not so easily contained. Plastic slips away from such mastery. Drawing upon plastic’s “transmutation”, Barthes offers one compelling interpretation of the substance.⁵² Plastic, he notes, is “in essence the stuff of alchemy”.⁵³ Such a comparison is crucial to understanding the power of plastic as a cultural object. Its potentials and limitations for a Barbie doll-like corporeality and subjectivity, and its corresponding relationship to conventional notions of beauty, can be re-defined through this concept.

Understood to be magical in its invention, alchemy was also the scientific precursor to modern-day chemistry. Based in the medieval era, alchemy’s transformative symbolism has persisted into modern times. Unfortunately, however, as Battersby notes, so too has its “distaste” for the feminine.⁵⁴ The “alchemical process” is “an attempt to turn material that is ‘cold’, ‘wet’, ‘sterile’ and ‘female’ into a perfection of form (gold and androgynous) by first rendering it hot and dry (male)”.⁵⁵ Battersby goes on to elucidate that, in alchemical symbolism, femininity “is explicitly linked to matter; and to the imperfect: to blackness, coldness, wetness, inertness and the unformed”.⁵⁶ It is a study and practice in which predetermined unruly feminine (and

⁵⁰ Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 110.

⁵¹ Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 7-8.

⁵² Barthes, “Plastic,” 97.

⁵³ Barthes, “Plastic,” 97.

⁵⁴ Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 105.

⁵⁵ Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 106.

⁵⁶ Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 106.

racialized) qualities are removed in the transition or “transmutation” from base materials into a “gold and androgynous” ideal.

Significantly, the characteristics that communicate the alchemical process align with what Gronberg discusses in regards to the modern mannequin. Noting that the mannequin often had “‘skin’ that was ‘gilt’ or silvered over”,⁵⁷ she identifies the physical markers that allude to alchemy’s metallic signification. Gronberg suggests that these qualities work in conjunction with what she calls the “eradication of the ‘naturalistic’ female body”, which, she believes, was a typical consequence of the redesign of the industrialized figures.⁵⁸ This reading of the mannequin implies that Battersby’s assessment of alchemy is at work in the Western trope of woman-as-doll. If interpreted in this way, plastic and Barbie doll-like representations do not have to be demarcated as static objects, but, rather, can be active machines. The problem with this reading for representations of the feminine subject is that in order to be dynamic, a plastic and doll-like figure must disavow all feminine symbolism.

While the slippery qualities of plastic indicate material, symbolic, and corporeal dynamism, perhaps its posthuman potential for the feminine subject only stretches so far. Iain Morland quite rightly points out that “plasticity is human”; it is “historically and culturally contingent” upon “humanism”.⁵⁹ As such, the innovation and flexibility of the material must be considered in conversation with our humanist attempts to “improve upon nature, even transcend it”.⁶⁰ Given this assertion, representations of corporeal plasticity become humanist interventions, further insisting that “we are not yet plastic enough”.⁶¹ If humanism is traditionally linked with the masculine, and nature to the feminine, as Battersby suggests, then plastic, even at its most wondrous, is reiterating the discursive and embodied “eradication” of femininity. Plastic, then, becomes a contested site of freedoms and limitations.

Toying with the Posthuman

Outlining the Western cultural trope of woman-as-doll sheds light upon its constructedness in both historical and contemporary representations. Yet, attempting to define its cultural meaning in terms of feminine subjectivity suggests aporia. “Doll-like” in its signification conjures beauty in the most classical sense, but a plastic and doll-like representation toys with this simple reading. One way to account for the malleability of the subject/object divide presented by a plastic and doll-like representation is to consider it by way of the magic of alchemy. Unfortunately, a symbolic reading of the alchemical process swiftly returns discussions to a falsely gendered binary. Indeed, such a reading leaves us to speculate whether becoming Barbie doll-like is the most masculine bodily intervention one can attempt. While this may be a productive query, it also falls back on the humanist narrative where “[m]aleness and femaleness must be considered the opposing, mutually exclusive limits of human plasticity”.⁶² I am not

⁵⁷ Gronberg, “Beware Beautiful Women,” 379.

⁵⁸ Gronberg, “Beware Beautiful Women,” 379.

⁵⁹ Iain Morland, “Plastic Man: Intersex, Humanism and the Reimer Case,” *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communications and the Self* (Special Edition: Posthuman conditions, ed. Neil Badmington), 3. 2/4. 1 (2007): 95.

⁶⁰ Meikle, *American Plastic*, 2.

⁶¹ Morland, “Plastic Man,” 95.

⁶² Morland, “Plastic Man,” 93.

satisfied with this reading, and think that the plastic Barbie doll and its referential visual representations may present an alternative to such a dichotomy.

The Barbie doll's plasticity does not allow for the complete erasure of femininity on which the alchemical process seems to rely. Rather, the "eradication of the 'naturalistic' female body" is complicated in the Barbie doll's curvaceous form. Possessing the exaggerated shape of a hyperfeminine figure without the significant gendered markers of nipples or defined genitalia, the doll occupies an in-between state, suggesting that its signification may work to disrupt conventional ideas of gendered subjectivity. As such, a Barbie doll-like representation of plastic corporeality can be a site both of discursive tradition and gendered ambiguity of feminine object and masculine subject.

This state of dissolution is exemplified in the Moschino advertisement. Here, what is edited, elongated, and smoothed over also calls attention to the tradition of ideal beauty in the West, while elucidating the tensions of these traditional gendered cues. When feminine somatics and plastic become coupled and sometimes visually indistinguishable, Toffoletti asserts that there may be room to subvert "the ideals of autonomy and origins that structure" a fixed divide between masculine subject and feminine object.⁶³ Rather than reducing femininity to a static object or, indeed, to the nonhuman, she contends that "as the distance between ourselves and our cultural objects falls away", a plastic and Barbie doll-like representation of subjectivity can be understood as flexible and "always in process".⁶⁴ Reading visual narratives of plastic corporeality in this way complicates conventional understandings of femininity in the West, and reveals the potential for Barbie doll-like representation in posthuman terms.

Yet, as we have seen, representations of the feminine body as plastic, as doll-like, and as the conflation of the two, are steeped in cultural meaning that cannot be ignored. Not only does this meaning provide a significant context for a plastic and Barbie doll-like corporeality in the West, but it also helps determine what standards are cast and recast for the contemporary beauty ideal and its ramifications for the feminine subject. Elaine L. Graham reminds readers that

What is at stake, supremely, in the debate about the implications of digital, genetic, cybernetic and biomedical technologies is precisely what (and who) will define authoritative notions of normative, exemplary, desirable humanity into the twenty-first century.⁶⁵

Thus, traditions in technology, language, aesthetics, and the history of beauty, public spaces, and consumerism all play vital roles in determining the shapes that contemporary, plasticized Barbie doll-like depictions take. As a result, these narratives and discursive practices also define which bodies and subjectivities are both normalized and marginalized.

Embracing and questioning a Barbie doll-like posthumanism in this way, as it has the flexibility to open up possibilities for the feminine subject while also sliding back into cultural hierarchies, allows us to conclude with a rounding back to the central signification of plastic and the Barbie doll. It was only a few short years after Barthes wrote "Plastic" that the Barbie doll slipped off of Mattel's factory conveyor belts and

⁶³ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 69.

⁶⁴ Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 72.

⁶⁵ Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 11.

onto department store shelves. Ever since, the doll has been a mainstay in late twentieth-century “plastic-fantastic” iconography.⁶⁶ As cultural object (and icon), the Barbie doll is a shining example of plastic’s ubiquity and its ambiguity, its potential and its artifice. In many ways, the Barbie doll is synonymous with plastic. The symbolic significance of the plastic Barbie doll seems to extend to the visual trope of becoming Barbie doll-like as well. Digital editing, technological “enhancement”, and mass production and distribution reaffirm its ubiquity; the plastic and Barbie doll-like beauty standard’s pervasiveness contributes to a broader cultural discourse of race and class-based hegemony. Yet, plastic and Barbie doll-like representations also exist within an ambiguous space where replacing fleshy bodies with a seemingly appealing plastic sheen sets up a contemporary conundrum in terms of feminine embodiment and subjectivity. It is out of artifice that a plastic and Barbie doll-like corporeality works to rupture the static binaries of the masculine subject and the feminine object. And, it is from this place of slippery uncertainty that plastic and Barbie doll-like representations may be at their most aspirational.

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Frumuse e de plastic: construc ii ale unui ideal feminin vestic

Articolul de fa a examineaz  tropul vizual al unui standard de frumuse e artificială de tipul păpu ii Barbie  n reprezentări contemporane ale personificării  i subiectivit ţii feminine. Lu nd  n considera ie originile tehnologice, istorice, lingvistice  i estetice ale acestui fenomen, articolul urmăre te procesul prin care nara iunea culturală a femeii-ca-păpu ă a pregătit scena pentru manifestările contemporane de acest fel  i cum plasticul  i-a făcut la r ndul lui loc  n discurs. Articolul  ncearcă s  reveleze implica iile  n timp ale fenomenului femeii-ca-păpu ă asupra subiectivit ţii feminine  n Vest si s  sugereze posibilită ile  i limitările pe care o corporalitate din plastic ca cea a păpu ii Barbie le poate avea asupra subiectului feminin  ntr-o perspectivă postumană.