

MG Episode 2: Barbie X Petro-Capitalism

SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

[Material Girls Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Marcelle Kosman 00:29

Hello and welcome to Material Girls, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

Hannah McGregor 00:37

And I'm Hannah McGregor and hey, Marcelle. Have you seen the new Barbie movie yet?

Marcelle Kosman 00:43

No, I haven't. We're recording this episode in the past and the movie hasn't been released yet. What about you? Have you seen it?

Hannah McGregor 00:51

No. Same reasons. Yeah, it's actually not, just not out yet, but I'm gonna.

Marcelle Kosman 00:56

[Marcelle laughs] I also am gonna and like, weirdly excited about it. Okay, but listen, instead of talking about a movie that we haven't seen, I would love it if we could just play a little game.

Hannah McGregor 01:11

I mean, it sounds like the beginning of a Saw movie, but okay.

Marcelle Kosman 01:17

[Marcelle laughs] Wouldn't know, haven't seen it. Them, haven't seen any of them.

Hannah McGregor 01:21

I only know them from cultural references. Too scary.

Marcelle Kosman 01:24

All right, Hannah. I have for you some Barbie trivia.

Hannah McGregor 01:29

Whoo. I like Barbie. I am bad at trivia. Let's go.

Marcelle Kosman 01:32

This is going to be so fun. Okay. Question, the first: Barbie hit the shelves in 1959. What is Barbie's astrological sign?

Hannah McGregor 01:44

Libra.

Marcelle Kosman 01:45

Oh good guess! That is incorrect. **[Sound effect of buzzer plays]** It's Pisces.

Hannah McGregor 01:50

Oh my god. Pisces was my first instinct. And then I stopped and went back. I was like she acts like a Libra.

Marcelle Kosman 01:57

Question, The two: Barbie's full name is Barbara Millicent Roberts. Hannah, is Roberts her name from birth or a name she acquired from marriage?

Hannah McGregor 02:10

Barbie is not married so it must be her name from birth.

Marcelle Kosman 02:12

Correct. Barbie has never been married. Okay, speaking of never been married. Question three. Ken Carson is the name of Barbie's long time on again off again boyfriend. He was introduced in 1961. What is the longest duration The couple has been off, as in broken up?

Hannah McGregor 02:35

Wow. Officially broken up. I'm gonna say two years.

Marcelle Kosman 02:40

Great guess. It's seven years. Their longest split was from 2004 to 2011.

Hannah McGregor 02:50

Wow. Marcelle, quick follow up question actually just on that one. How do you know they're broken up? Did you ask Ken?

Marcelle Kosman 02:59

All of the answers to all of these questions I did gather from the internet, but it is important to know that this information is official. It is Barbie canon. So Mattel Corporation advertising campaigns, Mattel corporation press releases. Barbie lore is like basically celebrity gossip for a person who isn't a real person.

Hannah McGregor 03:24

Really good stuff. Okay.

Marcelle Kosman 03:27

Hey Hannah, question four: how many sisters does Barbie have?

Hannah McGregor 03:30

One, Midge. I mean, Skipper. One, Skipper.

Marcelle Kosman 03:36

That was close. Oh. Yes, Skipper is her sister, however interestingly-

Hannah McGregor 03:42

Oh, does she have a weird baby sister, like a little toddler?

Marcelle Kosman 03:46

Yes. Yes, Kelly. You're thinking of Kelly. Yeah, Kelly was introduced in 1995. But retired in 2010. So-

Hannah McGregor 03:53

Oh what a sinister thing to do to a child. Hm, Kelly isn't actually working for us as a brand, so we're going to retire her. Eeeeeee.

Marcelle Kosman 04:01

So does that mean that Kelly is dead? I don't know.

Hannah McGregor 04:05

No, no, no, no, it means that Barbie decided that having a four year old sister and no parents is sort of cramping her breezy lifestyle. And so she sent Kelly off to live with her aunt and uncle on a farm. Don't worry, Marcelle. She's running free on a farm.

Marcelle Kosman 04:22

Sure. Good. Good. All right. Question five: In addition to making Barbies of color starting in the 1980s, Barbie has had friendships with women of color since the 1960s. What is the name of Barbie's first Black best friend introduced in 1968?

Hannah McGregor 04:42

My gut says Whitney, but I think that's wrong based on your face and also just that I don't remember. But also how can you have friends in the 1960s that didn't exist until the 1980's?

Marcelle Kosman 04:59

So first the answer is Christie. Christie O'Neill was introduced in 1968. So here's what is getting sticky for us. Barbie is the name of the main Barbie doll. But we call all of the dolls Barbies, but that's just a consumer thing. Like calling all tissues Kleenex. They are not Barbie dolls. They are dolls. They're just dolls. And so Barbie has had friends of color since the 60s that you could buy. Christie is not a Barbie. She's a doll.

Hannah McGregor 05:44

Gotcha. Released by the Mattel Corporation.

Marcelle Kosman 05:47

Correct. Correct.

Hannah McGregor 05:48

Gotcha. But starting in the 1980s they made Barbie into a woman of color?

Marcelle Kosman 05:53

They didn't change her canonically but they started making versions of Barbie. They started making like Black Barbies. They started making LatinX Barbies.

Hannah McGregor 06:05

The lore is rich and deep and we simply don't have time. Ask me more questions.

Marcelle Kosman 06:10

Okay, question six: Barbie ran for president for the first time in 1992. When did she most recently launch a presidential campaign?

Hannah McGregor 06:21

2016.

Marcelle Kosman 06:22

So close!

Hannah McGregor 06:24

2017.

Marcelle Kosman 06:27

[Marcelle laughs] 2020.

Hannah McGregor 06:28

2020?

Marcelle Kosman 06:29

Yeah, candidate Barbie in 2020. And this time she came with a voter. [Marcelle laughs] One voter, and the Barbie who ran for president in 1992 was Black. Very exciting.

Hannah McGregor 06:44

Wow. Incredible. Wow.

Marcelle Kosman 06:47

Okay, last question. This is a true or false question. And it's kind of a leading question. I really only threw it in because it is funny. In 1997 the band Aqua released the song "Barbie Girl". Hey Coach. Can we go a little Stinger here?

[Soundbite from "Barbie Girl" by Aqua:

Ken: Hi, Barbie.

Barbie: Hi Ken!

Ken: You want to go for a ride?

Barbie: Sure do!

Ken: Jump in!

Barbie: I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world!]

Marcelle Kosman 07:13

[Marcelle sings the tune of "Barbie Girl" by Aqua] Yeah, thank you. It remains one of the best selling singles of all time. And yet, Mattel sued Aqua for trademark infringement. Aqua then countersued Mattel for defamation. In 2002, the US Court of Appeals ruled that quote, "the song was protected as parody" end quote, true or false. On throwing out the defamation suit against Mattel, the judge advised the parties to and I quote, chill.

Hannah McGregor 07:47

I mean, I really want to say false. You made that up. But you know what? Based on context clues I'm gonna say it's true. And that rules.

Marcelle Kosman 07:55

I know. It's so funny. All right, thank you so much for indulging me. I had such a hoot putting that together.

Hannah McGregor 08:05

I loved getting a peek into the Barbie lore and you know that it's just made me hungry to know more about this weird doll and the weird corporation that makes her.

Marcelle Kosman 08:18

Amazing. Well, let's get into it.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 08:23

Okay, Marcelle, it's time to ask: why this, why now? Which is a very materialist question. So a quick reminder and FYI, for new listeners, what we're going to be doing here is a materialist critique, which is a kind of scholarly engagement with a cultural text. The materialism part means we look at modes of production, moments of reception and the historical and ideological context for both. So doing a materialist critique gives us the opportunity to ask: why this, why now?

Marcelle Kosman 09:03

Or in the context of today's episode: Why this at that time?

Hannah McGregor 09:08

Yeah, why this, then? Why is this, why then? Okay, so we're interested in stuff that is Zeitgeist-y, mostly cuz I love saying that word, and that the zeitgeist changes over time, because popularity ebbs and flows just like inflation. Sorry, I'm reading the script here, Marcelle. Is that a typo? Ebbs and flows like inflation?

Marcelle Kosman 09:32

Nope, nope. Just a casual reference to economics to set the mood for this section.

Hannah McGregor 09:39

So is that what we're gonna be talking about today?

Marcelle Kosman 09:41

Yes, we are going to have a super fun conversation about economics, but particularly, we're going to talk a little bit about nostalgia and about 90s Barbie nostalgia, because I gotta say, this new Barbie movie has me feeling like all my feels about the 90s.

Hannah McGregor 09:57

Yeah, I mean, I don't think it's just you, like I feel like everybody's wearing 90s fashion now.

Marcelle Kosman 10:04

I know and you know what, it didn't look good then...

Hannah McGregor 10:06

And it looks fine now. Young people, whatever you're doing, if it makes you happy. Yeah, keep doing it. Just put all of those weird clips in your hair.

Marcelle Kosman 10:18

Okay, Hannah, I have a question for you. All right. Tell me. Did you play with Barbies as a kid? I know you had Totally Hair Barbie.

Hannah McGregor 10:27

I absolutely played with Barbies as a kid. We were one of those like hippie households, where my parents didn't want to buy me plastic toys. And they didn't like that Barbie presented a like, unrealistic model of femininity, and I didn't care. I wanted them. I wanted to play with them. I loved their clothes. I loved their fashion. So I had some Barbies. I did not have a ton of Barbies. I had three older cousins who had a like, all female, who had a remarkable Barbie collection. And when I would visit them, we would do these like epic Barbie make believe games, like soap operas, just like elaborate narratives with their Barbie collections. What about you?

Marcelle Kosman 11:20

So I was an only child. So I spent a lot of time playing in my room alone with my Barbies. And you know what? I had a very strong anti Barbie sentiment when I was a teenager, but I gotta say I got over it. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 11:40

Just experiencing the various waves of feminism within your own heart.

Marcelle Kosman 11:44

Yeah, Barbie was a huge part of my childhood. And, you know, I think like for us as millennials, part of the reasons why Barbie was so impactful for us in the 90s is maybe kind of specific and something that I want us to talk about a little bit, maybe a lot, maybe it's like kind of the whole thing I want to talk about today.

Hannah McGregor 12:05

So it's not just that, like, we have nostalgia for 90s Barbies, because that's when we grew up, like there was something specific about the 90s and Barbie. Why the 90s?

Marcelle Kosman 12:17

So my research for this episode is very chaotic. And I'm going to try to keep it in check. Okay? So Barbie's popularity peaked in the 90s. And so it's not a coincidence that we remember her being so ubiquitous at that time. She has not always been that ubiquitous. There was a particular stretch in the 90s when she was like, the thing. And there are a few reasons why I think this is the case, one that's kind of interesting is that our parents would have been seeing ads for Barbies for their entire lives.

Hannah McGregor 12:55

That's interesting. So we were like the first generation whose parents had always known about Barbie, which sort of naturalizes that as a toy. Cool.

Marcelle Kosman 13:07

Other toy competitors at that same time were focusing largely on toys and games, quote, unquote, for boys, so-

Hannah McGregor 13:16

Cuz of the patriarchy?

Marcelle Kosman 13:17

Well, yeah, obviously and because, I guess, boys need more toys, whereas girls can just help in the kitchen?

Hannah McGregor 13:25

Girls just need small spatulas and small vacuum cleaners.

Marcelle Kosman 13:31

I don't know why this would be the case. But basically in the 90s there was just this huge, untapped girl toy recipient market, and Mattel filled it with Barbies.

Hannah McGregor 13:43

Yeah, and I remember there being like so many Barbies to choose from.

Marcelle Kosman 13:48

Yes, so this was another thing that was particular to the 90s. Like we said, Barbie had been around since 1959. But in the 90s this is a quote from 90s toys.com.

Hannah McGregor 14:03

Good research, Marcelle.

Marcelle Kosman 14:04

I know. You know, I went everywhere for this episode. Quote, "Mattel unleashed a whole new wave of creativity and fashion," end quote, through its Barbie dolls. So like we saw so many different styles of outfits and so many different options for Barbie accessories, and I don't know why I didn't include this in here, but it also wasn't until the 90s that Mattel licensed Barbie merchandise. So there had not been Barbie merch prior to the 90's. So like all this stuff-

Hannah McGregor 14:36

Like Barbie branded backpacks.

Marcelle Kosman 14:40

Exactly. Yes. There was also a Barbie fashion designer game available on CD ROM. It's one of the first design games and it was Barbie, and it was marketed at girls.

Hannah McGregor 14:55

My God. We could do anything we could have any job.

Marcelle Kosman 14:59

Yes Yes, yeah, so the slogan "We girls can do anything" started in the mid 80s. But it really, really kicked into gear in the 90s when we got a whole new roster of Barbie career possibilities. And that is the same era that we got Barbie first running for president. And I think this is a big deal against an incumbent. Right? So like historically, in the US, incumbents win.

Hannah McGregor 15:31

Barbie is here to get Bush Sr out of office.

Marcelle Kosman 15:33

Exactly. I know!

Hannah McGregor 15:37

Honestly, Barbie. Iconic.

Marcelle Kosman 15:40

So like, Barbie is such a complex toy, because of how some people see her as, sort of symbolic of women's emancipation, right? Like, she's unmarried, she owns her own very fabulous home, multiple cars, a camper van. She basically takes care of her siblings.

Hannah McGregor 16:02

She has 500 jobs, like she's got so many PhDs. I don't know how she does it.

Marcelle Kosman 16:09

It's incredible. Whereas, as you pointed out with, like, the concerns that your parents had, she's also like, very reasonably perceived as an anti feminist toy, because of the way that she sells girls on consumerism, and on a very impossible body type and particular types of beauty standards. And-

Hannah McGregor 16:33

Yeah, I remember it being like a really, sort of early feminist messaging for me was people pointing out how impossible it would be to walk if you had Barbies feet and breast size. That functionally they'd made a body that couldn't move through the world. And that was like, Whoa, metaphor. Woah.

Marcelle Kosman 16:59

I know, I know. Man. Okay. Okay. Another kind of key thing here is very, very broad, and I think it really deserves a lot more research than what I had time to do. But it's so interesting. Do you remember, Hannah, this period in the 90s when we thought of toys as an investment?

Hannah McGregor 17:22

Yes, yes. Yes. The Beanie Babies craze. And definitely, that was, I think, the turning point into a sort of relationship to toys where adults would buy them, like would buy limited edition, and then keep them in their packaging, with this idea of like, if you get every new Special Edition Barbie, and you have them all in their packaging, one day, dot dot dot profit, like, really,

everybody was very unclear, I think, about exactly how they would become rich. But you were gonna.

Marcelle Kosman 17:57

Yeah, absolutely. And the toy companies leaned into that, right?

Hannah McGregor 18:03

Of course they did. It made people buy things!

Marcelle Kosman 18:05

Exactly, like they packaged Barbies with the term "collector's edition" on the package. Like how fucking wild is it for the toy company to tell you that this product that they've just launched, like 2 million of onto the shelves is a collector's editions like, oh, well, I'm, I am gonna, I better collect it.

Hannah McGregor 18:28

Oh, my God. I mean, that alone, I feel like we could talk about it all day. But it does sort of make me think like, Okay, people are seeing this mass produced thing. And thinking, if I somehow engage with this economy of mass production in the right way, I will win at it. Like I will beat the economy at its own game, which does make me then want to ask like, what's happening economically?

Marcelle Kosman 19:01

Oh, Hannah.

Hannah McGregor 19:02

I just don't understand the economy. But what's going on in the 90s? It's bad. Right?

Marcelle Kosman 19:07

God, you're so good at this. So actually, the 90s as a decade was a pretty prosperous decade. But the first two years of the 90s were pretty bleak, especially for boomers. **[Marcelle laughs]** Sorry, I shouldn't laugh at them. It was the recession.

Hannah McGregor 19:30

Oh, interesting.

Marcelle Kosman 19:32

So let me give you as quick and dirty a lesson about the 90s recession and plastics manufacturing as I can, okay? Because this is the rabbit hole that I lost myself in putting this episode together.

Hannah McGregor 19:45

So this is what materialist critique will do to you. **[Marcelle laughs]** You're just like, Oh, that's really interesting. The rising production of plastic- oh no!

Marcelle Kosman 19:55

Oh, what was going on like globally? Oh no!! In 1990, Iraq, headed by Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. So the US and a bunch of allies invaded Iraq. This was the first Gulf War. Okay? According to the Canadian government's webpage about the Gulf War, because it has one, I'm going to quote this because- this is some government propaganda, quote, "the West was very concerned with Iraq's ability to restrict access to a large part of the world's oil supply. The United States and other countries began to call out Iraq for their human rights abuses." Those two sentences do not follow. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 20:44

I mean, they follow each other back to back, but they're like, listen, we were really worried about having access to that oil. So we were like, Oh, you actually might be, I think, abusing human rights. And we should actually, for the good of the people. We should probably invade.

Marcelle Kosman 21:02

Yeah, yeah. So it is essential to understand that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait caused something called the 1990 oil price shock. Okay? So this was a spike in oil prices that contributed directly to the recession that impacted much of Western Europe, Canada, the US, Australia, okay? Following the recession, most of these countries did great.

Hannah McGregor 21:30

Okay. Economy picks right back up.

Marcelle Kosman 21:32

This is a pretty short oil shock compared to the OPEC crisis that happened in the 70s. It was only like, technically nine months. And yet it occupies such a huge space in the psyche of like, oh, well, the 90s recession. So this has me thinking about plastic manufacturing, because where does plastic come from, Hannah?

Hannah McGregor 21:57

The same place as oil, right? It's a petroleum byproduct. Yeah. Yeah. So when we make plastics, we're drawing on the same resources. And so an oil shortage may also be a plastic shortage?

Marcelle Kosman 22:09

Yes. It isn't that Exxon Mobil makes plastic, but Exxon Mobil is in bed with Procter and Gamble. Does that make sense?

Hannah McGregor 22:17

Yeah, absolutely. Of course. Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 22:19

So bear with my rabbit holing. Okay?

Hannah McGregor 22:22

So big plastic and big oil are friends.

Marcelle Kosman 22:25

Big plastic and big oil are siblings. Big plastic and Big oil are father and son.

Hannah McGregor 22:31

Is Big Oil, Daddy?

Marcelle Kosman 22:32

Big Oil is Daddy. Big plastic is sonny? Ew. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 22:36

Disgusting. Gross. Disgusting.

Marcelle Kosman 22:40

So quick tangent, Hannah. Do you remember how in the 90s-

Hannah McGregor 22:46

Reduce, reuse, recycle!

Marcelle Kosman 22:47

Reduce, reuse, recycle. That's right.

Hannah McGregor 22:50

I have read a little bit about the fact that the incredibly widespread public education campaigns focusing on recycling were plastic manufacturer propaganda, to discourage us from doing the actual important one, which is to reduce, which is to consume fewer plastics. It was absolutely them being like, Guys, don't even worry about it. You can use as much plastic as you want. Because just give it back to us. And we'll for sure not put it in the ocean, whatever, wherever we're gonna put it, don't even worry. It's not the ocean.

Marcelle Kosman 23:27

Don't even worry about it. It's cool. So like these public service campaigns were textbook public misinformation campaigns. Textbook! And it went on for decades. And we are right to be angry. Okay, so part of this misinformation campaign comes from the fact that in the 80s, plastic was experiencing a deteriorating public image. Okay? So NPR did some phenomenal research about this. They looked at industry documents throughout the decades. They found evidence that the executives from oil and gas giants and plastics people, like Exxon, Chevron, Procter and Gamble, met together in 1989, to discuss how to solve the image of plastics.

And lo and behold, the 90s has a very mainstream, widespread public campaign about recycling plastics. And meanwhile, these companies continue to make billions of dollars selling us on new plastics. So this is wild. Okay. So here's why these things are related. Right? So the oil shock of the 90s stresses out these companies at the same time that they're trying to restore plastics' public image, and they can't do that if it's expensive to produce new plastic, right? New plastic has to be cheap enough. So the oil has to be cheap enough that no one's noticing that they're not recycling.

Hannah McGregor 25:13

So that also freaks out the plastics industry because it makes everything more expensive. Okay, so they come back, they come back after nine months.

Marcelle Kosman 25:21

They come back after nine months, I did my best at looking at like, the actual like-

Hannah McGregor 25:28

It says here in the notes that you looked at Statistics Canada. Which, bless you.

Marcelle Kosman 25:33

I did. So okay, so according to Statistics Canada, the plastic products industry grew steadily between 1990 and 1996. Okay? So that's despite an oil price shock. According to the association of plastics manufacturers, which is a European organization, global plastic production

experienced, and I quote, “continuous growth for more than 50 years,” end quote, beginning in the 1950s. The British plastics Federation has this incredible web page. It has like 10 posters, depicting the history of plastic in a series of significant moments. They quote, “the significant developments and milestones throughout the history of plastics dating back to 1284,” end quote, and I need you to know, Hannah. It includes the introduction of Barbie in 1959.

Hannah McGregor 26:37

Of course it does, of course it does. So we've got this plastics industry, reeling from a brief recession, desperate to reintroduce plastic into people's homes, into people's consumer decisions. And then we've got essentially a sort of misinformation campaign that allows the plastics industry to continue to produce plastic at an unsustainable rate, like that functionally sort of subsidizes plastic production, like makes plastic cheap.

Marcelle Kosman 27:16

And creates in the mind of the consumer, like a reassurance that it's okay to produce new, not recyclable plastic, because so much of it is going to get recycled anyway. So look, we're not thinking about plastic toys and thinking like, well, that's more garbage. We're thinking like, this is a toy.

Hannah McGregor 27:31

Especially not if we're being taught to treat them as collectibles. And at the same time, we've got this sudden massive brand expansion of Barbie not only into like so many new models of the dolls, but also like plastic lunch boxes and functionally plastic backpacks and plastic- Okay, Barbie in the 90s was working for big plastic.

Marcelle Kosman 28:00

Oh my God. Not only was she working for big plastic... Barbie *is* big plastic.

Hannah McGregor 28:08

Oh my God. Yet another example of how corporate lean and feminism ultimately sells us all out. We were impressed because she had 500 jobs. But it turns out that she's been secretly fucking the planet. God damnit, Barbie!

Marcelle Kosman 28:26

I know. I know. So you see why the research for this episode nearly killed me. Right?

Hannah McGregor 28:32

Oh my god. But so fun. So fun. On top of all of this context, are we also going to talk about theory?

Marcelle Kosman 28:38

Yeah, we are. Yeah. Let's do that now.

Hannah McGregor 28:41

Okay, good. Good. I'm so excited.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 28:49

Now it's time for the theory we need. Hannah, do you remember Marshall McLuhan's concept, "The medium is the message"?

Hannah McGregor 29:00

Yeah. I mean, based on my encyclopedic memory, I think we discussed that at length in season 5, episode 7 of *Witch, Please?*

Marcelle Kosman 29:09

That is correct. Yes, we absolutely did. Could you please remind listeners and explain for the new folks in layperson's terms what "the medium is the message" means?

Hannah McGregor 29:22

Yeah, absolutely. So importantly, if you're confused by it, there's a Canadian government produced Heritage Minute, in which you can see an actor playing Marshall McLuhan saying it a couple of times, but doesn't explain what it means. **[Marcelle laughs]** But he does say it. So if you could just kind of a clip here, Coach.

[Heritage Minute Clip 29:45]

Student: Are you saying that the medium is more important than the message it carries?

McLuhan: No, no, no, the medium is not more important than the message. It uhm... It's obvious. The medium *is* the message.]

Hannah McGregor 29:56

Thank you. So McLuhan was essentially interested in the relationship between media and society. And his main argument was that society and its technologies are inseparable. So he

argued that society and technologies are inseparable because the effect of any new technology is so powerful, so far reaching that it will necessarily change the culture that embraces it.

Marcelle Kosman 30:27

Yes, beautifully put Hannah. Generally speaking, McLuhan is talking about what at the time were called electric technologies, which we don't really talk about anymore because electricity is so ubiquitous now. Now we're thinking about digital, but he was deeply suspicious of these technologies, because rather than extending the body like a shovel extends my arm, electric technologies kind of replace brain function.

Hannah McGregor 30:56

Yeah, like how my phone remembers things, so I never have to.

Marcelle Kosman 30:59

Exactly, so I've pulled a few quotations from McLuhan's understanding media, and I was hoping that you would read them for me.

Hannah McGregor 31:08

Oh, my god, I love reading quotes. Okay, quote, The first: "the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action," end quote. Okay, that makes sense. The medium matters, because the medium is what says, like, how we say things and who we can say them to. Next quote, "the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance," end quote. Oh, my God. Yeah, absolutely. This is like the way that social media hasn't created trolls. It didn't turn people into trolls, but it creates the sort of possibility of being inundated at a scale previously impossible by the opinions of assholes in a way that creates the perception that people are worse than they used to be. But it's not that people are worse. It's just that we can hear all of them all the time.

Marcelle Kosman 32:24

Yes, absolutely. Okay. One more. And this is a long one.

Hannah McGregor 32:28

This is a thick quote. Quote, "technological media are staples or natural resources-" Exactly. Ah, yeah. Yeah, good job, Marcelle. **[Marcelle laughs]** Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, this is hot. "-Exactly as our coal and cotton and oil. Anybody will concede that a society whose economy is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton or grain is going to have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result. Stress on a few major staples creates extreme

instability in the economy, but great endurance in the population. Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become fixed charges on the entire psychic life of the community. And this pervasive fact creates the unique cultural flavor of any society," end quote.

Marcelle Kosman 33:27

Mhmm, okay.

Hannah McGregor 33:29

So this is great, right? This is an extension of this idea that like, the technologies that dominate our societies, shapes our economies, our understanding of the world, our psychic lives. This is at the heart of a lot of the arguments happening in the 1950s, for example, about like, why Canada needed its own Broadcasting Corporation and its own television and its own because like, like, we needed our own infrastructure, because like, you need to have those technologies if your societies gonna be organized around them.

Marcelle Kosman 34:03

Yes, yeah. If your society isn't organized around your own infrastructure, it's gonna get organized around somebody else's infrastructure.

Hannah McGregor 34:11

For sure. But there's also such an intriguing connection here between media and the material resources that like, allow an actual, you know, that are central to an actual economy. And that reminded us as the plastic company propaganda does, that the technologies of communication and a relationship to material resources are kind of inextricable.

Marcelle Kosman 34:47

Absolutely. Yes. Yeah. Thinking of technological media as a natural resource, and thinking of natural resources as media, I think, really helps us to understand why for example, Alberta, even though we know that we're running out of oil, Alberta as a people is incapable of thinking beyond oil and gas production, right, that's the endurance in the population. Right? So it's economy, unstable. Solution? Lean harder into oil and gas production.

Hannah McGregor 35:27

Yeah. Oh my god. Okay, so media is a resource, resource is a media.

Marcelle Kosman 35:32

Yeah. Yeah.

Hannah McGregor 35:33

Okay.

Marcelle Kosman 35:35

Great, so listen, there are a lot of moving parts. In this episode, my brain is stressed to capacity. So now we're going to use McLuhan to segue into your friend and mine. Roland Barthes!

Hannah McGregor 35:52

Roland Barthes! **[French music plays]** Similar historical period, different language and country.

Marcelle Kosman 36:02

Totally. So right around the same time, 1950s, McLuhan was freaking out about electric technologies. Roland Barthes is writing a series of essays on things that were at the time current events, not so current anymore, but still, I would say, prescient. So folks might be familiar with these episodes. They're published in a book called *Mythologies*. And we're gonna look at Barthes's analysis of the myth of plastic.

Hannah McGregor 36:36

Oh, my God, there's an essay in *Mythologies* about plastic?

Marcelle Kosman 36:40

He does! He had gone to a plastics exhibition, and I think was very stoned because he's into it.

Hannah McGregor 36:50

[Hannah laughs] Oh, my God, it's me! Am I the modern day Barthes?

Marcelle Kosman 36:53

It reads very much like whoaaaaa!

Hannah McGregor 36:56

Whoa, man. Woah, man, have you seen this shit?

Marcelle Kosman 36:59

So he in this essay describes plastic as, quote, "More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation. It is ubiquity made visible," end quote.

Hannah McGregor 37:13

Yes, yes, it is. Mass production is the possibility of mass production; it is the fantasy of an unlimited resource even though we know it's not unlimited.

Marcelle Kosman 37:22

Exactly. So he is literally looking at like, I guess, at the exhibition they like literally showed like how it goes from these little crystals and transforms into objects.

Hannah McGregor 37:36

It starts as crystals? Don't. I simply have no time to learn how plastic is made.

Marcelle Kosman 37:41

So he says, quote, "transforming the original crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects, plastic is all told, a spectacle to be deciphered. The very spectacle of its end products," end quote.

Hannah McGregor 37:58

Oh my god. Rest in peace, Barthes, he would have loved to Totally Hair Barbie.

Marcelle Kosman 38:06

[Marcelle laughs] Oh, so true. Totally Hair Barbie is absolutely a spectacle.

Hannah McGregor 38:12

What a spectacle. That is the spectacle of the end product.

Marcelle Kosman 38:15

Mhm. So okay, so what do you think, Hannah? Talk to me about this phrasing. "Plastic is the spectacle of its end products." What do we make of this?

Hannah McGregor 38:24

I mean, it's so interesting, because I feel like culturally, we don't see, engage with, or talk about plastic as a raw material. In a way, like with so many other raw materials, we have a kind of shared cultural sense of like, paper is made from trees, and we think about trees. I said, we don't have time to get into how plastic is made. But I don't know. And that's really surprising because I came up in the era of short educational videos taking you inside a factory to show you how something's made.

Marcelle Kosman 38:59

Totally. But I also think that might be partly because plastic is also not the raw material, right? Plastic is the product. It's the byproduct of petroleum.

Hannah McGregor 39:10

Oh my god. Oh my god. So even my attempt to think about plastic itself fell immediately into the spectacle of the end product.

Marcelle Kosman 39:22

Yes. Ah, okay. Okay. Okay. Another thing that Barthe points out, that is so mythical about plastic, is that and I quote, "it can become buckets, as well as jewels," end quote, and because of plastic, quote, "The hierarchy of substances is abolished. A single one replaces them all. The whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself since we are told they are beginning to make plastic aortas," end quote.

Hannah McGregor 40:00

Life in plastic, it's fantastic. **[Soundbite from Barbie Girl by Aqua plays, "Life in plastic, it's fantastic"]** Plastic is particularly, you know, in the mid 20th century, being positioned as this, like it's a similar era to brutalist architecture when they were making everything out of concrete. There was this real interest in the sort of democratizing function of a single medium, that everything could be made out of.

Marcelle Kosman 40:29

Yes. And that democratization is something that is highlighted in this last long quote that I would love for you to read for us.

Hannah McGregor 40:41

Quote, "The fashion for plastic highlights an evolution in the myth of imitation materials. It is well known that their use is historically bourgeois in origin. But until now, imitation materials have always indicated pretension. They belonged to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use. They aimed at reproducing cheaply, the rarest substances, diamonds, silks, feathers, furs, silver, all the luxurious brilliance of the world. Plastic has climbed down, it is a household material. It is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic." Ugh. I love Barthes. "For the first time artifice aims at something common, not rare. And as an immediate consequence, the age-old function of nature is modified, it is no longer the idea, the pure substance to be regained, or imitated, an artificial matter more bountiful than all the natural deposits is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms." End quote.

Yeah! **[Marcelle laughs]** Yeah. Okay, so we've got now, like, when plastic was being used to imitate other things, it continued to center, the materiality of those originals quote, unquote, the diamonds, the silks, the feathers, the silver, you know, the ideal was that thing, and we were just trying to imitate it. But the entry of plastic into every aspect of our day to day lives, decenters it as imitation of another sort of naturally produced thing, and turns it into, like we don't, we're not imitating anything. Plastic is just what stuff is made of. And in fact, we can make so much stuff out of plastic, that now you don't have to base it on other things, you can just invent new, whatever, because plastic can be anything.

Marcelle Kosman 42:52

That's right. Plastic can be anything. Plastic is cheap. If we think about toys, you can play with plastic toys, you can drop them on the ground, you can trade them, you can throw them in the garbage when they're no longer fun. And it doesn't matter, because there's always more plastic.

Hannah McGregor 43:12

Yeah. And then if we go back to McLuhan, and his argument that like, a society is transformed by the ubiquity of new technologies, plastic is like *the* medium writ large, you know, from the 50s escalating into the 90s. Like plastic becomes the sort of the medium around which are like collective imaginations or understandings get reshaped. So it's like, no surprise at all, that our sort of collective imagination around, say, a really central cultural conversation like gender would actually be something that we are working out via the literal materiality of plastic.

Marcelle Kosman 44:04

Yes. As I was putting this together, I was thinking, okay, so like, if the medium is the message... is the message of plastic, just plastic? Like is the message of plastic, just consumerism, just consumption, endless consumption?

Hannah McGregor 44:24

Oh, my God, Marcelle. I've got full body chills, **[Marcelle laughs]** and I am really ready to hear what you're going to do in this essay.

Marcelle Kosman 44:34

Okay, okay. Okay.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 44:39

Okay, Marcelle, you've set us up for a big claim. What's your hot take?

Marcelle Kosman 44:44

Okay, I really want to start with the caveat that this claim is more theoretical than any hot take I've ever had before. Because I don't have the data, okay?

Hannah McGregor 44:55

It's 17 points long! **[Hannah laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 45:00

Yes, because it's very theoretical. Okay? okay, okay.

Hannah McGregor 45:05

Everybody, I need you to know that usually our "In this essay, I will" statements are one to two sentences, and Marcelle's is five bullet points.

Marcelle Kosman 45:16

Yeah with multiple sentences in each bullet point. Okay, ready?

Hannah McGregor 45:20

I'm ready.

Marcelle Kosman 45:24

Okay. **[Marcelle clears her throat]** The recession in the early 90s, paired with the increasing lobbying power of plastics manufacturing and the oil and gas sector created a consumer culture wherein plastic toys proliferated, yet, we're simultaneously perceived as valuable, a potential investment in one's future, something to buy and something to save. As an iconic toy whose popularity peaked in the post recession climate of the 1990s, Barbie is a perfect microcosm of the myth of plastic, like the medium out of which she is made Barbie gives us the illusion that she can be anything and that by living vicariously through her, so can we.

But Barbie *can't* actually be anything. She can only represent the fantasy of possibility. She is pretence incarnate. Moreover, our capitalist relation to Barbie is likewise a pretense. Many of us were encouraged to believe that collecting Barbies would be an investment in our own financial success. We collected Barbies that were marketed to us specifically as collector's editions. But the reality is that so many people collected these special collector's editions that we ensured our future market oversaturation, meaning that these collector's editions are worth less than what our money would have been worth if we just stuffed it in a mattress. Ultimately, Barbie is the promise of liberal feminism, she provides an optimistic and intoxicating incentive to literally

buy into Petro-capitalism, a mode of production that has and continues to threaten the possibility of our own futurity. In this essay, I will...

Hannah McGregor 47:17

Okay, so I was right when I said earlier, the Barbies' just leading feminist is fucking us all over. Oh, oh my god!

Marcelle Kosman 47:31

I'm sorry that was such a long thesis, but every part was essential.

Hannah McGregor 47:37

I feel like I just came. **[Marcelle laughs]** I'm gonna go lie down and smoke a cigarette.

Marcelle Kosman 47:49

[Marcelle laughs] That's it, that's all I got. That's all I got. I'm out. I'm out for the rest of this recording.

Hannah McGregor 47:55

The rest of the series. I mean, that's it. **[Marcelle laughs]** That is like, it's so complex, and I love it. And okay, so, as I'm wrapping my brain around all the moving parts of this, I want to start with the feminism and work backwards. So Barbie, herself, she's not a medium. Plastic is her medium. Barbie is a metonym for plastic. For folks who haven't been studying classical rhetoric recently, a metonym is a rhetorical device, where something that is a part sort of rhetorically stands in for a larger whole.

So for example, when we are talking about the large media infrastructure that produces and disseminates news, we will often call it the press. And that's a metonym because the press is like the physical thing that you print newspapers on. But we refer to this whole complex industry as the press. Or the royal family, and everything involved in the monarchy is sometimes referred to as the crown. Which is like one physical object. So similarly, Barbie has a sort of metonymic relationship to this really complex industry that undergirds her existence, her production, her materiality, her popularity, and that is plastic, as a medium and a material, which McLuhan demonstrates to us are kind of inextricable in late capitalism.

Which is such a helpful thing to remember that like the medium is the message means that the message is the medium, like that they go back and forth, that like understanding the materiality of media also means you can understand the media functions of material things. Man, we should make a whole podcast about understanding the relation between media and materiality.

What a great idea! **[Marcelle laughs]** Yeah, this is it, that is what we're doing. I can't do it any harder!

Marcelle Kosman 50:24

Can I just quickly interrupt you to share with you a really, really powerful, yet another quotation, from yet another reading.

Hannah McGregor 50:36

Marcelle, You did 4000 times more work for this episode than I-

Marcelle Kosman 50:44

I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop. And then I got to a point where it was like, I gotta start hyperlinking all of my sources because I can't keep track. I couldn't stop consuming. **[Marcelle laughs]** Good joke, Coach. Good joke. Okay, okay. Okay. So I wasn't sure when this would be useful. So I just sort of plugged it in at the end as like just a little just a little treat that we can pull in at any time.

Hannah McGregor 51:07

A dessert quotation! Yum!

Marcelle Kosman 51:08

A dessert quotation. Okay. This little nugget comes from an article written by Charlie Squire, which Coach sent me while I was doing research for this episode, and which Coach sent me because friend of the pod, Jackson Bird had restacked it on Substack, which is a new social medium that I'm slowly trying to...

Hannah McGregor 51:30

I don't know what it means to restack something. Bless you Jackson.

Marcelle Kosman 51:35

Me neither, but it sounds cute! Anyway, so-

Hannah McGregor 51:37

The article is called "Mattel, Malibu Stacy, and the Dialectics of the Barbie Polemic". We simply don't have time to discuss what a dialectic is.

Marcelle Kosman 51:47

We absolutely do not.

Hannah McGregor 51:48

And it's not because neither of us understand it. **[Marcelle laughs]** But if you, listener, are somebody who really understands, like really gets what a dialectic is, write it in, let us know. And we'll have you on an episode to explain it to us! **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 52:09

Okay, so here is the quotation. Okay, ready? "When we speak about Barbie, it is shockingly easy to recognize her personhood, to describe who she is. It is much harder to talk about Barbie in terms of *what* she is: a combination of plastics available for purchase." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 52:34

Marcelle, I'm going to point out that in reading that quote, you accidentally change the phrase "what it is" to "what she is", which is pretty, a pretty good indication of exactly what the quote is saying.

Marcelle Kosman 52:49

Oh my god.

Hannah McGregor 52:50

Okay, so let me just reread that so we can hear the difference. Quote, "when we speak about Barbie, it is shockingly easy to recognize her personhood to describe who she is. It is much harder to talk about Barbie in terms of what it is: a combination of plastics available for purchase." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 53:11

It feels wrong! It feels wrong!

Hannah McGregor 53:13

It. Yeah, it does feel wrong. It feels wrong to be like Barbie.. like it. It's a chunk of plastic and a very elaborate marketing campaign.

Marcelle Kosman 53:25

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Barbie is just marketing for plastic.

Hannah McGregor 53:31

Which is exactly what Aqua's song is saying. Aqua's song. I mean, honestly, "life in plastic. It's fantastic. You can brush my hair, undress me anywhere." Like I kind of get why Mattel was like shhhhh, don't say it out loud. Stop talking about the fact that this is a plastic thing!

Marcelle Kosman 53:56

[Marcelle sings] "imagination, life is your creation"

Hannah McGregor 54:05

[Hannah mimics Kens voice, singing: "C'mon Barbie, Lets go party"]

The other thing that this just evoked for me, is the conversations happening around plastic surgery in the 90s, which I feel like sort of the 90s was the era of the mainstreaming of plastic surgery. And while plastic is being used in a different sense in the phrase 'plastic surgery' because like, plastic is also an adjective that refers to something being like, malleable or changeable. So plastic surgery is about like, sort of the malleability like the transform ability of the human body via surgical intervention. The discourse around plastic surgery conflated the two in the sense that it was like oh, we're turning our bodies into plastic. And so we get it like conversations about breast implants as though they're like chunks of plastic, though like, I don't know, is silicone plastic?

Marcelle Kosman 55:07

I assume it's a petroleum byproduct.

Hannah McGregor 55:10

So, there might actually be the literal inserting of plastics or plastic-esque things into our bodies. And that's kind of the whole point about like, plastic arteries and plastic that like, our bodies are becoming plastic, the adjective in part via what Barthes is saying about the sort of replacement of nature with the ideal of plastic as a space of total imagination. And there's, like, I think, some sort of intriguing liberatory possibilities in that in the sort of decentering of nature, as the sort of primary way to think about us and our bodies. But it is, like that era of "our bodies have become transformable" is tied into these anxieties about like, what if we ourselves just become plastic things?

Marcelle Kosman 56:06

Right, right. Right. And like, I wonder if maybe the flip side of that is a very, I think healthy hesitancy or resistance to the idea of unproblematized plastic consumption. Right? So like, you're totally right, that centering nature can create a kind of essentialism that forbids imagination, right? And play.

Hannah McGregor 56:36

Yeah, but at the same time, the total replacement of nature, with the endless possibilities of plastic, becomes a way that sort of consumerism and capitalism can totally reshape our society. Like if plastic becomes the medium, then that is how we're sort of shaped imaginatively around this fantasy of an unlimited resource that like recycling itself is a fantasy of unlimitedness, right? That's like, Don't worry, this plastic can go back into the big bubbling plastic vat. We'll just melt it down, and we'll make new plastic out of it, and it never will never run out. Don't even worry about it. Don't even worry about it. Don't even think about it.

I mean, this also makes me think about how much Barbie has become a queer icon. As we have learned from our reading of Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp", like camp aesthetic is a sort of celebration of the mass produced and a celebration of surfaces without substance. And Sontag's argument is that a big part of that is that queer people have understood that like, a focus on appearances, and aesthetics might be a way to get liberation, essentially, like, if we agree to do everybody's makeover, cut everybody's hair and redesign everybody's homes, maybe they won't hate crime us or put us in prison for being gay. Like, that's the idea, right? And so this, this fixation, on surfaces, on plasticity, on transformability, on play, on artifice, like that all makes sense to me as part of a conversation about queer aesthetics as well.

Marcelle Kosman 58:31

And, and, and but, but, and all of the possibilities that plastic gives us are still possibilities without plastic, but because of the power, and because of the way that plastic has fundamentally shaped our society, we can't even imagine these kinds of possibilities without feeling like plastic is the thing that makes them possible. Do you see what I'm saying? Like-

Hannah McGregor 59:07

I really do see what you're saying because the mediums the message!

Marcelle Kosman 59:11

Yeah. Yeah!

Hannah McGregor 59:14

Your point, Marcelle, about the way that plastic is the way in which we imagine unlimitedness when in fact, imagination does not need to function through a metaphor of plasticity. And the absence of plastic would not mean the absence of creativity, or a return to some sort of essentialist fixation on nature. It really makes me think about how the linking of plastic to unlimited possibility is fundamental to a global economic order that wants us to understand petroleum as synonymous with endlessness, as synonymous with unlimited possibility, that wants to link those two things together, inextricably, so that when we think about an end to

plastics, an end to petroleum, an end to oil, so many people immediately start thinking about the loss of freedom. That if we can't have all the plastics we want, then do we lose the ability? Like do we become less free? Do we globally become less free? Do we become imaginatively less free? Do we have to return to some pre plastic world?

Marcelle Kosman 1:00:51

Even financially or class based freedom, right, like Barthes was saying about the democratization of plastic. So like, oh, well, all of a sudden, is it only going to be rich people who can have certain things because the rest of us can't afford to have those things?

Hannah McGregor 1:01:08

Yeah, that fundamental infiltration of plastic into the imagination, of what it means to be free, I mean, the imagination of what it means to imagine really now leads me to think that Barbie is actually like a really good explanation for our global climate crisis.

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:32

Honestly, Hannah, I think you're right.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:33

You're still gonna see the movie though, right?

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:36

Can I be honest? After this conversation, I don't know. **[Hannah laughs]** I mean, probably. I'm probably gonna go see it but like, I might not.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:47

I'm just gonna yell Barthes quotes at the screen while i'm there

.

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:52

I'm going to see it but I'm going to be really critical of it! **[Hannah laughs]**

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 1:02:03

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Marcelle Kosman 1:02:33

I just started to feel really bad about how much of our merch is probably made of plastic. If you-

Hannah McGregor 1:02:40

Ugh, we should divest from plastic...

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:43

Help! If you have questions, comments, concerns, thoughts about plastic and our, you know, the mechanisms through which we continue to proliferate it by selling you merch or praise—especially praise – come hang out with us at @ohwitchplease on Instagram or Twitter, or on tiktok at ohwitchpleasepod. You can also check out our Patreon at patreon.com/ohwitchplease. Special thanks to everyone on the Witch, Please Productions team, including our digital content coordinator Gaby Iori [Soundbite of BOING], our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix[Soundbite of record rewinding] , our sound engineer Erik Magnus [Soundbite of chimes], and our endlessly patient executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! [Soundbite of sports whistle]

Hannah McGregor 1:03:47

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Echa S
Anne V
Audrey W
Michelle Y

Marcelle Kosman 1:04:11

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens, but until then:

Hannah McGregor 1:04:19

Later, gators!

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]