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Abstract: This brief, reflective piece considers the function and nature of the memory of girlhood culture, and how that signifies in relation to narratives of the self, in the context of broader discursive constructions of girlhood.

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“Come fossi una bambola?": Girlhood Studies and Memory in Italy

DANIELLE HIPKINS

I recently started a project on memories of Barbie-play amongst Italian women and girls. The study was not ready to be included in this issue of *g/s/i*, but I was led to the work by a series of considerations about girlhood and memory that might still feed into the broader considerations of this journal issue. As this issue demonstrates, there is some inspiring work taking place in Italy talking directly to girls about their cultural consumption, and we need much more such research, which addresses their consumption of toys, popular magazines, film, television, and social media.¹ However what I want to consider here is the function and nature of the memory of girlhood culture, and how that signifies in relation to narratives of the self, in the context of broader discursive constructions of girlhood.

The inspiration to research in this area came in part from an exhibition I first visited in May 2016 at the *Vittoriano* complex in the heart of Rome.² The exhibition ran alongside one dedicated to Czech poster artist, Alphonse Mucha. On arrival there one could turn left for Mucha's fin-de-siècle, consumer-driven fantasies of femininity, now esteemed as high art, or right for pink plastic forms of consumer culture, a twentieth-century pop classic still an easy shorthand for feminine frivolity. My Sunday visit coincided with that of a family - father, mother and young daughter; the mother in her late thirties shrugged apologetically at me, offering an explanation for her presence: she had wanted to see the Mucha, but got dragged in the other exhibition by her daughter. Two minutes later, as we all moved past the 'Barbie through the ages' opening showcase, however, the woman's mood changed, when she set eyes on "kissing Barbie," a Barbie designed with her lips permanently pursed in a kiss. Excited, she beckoned her partner over, and explained with joy that *this* was the very model she had as a child, imitating its pursed lips in laughter. What was striking was that the Mattel exhibition itself, in keeping with Barbie's aspiration towards global universality, was peculiarly lacking in this kind of fascinating personal response. Its "Italian" themes were limited to highlighting an engagement with some top Italian designers, and an emphasis on the *Alitalia* line of dolls (this universality seems typical of Barbie exhibitions in general).³ Yet, eavesdropping conversations, whilst wondering over the exhibition's peculiar blank about Barbie in Italy, led me to ask about the significance of Barbie for Italian women growing up. What might we learn by asking Italian women what they remember of Barbie? Would this aspect of girl culture in Italy tell us more about girls, women, memory and play in general? To date, studies of Barbie have tended to concentrate either on her reception in the US, or her impact in communities where her ethnic difference is overtly marked. Is Barbie fandom also inflected by national differences in a European context, even in a country that has always had strong ties to US culture?

It is perhaps late in the day to consider the significance of Barbie in Italy. Looking at Mattel's most recent figures, it would be obvious to conclude that this exhibition, preceded by one in Milan, and flanked by a sister exhibition in Bologna, constituted an attempt to shore up its flagging sales.⁴ Globally it faces the challenge not only of Disney princesses, but a rapidly diversifying toy market, that includes a vast array of tablet games, whilst in Italy, the home-grown Winx figures have also created new alternatives that Ellen Nerenberg and Nicoletta Marini-Maio have undertaken to explore in an exciting new study of girl culture. Nonetheless, Barbie still exercises a strong hold on

¹ See, for example, work by Mariagrazia Fanchi, Rossella Ghigi, Arianna Mainardi and Romana Andò.

² I would like to thank my colleagues Silvia Dibeltulo and Sarah Culhane for drawing my attention to this exhibition.

³ See Mary A. McMurray, "Celebrating 50 Fabulous Years with America's Favorite Doll," *Girlhood Studies* 5, no. 1 (2012): 165-168.

⁴ "La crisi di Mattel," *Il Post*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.ilpost.it/2015/01/29/declino-barbie-mattel/>.

the Italian imagination. The way in which this is evident in mainstream discourse is something very familiar: a schizophrenic attitude towards femininity, in particular post-femininity, both celebrated and excoriated across a political divide. The few adult-oriented books in the exhibition bookshop, beyond the plethora of children's books and the exhibition catalogue itself, reflect this bi-polarity. On the one hand, a light-hearted scholarly *divertissement*, a descriptive account of Barbie's global (not Italian) trajectory: *Una donna perfetta* by academic Nicoletta Brazzano, whose quotes celebrating Barbie's glamour grace the exhibition catalogue.⁵ On the other hand, the comedian Alessandra Faiella's humorous account of contemporary Italian femininity *La versione di Barbie* aligns the figure of Barbie with all that is bad about growing up girl in Italy, and I doubt any Mattel representative had read it.⁶ In particular, her account pins blame for the rise of *velina* culture and plastic surgery on the doll. In this respect, her work echoes that of countless popular feminist writings in Italy and beyond. Furthermore her comically exaggerated account of her rejection of Barbie as a young girl is typical of what Erica Rand has described as accounts of Barbie subversion that place the narrator in a very specific position, which reflects much more on how s/he sees her/himself now than any necessarily accurate memory of play as a child: "Non riesco a capire cosa ci fosse di tanto affascinante in un'orripilante bambolina di plastica col naso rifatto, le tette finte, e il quoziente intellettivo di uno gnu" (I couldn't understand what was so fascinating about a horrifying plastic doll with a fake nose, fake tits, and the IQ of a gnu).⁷

This brings me to the challenge of interpreting memories of play from anywhere other than this particularly disapproving adult context. However, I believe that the pink padded space of the Barbie exhibition, in the neutralized nationalism of the *Vittoriano*, enabled a vivid reconnection with childhood memory for many of the 24 women I interviewed there in September 2016.⁸ This temporary reconnection was primarily enabled by the vision of the often long-lost objects themselves. What I found as a result of my interviews in this unique space was a process of uncovering a very different history of Barbie that underlies the mainstream critique of the mass commercialization of femininity in Italy. Five kinds of response characterized these loosely structured, brief interviews: on the pleasure of clothing and dressing (two friends of 26 and 54 were still making clothes for Barbie and staging exquisitely detailed scenarios for her on Instagram); on choice and independence or "trying out" adulthood; on the desire to continue play beyond girlhood (one 30 year-old still kept her Barbie in a basketball outfit and checked up on her when she got back from work); on the connections with other women and generations, particularly daughters; and on the strengths and shortcomings of Barbie when seen from the present.

With reference to the role of memory across these responses, the work of Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell is useful. In their study of memories of Barbie-play they show how childhood can become a space for feminist political activity, despite what they call the "romancing" of memory texts, because these memories show active child agency. They consider the "confessional aspect" and the "shaping" aspect of narratives of Barbie play, in the light of Rand's "destiny narrative" interpretation of women's memories, claiming that:

the equational logic which the accounts display is intriguing. For all the women the doll-play in the past is represented as being an image, indeed, an emblem, of the woman in the present. The past somehow seems collapsed with the present. [...]

⁵ (Rome: Laterza, 2008).

⁶ (Milan: Mondadori, 2013).

⁷ Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). 13.

⁸ I would like to thank the exhibition organizers Arthemisia group for allowing me to be present in the exhibition, and all those women who agreed to be interviewed and to share their responses.

Thereby, accounts of Barbie-play may be not only part “truth” and part “fiction” but also memory of a reconstruction of the past self as a girl with her wishes and desires.⁹

This process of reconstruction is evident, for example, in the Italian examples I found of 35 year-old Greta, who said that she became a hairdresser, so would always cut and color her Barbie’s hair, or 31 year-old Elisa who became a nurse, so she made her dolls ill in order to be able to look after them. All the respondents at the *Vittoriano* displayed a resilient attachment to Barbie, carried through into the present largely as pleasure, but also as “shaping” them. Was this perhaps to do with context of the exhibition space, their decision to pay to visit usually connoting their obvious fandom or curiosity?

Where occasional criticism appeared, usually amongst older interviewees, however, it was strong, apocalyptic even: “ha rovinato una generazione” – although by the time that comment arose it was unclear whether the 63-year-old speaker was referring to Barbie or Silvio Berlusconi. Like the broader discourse in Italy this aspect of their reflections was also schizophrenic and projected onto an “other” (“Barbie damaged her in the search for a perfect body, not me”). How do we account for this disconnect? Is it to do with the distinction between Barbie as toy and Barbie as symbol of US (and corrupt political) culture? How does this disconnect speak to the “problem” of a certain kind of analysis that has (still) not taken the degree or spaces of feminine pleasure into account? Women’s complex memories of playing with Barbie should remind us that it is not the doll-play that is at stake, but its interpretation, as critics like Rand have shown. In fact, Barbie-play represents fantasies of female power and agency, just as often as a concern with subjection to the domestic or personal aesthetic sphere. The problem in the Italian context is that as girls leave doll-play behind, or “cover it over,” more complex negotiations with femininity in a broader social context ensue, which echo doll-play in an entanglement of metaphorical and real levels.¹⁰ At this point, the connection with doll-play feeds back into the narrative, and takes on new meaning from the perspective of the present, appearing either to re-inscribe women’s objectified status, or validate it through pleasure (or most likely both, giving rise to a split female subject). This negative discursive construction of Barbie is writ so large in Italian society, as if the more strongly this disappointment is felt, the more polemical the divide between attachment to and rejection of Barbie becomes, as if to remind us of the power that Barbie play could have if there were a means to reconcile this polarity. In many ways, as Marjorie Lord suggests, Barbie only channels the ambivalence women always feel about femininity, but she also permits us to understand one of the ways in which that ambivalence comes about.¹¹

What this brief and limited foray into oral history also has the potential to underline is the under-interrogated nature of memories of girlhood play in Italy. Perhaps what surprised me most about those visiting the exhibition was their willingness to talk about it to a complete stranger. This adult eagerness to speak about girlhood has become much more evident in contemporary Italy recently with Concita De Gregorio’s project *Cosa pensano le ragazze?* De Gregorio’s project began with the idea of gathering girls’ voices together from around Italy.¹² However as the project snowballed, “girls” or “ragazze” became a much more elastic term, in keeping with our postfeminist times, and

⁹ Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell “‘Just a Doll?’: ‘Liberating’ Accounts of Barbie-Play,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2000): 186.

¹⁰ This term is one derived from Carol Gilligan’s work on girlhood, and is used by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh in “Mail-Order Memory Work: Towards a Methodology of Uncovering the Experiences of Covering Over,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (1998): 57-75.

¹¹ M. G. Lord, *Forever Barbie: The unauthorized biography of a real doll* (New York: Walker and Company, 2004), vii.

¹² Concita De Gregorio, “La nostra biografia nelle voci di mille ragazze,” *La Repubblica*, March 8, 2017.

began to include women, up to the age of 105.¹³ This project, which has created a useful resource of over 1000 thematically organized interviews that can be accessed online speaks to how this desire to identify as girl, and to recover girlhood, taps into the Italian zeitgeist.¹⁴ It is hardly surprising in the wake of the damning discourses about girlhood that emerged around the Berlusconi scandals that there should be a desire to speak back. It is also interesting that the one of the project's participants describes the experience as "come tornare bambina," perhaps speaking to the same-sex connections that adult women might associate with girlhood, according to Monica Swindle.¹⁵ However, one of the more troubling aspects of the project from the perspective of Girlhood Studies is the way in which the distinction between girlhood and womanhood apparently collapses, obscuring the power dynamics at play in that interaction. On the cover of the book accompanying the project, De Gregorio writes that "nelle risposte il tema centrale è sempre l'amore" (in the answers, the central theme is always love).¹⁶ However, watching some of the interviews with young girls of seven or eight, certain questions recur: "Qual'è la differenza tra i maschietti e le femminucce", "Come si comporta una bambina nella tua classe quando si fida?", "Che cos'è secondo te l'amore?", "Ti piacerebbe diventare famosa?"¹⁷ These questions elicit the full range of entertaining and surprising answers one might expect, but one does wonder about the adult assumptions that subtend these, and whether there might not be more co-productive or girl-centred ways of exploring a young girl's world? How might this study have been better inflected by Mary Celeste Kearney's call for a "significant movement away from studying girls as future women and toward analyzing girls as members of a unique demographic group?"¹⁸

By maintaining an emphasis on the *memory* of girlhood as something distinct from the *experience* of girlhood we might avoid this kind of pitfall. Here I turn to one final area that was the starting point for these considerations and emerged from my work on the Italian Cinema Audiences project. This was a collaborative research project exploring memories of cinema-going in Italy in the 1950s.¹⁹ The project focused on the importance of cinema in everyday life, and the social experience of cinema-going, by surveying over 1,000 Italians aged over 65 to elicit both statistical data about their film-going experiences and evidence of their memories, and interviewing 160 Italians from a similar cross section of the population. Half of those interviewed were female, and the project has

¹³ Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones write that "Contemporary consumer culture has an intense focus on beauty and youth, with cosmetics and fashions targeted at girls, and also promising that the experience of "girliness" can be bought by "adult" bodies. Women and girls are thus caught in an elastic construction that blurs the boundaries between the two."

Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones, introduction to *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, eds. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 8.

¹⁴ Concita De Gregorio, "Cosa pensano le ragazze," *La Repubblica*. Web. Accessed 6 June 2017. http://lab.gruppoespresso.it/repubblica/2017/cosa_pensano_le_ragazze/.

¹⁵ "One of the effects of feeling girl particularly seductive for women is the boundary that is created around female bodies rather than between them, the pull of girlfriends, the experience of those easy giggly friendships of youth, a collectivity that many women lament as lacking in womanhood replaced instead by horizontal hostility and competition." Monica Swindle, "Feeling Girl, Girling Feeling: An Examination of 'Girl' as Affect," *Rhizomes* no. 22 (2011). Web. Accessed 6 June 2017, <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue22/swindle.html>.

¹⁶ De Gregorio, *Cosa pensano le ragazze* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016).

¹⁷ De Gregorio, "Alida, le bambine non piangono mai," *La Repubblica*. Web. Accessed 6 June 2017. <http://video.repubblica.it/cosa-pensano-le-ragazze/ragazze-domani/alida-le-bambine-non-piangono-mai/230933/230381>. "What's the difference between boys and girls?", "How does a girl in your class behave when she has a boyfriend?", "What is love for you?", "Would you like to become famous?"

¹⁸ Mary Celeste Kearney, "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 9 (2009): 18.

¹⁹ Funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK), 2013-16, it was led by Daniela Treveri Gennari (Oxford Brookes University), Catherine O'Rawe (University of Bristol), and Danielle Hipkins (University of Exeter); the Research Assistant was Silvia Dibeltulo, and Sarah Culhane was the project's PhD student.

served to show how for that generation of women, cinema-going was a formative experience in girlhood. One of the project’s most important outputs to date re-defines the relationship between memory, girlhood and urban space to use GIS aids as a form of “emotional mapping” to trace the perceived evolution of the self in relation to different cinemas around an expanding personal urban space over the course of the life cycle.²⁰ Elsewhere we have found that thinking about cinema-going opens up other new questions about the relationship between cinema and female mobility, for instance in the rural spaces of Italy, where we found that girls were inspired by film stars not only in terms of dress and hairstyles, but also to pursue physical activity, such as swimming in impersonation of the Hollywood star, Esther Williams.²¹ It would be worth reflecting further on how these “memories of mobility” might be linked to older interviewees’ experience of reduced mobility in the present day, as memories of girlhood are used to “shape” a girl with physical agency, as well as agency of intention.

Mary Celeste Kearney has suggested that girlhood media studies are still dominated by presentism, and the contribution to her edited collection on mediated girlhood by Rebecca C. Hains, Shayla Thiel-Stern and Sharon R. Mazzarella on memories of girl culture in the US of the 1940s and 1950s represents another rare instance of such work.²² Their focus on the specific experience of girls elicits a fuller picture of their consumption of film, radio, television and literature, pointing towards the need for a greater understanding of what it meant to be a girl in postwar Italy, and how that informs present-day discourses of girlhood and womanhood. As Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach write, “this is a fascinating time in the history of gender relations because we all live with the deeply internalized legacy of past generations as we simultaneously live in a very changed world.”²³ Oral history offers just one particular route into understanding that intergenerational connection, and it is one in which the processes of memory provide the key to unlocking that enigmatic relationship between past and present experiences of girlhood.

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²⁰ Pierluigi Ercole, Daniela Treveri Gennari and Catherine O’Rawe, “Mapping Cinema Memories: Emotional Geographies of Cinema-going in Rome in the 1950s” *Memory Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017): 63-77.

²¹ Danielle Hipkins, et al., “Oral Memories of Cinema-going in Rural Italy of the 1950s,” in *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context*, ed. Daniela Treveri Gennari, et al. (Palgrave, 2017, forthcoming).

²² See Mary Celeste Kearney, “New Directions: Girl-Centred Media Studies for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Children and Media* 2, no. 1 (2008): 82-3, and Rebecca C Hains, et al., “We didn’t have any Hannah Montanas’: Girlhood, Popular Culture, and Mass Media in the 1940s and 1950,” *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls’ Media Culture* ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 113-132.

²³ Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *What do Women Want?: Exploding the Myth of Dependency* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), iv. I would like to thank Annabel Dearing for bringing this book to my attention, and also to thank particularly Fiona Handyside and Catherine O’Rawe for their attention and help in my various reiterations of this topic.

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