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BARBIE "AN ICON OF PERFECT BEAUTY": POPULAR CULTURE PERSPECTIVES

M. Syaifuddin S

STKIP PGRI Jombang

syaifuddin@stkipjb.ac.id*

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Abstract

This study discusses about Barbie as an icon of popular culture that is suspected to be a symbol of female perfection. American Studies approach through historical aspects, and the social becomes very important because Barbie was born in American society.

Semiotic theory becomes a tool of analysis in this study because the theory is able to explore and discover the meaning of a popular culture artifacts that are being researched through symbols that exist on the Barbie.

The results of this study show that icon and popular culture are two things that can not be separated. When a popular cultural artifacts are created, usually always accompanied by a meaning brought or is represented by the artifacts. The results of this study also indicate that Barbie can always reflect popular culture that are popular, so that Barbie can be referred to as an icon of popular culture. In the end, Barbie became an icon created ideal nature of the word "beautiful" in American society.

Keyword: *icons , popular culture , beauty , semiotics , barbie*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas Barbie sebagai ikon budaya populer yang ditengarai menjadi simbol kesempurnaan wanita. Pendekatan American Studies melalui aspek sejarah, dan sosial menjadi sangat penting karena Barbie terlahir di tengah masyarakat Amerika.

Teori semiotika menjadi pisau analisis dalam penelitian ini sebab teori tersebut mampu menggali dan menemukan makna dari



suatu artefak budaya populer yang sedang diteliti melalui simbol-simbol yang ada pada Barbie

Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ikon dan budaya populer merupakan dua hal yang tidak dapat dipisahkan. Ketika suatu artefak budaya populer diciptakan, biasanya selalu dibarengi dengan suatu makna yang dibawa atau dilambangkan oleh artefak tersebut. Hasil dari studi ini juga menunjukkan bahwa Barbie senantiasa dapat merefleksikan budaya populer yang sedang digemari sehingga Barbie dapat disebut sebagai ikon dari budaya populer. Pada akhirnya, Barbie tercipta menjadi sebuah ikon sifat ideal dari kata “cantik” pada masyarakat Amerika.

Kata kunci: ikon, budaya populer, kecantikan, semiotika, barbie

In general, we would all agree that Barbie tells about many things about America. Looking at the Barbie dolls which most come in white skin, most people will see that she represents the white supremacy in the United States. Finding out that there are so many things comes along with Barbie and that people can see her every where proves to the world that Barbie has been able to become an icon of popular culture since she has been sold all over the world and even in Iran, there has been an Islamic Barbie.

Barbie seemed to be a legitimacy that the word "pretty" is "white" and "blonde hair". In cosequence, this study was to prove that hypothesis. On anotherside, this study also wants to dismantle the presence of some facts behind the existence of Barbie.

Popular Culture itself is now getting much attention from either scholars or students. Many students are interested in making the artifact of popular culture and its other issues to be their topic of the research. That is why, this paper is aimed at discussing the nature of popular culture and how a certain artifact of it is able to be called as icon.

DISCUSSION

2.1 Icon

Icon is familiar to people’s everyday life for it represents something that they believe in. The Virgin Mary, for instance, can be called as an icon of religion in which Christians believe in. They put her paintings, statue, and ornaments in their houses, dash boards of their car and so on. It seems that Virgin Mary has filled up people’s daily life.

If we refer back to its original root of the word “icon”, then, we will be able to find out the red thread of the condition described above. The word “icon” is originally derived from the Greek root, ‘*eikon*’ which means “image” (Fishwick 3). So, in simple word, icon means something that images, reflects or symbolizes thing. Virgin Mary, therefore, reflects a purity and obedience to God

in the 1970s. David Orr in the same book also states that 'icon' refers to "the most unintelligible of images: especially in a culture whose visual spectrum is intense, convulated, diverse, and ubiquitous" (3). Still icon does objectify deep mythological structure of reality, revealing basic needs which go from age to age, media to media, generation to generation. In another book, Fishwick points out that 'icon' means an object of uncritical devotion. It does not penetrate layers of meaning and emotion which cluster around it. Icons are symbols and mindmarks. They tie in with myth, legend, values, idols, aspirations. (1974: 53) That is why icons are said to be symbols of something.

When people talk about "icon", their mind will drive them into everyday life meaning, It has been stated previously that icon is mostly related to something popular or un-strange in the ears of people. Mary F Rogers (1999) says that an icon is an acknowledgment of something by people. It is something that people know in their daily life. It is something familiar to them (xiii). So, referring to Barbie as the example in this study, we will never find out people saying, "Who is Barbie?" or "I've never heard anything about Barbie." Moreover, she says that an icon represents many things for it has multi-meaning, can adapt to any condition individual desire, high ambiguity, and has an open characteristic (xiv). She also mentions that icon is identified with a group of people as fans, collector, designers or consumers; icon of a culture then is a great desire, addiction and obsession toward something; it is a small social world built up around the icon; it refers to hobby, free time activity, or joyness; icon is also meant as hard choice, big money, trips, new skill and experience. Therefore, an icon means that a cultural artifact—an object of a culture reflects a range of values, belief, and norms in the society—has a tight hold on most of the members of the society (xx).

Barbie attracts young girls not only in America but also around the world. She also attracts people who love fashion. She comes into everyday life and takes part in the social interaction. Even she can be the mainstream or the central attention of the society when her collectors become addicted. For many people, icon of a culture is not merely a thing or thought. For them, icon comes as an experience, something that they can remember when they turn back to their past as well as they see their future. Some facts also prove that Barbie is also an ideal dream of beauty. The existence of plastic surgery makes some girls possible to transform their face and body into Ideal posture like Barbie.

Meanwhile, the using of the pronoun "*she* and *her* in stead of *it*" is another proof that Barbie has become a part of people's personal life and been assumed as if she were real so that they assumed her as a real woman not just a toy. She has been able to come to people's everyday life as something that is really close to them even she becomes an idol. This is another proof that Barbie is correctly called as an icon of a culture. As an icon then she reflects many things that her collector would like to imitate and sacrifice. Probably not many people

know that *The Empress Bride of Bob Mackie* was sold for \$1.000 in Lanchester, Pennsylvania in April 1997. Here sacrificing is given just for Barbie since her collector has been addicted in her.

In line with her idea on the meaning of icon, Marshall Fishwick (1974:52) says that icons have meanings as well as dimensions. They are external expressions of internal convictions: “everyday things that make every day meaningful. Volk Wagons are assemblage of steel, glass, and rubber, but they are much more than just those simple things. People who sell, see, and own them know this. The same thing does for Barbie. She is more than a teenage plastic doll. She is an icon, an American Icon. She represents or symbolizes many things about America. In simple word, when people see her, they will say “Oh, this is America” or at least, “Well, she is an American.”

In another book, Fishwick also mentions that icons are also cultural ciphers (1). They help us de-cipher, or unlock the mystery of our attitude and assumptions. As objects they can be approached objectively; but people who believe in them also operate on an emotional level – the level of love and reverence. The real task for one who would fully appreciate icons is not merely to define them but to participate in the iconic life. A person who adores or loves a certain icon then would like to be involved in the life of the icon itself. She would like to be a collector, an adorer, an imitator of the icon being loved. She would like to sacrifice, in a critical condition, her own life and personality just to be like the icon she adores. Let’s just see the case of Cyntia Jackson who is known as the twin of Barbie. She has got more than ten plastic surgeons to make herself just like Barbie. Vicki Lee is the other woman who wants to be really like Barbie even since she was still very young. She has got three time breast surgeon (now her breast is 34F), twice on her nose, several times on lip implantation and eyes during these 6-7 years. Joe Berger (1997) reported that Lee, 20 years of age, has spent \$120 every week to polish her hair, \$45 every three week for pedicure and manicure, and “thousands of dollars every year” to join gyms and skin care clinic. (in Mary F. Rogers 18-19) Therefore, Barbie is not only a plastic but something or probably someone that has been an idol for people in which they are willingly involved in Barbie’s iconic life. It means the adorers or collectors have really been influenced by this cultural product so that their life cannot be separated from it and want it to be like the Barbie’s.

Ray B. Browne and Marshal Fishwick (1978) states that icons accumulate and alter meanings; they also lose them (4). It means that what a certain icon tells about a certain thing being symbolized can change its values or meaning. The iconic Virgin Mary does not speak to the twentieth century as she did to the thirteenth. Man carries meanings, not merely objects invested with meanings. The image precedes the idea in the development of human consciousness; the idea drives the image on to glory or oblivion. The meaning of a certain thing assumed to be an icon changes as time and human consciousness goes.

2.2 The Nature of Popular Culture

Since Barbie is also an artifact of popular culture, it is considered necessary to make us understand what actually is meant by popular culture itself. For about a century, Western culture has really been two cultures: the traditional kind – let us call it ‘High Culture’ – that is chronicled in the text books, and a ‘Mass Culture’ manufactured wholesale for the market. The rigid conceptual barrier shaped by the general cultural upheaval since the 1960s between “high” and “popular/mass” cultures has broken down. Mukerji and Schudson (1991:1) presents that literary and art critics have come to recognize how much high culture and popular culture have in common as human social practices. Scholars have also come to see how much the traditional division of high and popular culture has been a political division rather than a defensible intellectual or aesthetic distinction. They have begun to trace the mutual influence of high and popular culture. They have come to take popular culture more seriously as a terrain of political and social conflict and a weapon of political mobilization.

Next, Macdonald (1998:22) states that in the old art forms, the artisans of Mass Culture have long been at work: in the novel, the line stretches from Eugene Sue to Lloyd C. Douglas; in music, from Offenbach to Tin-Pan Alley; in art from the chromo to Maxfield Parriesh and Norman Rockwell; in architecture, from Victorian Gothic to suburban Tudor. Mass culture has also developed new media of its own, into which the serious artist rarely ventures: radio, the movies, comic books, detective stories, science fiction, and television.

According to Laforse and Drake in their book Pop Culture and American Life (1981), Pop culture may be said to have originated with the appearance of mass society in the period after the Civil War in the United States. Its form was shaped by rapid industrialization, growing urbanization, the newly-freed black masses, the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, the onset of universal compulsory education, and the creation of new means of mass communication (viii). With the coming of mass culture and the consequent extension of political democracy and educational opportunity, popular culture came to complement the more formal social institution through which values are instilled. Recordings, radios, televisions, and motion pictures have come to play an important role in the socialization process and thus to complement the roles played by family and home, church, and school.

In addition, the best way to view popular culture according to Laforse and Drake (1981: ix) is to compare it with the folk and high cultures. High culture is generally associated rather closely with class status in society, and typically only the “sophisticates” partake of it. Put simply, high culture is typified by activities centered in art museums, concert halls, and avant-garde film theaters, and by reading literary masterpieces in various genres. The high culture artists,

whatever their mediums happen to be, are the architects of personal universes. Whether an artist is a composer, painter, sculptor, poet, novelist, or dramatist, the art is necessarily an intense personal expression of what Byron called “the soul within”; ideally, it is produced for a public, but usually not for mass public consumption. Sales, royalties, and money in general are viewed, at least in theory, by high-culture artists as being the useful consequence of the public’s occasional reaction to quality in art.

Where high culture art forms reflect idealized universal themes, folk art is by contrast the evocation of the life experiences of the artist, as for example in the ballads of Woody Guthrie and the paintings of Grandma Moses. Theoretically at least, a folk artist is one with his or her audience. By being a part of the audience and thus a part of the environment of his art, a folk artist breaks down the artist-audience distinction. With the passing of time, folk art often finds its way into art museums and concert halls where, ironically, it becomes the object of attention for high culture audiences (ix-x).

In contrast to both folk and high culture artists, popular artists aim to reach an audience with works that are calculated to sell. Advertisers, popular photographers, magazine illustrators, popular song writers, and movie directors typify the popular artist. To sell widely, such artists attempt to cultivate the feelings and preferences of mass audiences with results which can be catalogued through sales charts, corporate tax records, and best-seller lists (x). At present it is really obvious that popular culture is so intimately connected with the entertainment media. The fact is that popular culture and the media, especially the entertainment media are for all practical purposes inseparable.

Referring to the description above which touch the essence of high, folk, and pop culture, below is a great chart illustrating the differences between three of them:

HIGH CULTURE	FOLK CULTURE	POPULAR CULTURE
1. Written (literature)	1. Handed down orally (legends and tales)	1. written or oral transmitted by print, broadcasting or other commercials
2. Created with both concept and theory as well as talent	2. Its creation is by tradition and hearsay, handed down from generation to generation	2. Not serious concept or idealism
3. Individual work	3. Anonymous	3. Individual works, mass produced
4. Created for an	4. Created to give	4. Created to give

ideal not merely to place readers/audience/ beholder	moral teaching express people suppression, suffering as well as human bliss	pleasure and entertainment
5. Acquisition of money is not the chief goal	5. Community equilibrium is the chief goal	5. financial gain and popularity become the goal
6. recorded	6. Unrecorded	6. Patented
7. In the form of high lieterature, fine arts, arts, classical music	7. In the term of legends, tales, songs, beliefs, homely wisdom, common ways of spelling, etc.	7. pop lit, pop songs, pos arts, etc.

(Djuhertati Imam Muhni, 2005)

2.4 Barbie as the Icon of Popular Culture

Nobody will deny that Barbie has become a great phenomenon for she has been able to be sold in almost every country in the world. Any time we go to a mall or even to a traditional market, we can find Barbie dolls and her merchandises there. In 1995, Susan Reda conducted a survey and found that the most popular Christmas gift was Barbie. A year later, 1996, John Greenwald also found out that 99% of the girls in the United States had 8 Barbies each (Mary F. Rogers, 1999:5). From here, it is obvious that Barbie can be said as an icon of popular culture because she can be something just like what Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause (1992) described that popular culture is so easy to get because it is everywhere to be gotten—it surrounds us the way water surrounds a fish, as a transparent environment crucial to our survival. A fish looks *through* the water rather than *at* it and so do we tend to overlook the omnipresence of popular culture precisely because it is such a familiar part of our everyday environment. Popular culture is also about “satisfaction”, its major concern is in ensuring that people can get what they want regardless of whether they need it or not (1-2).

Referring to what Nachbar and Lause (1992) stated above, it is surely wise enough to say that Barbie is the icon of popular culture. Her existence in our surrounding with all of her stuffs represents what Nachbar and Lause (1992) said about the essential meaning of popular culture. Barbie is something that is not strange in people’s ear. Those who collect Barbie and her outfits never think about whether they need them or not. Otherwise their hobby of shopping and collecting Barbie is just a kind of satisfaction. They are willing to spend much money to get more and more Barbie and her outfits to complete their collection although they realize that they will never be able to feel completed. Barbie also proves that one of the characteristics of popular culture artifact is mass

produced. People know that there are many kinds of Barbie series and her outfits available in the world. She has been able to be sold all over the world, even in Iran there’s an Islamic Barbie wearing Moslem cloth completed with veils. In the United States itself, Barbie and her stuffs have been something very near to the life of girl and woman. Based on the survey conducted by Susan Reda, 1995, Barbie was the most popular Christmas gift at that time. A year later, John Greenwald also found out that 99% of the girls in the United States have 8 Barbie each (Mary F. Rogers, 1999:5).

Barbie represents the present popular culture products through her collections by being the characters of some popular films such as when Barbie appears as the main actress in *King Kong*. When the film of *Cat Woman* was being released, Mattel released Barbie doll in the form of the *Cat Woman* (2004). There are also *Barbie as Jeannie* (2003), *Barbie meets Elvis Presley*, *Barbie as Scarlet O’Hara*, *Barbie as Marilyn Monroe*, *Barbie as Elle in Legally Blonde* (2003), and so on. Barbie herself also makes her own role as the main player in her six movies; *Barbie and the Nutties Nutcracker*, *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper*, *Barbie as Rapunzel*, *Barbie in the Fairytopia*, *Barbie and the Magic Pegasus*. Beside that, Barbie also promotes some popular culture artifacts like Coca Cola Barbie, Avon Barbie, Barbie loves McDonald, and so on.

Barbie shows the fusion of high culture, folk culture, and popular culture as well through her films. Barbie in the *Nutties Nutcracker*, for instance, shows how an artifact of folk culture (the fairytale of the Nutcracker as a product of folklore inspired Tchaikowski to arrange it into classical music. Next this classical music based on the fairytale of the Nutcracker inspired the New York City ballet to transform it into classical dance that is ballet. The classical ballet dance based on the classical music of Tchaikowski then inspired Mattel to use it in Barbie’s film. The ballet dance was transformed from the live performance into animated one. Finally, the films are mass produced.

5. Behind the Beauty of Barbie

Sociologically Barbie contains an American zeal to legitimate itself as a superpower. This phenomenon also can be seen from the legitimacy of Superman, Batman, and other heroes created by American. When the heroic American society has embedded around the world, it is also necessary to legitimate the world that the terminology of "pretty" is white, slim body, and blonde.

It actually saves a very racial politics that Americans still want to say that the "white" and "blonde" is beautiful. This means that besides that color is not pretty. Through the existence of this Barbie suggests non-tolerant Americans against other races in America. The American non-tolerant packed subtly through the massive socialization Barbie.

To bridge some of the protests against this phenomenon, crafter trying to create a new Barbies with black skin and black hair, but these efforts are not able to obscure the view that Barbie is white, blonde and slim.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that icon and popular culture has a significant relationship. It shows that a certain artifact of popular culture might symbolize a certain thing. In other word an artifact of popular culture is usually an icon of a certain thing.

In another sides, Barbie managed to legitimize itself as an icon of beauty for people all over the world. In fact, if it is analyzed more in the Barbie contains a very racial legitimacy, namely the desire to declare that pretty is white, and blonde hair and deny other races.

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