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Review of Susan Stern's film, Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour

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Germanic sectarian populations in Ohio, including the largest concentration of Amish people anywhere. Tucked into coverage of the Ohio Mennonite Relief Sale is a brief gem of an interview with the sale's Quilt Co-Chair, Eli Hochstetler, who describes the quilting activity of his 83-year-old mother. He reports that quilting gives his mother a reason to get up in the morning; it is a way for her to contribute something of value to the world. And, indeed, quilts account for about half of the annual sale's substantial receipts.

The work of Susan Shie and James Accord lead into the "Contemporary Messages" segment. The video successfully and sensitively documents the collaborative style with which this couple produces highly complex and personal art works within the "Green Quilt" movement—the creation of quilts that project positive messages about the environment—which they started.

The other interviews with contemporary quiltmakers and fabric artists combine to make this final section of the video the strongest and most appealing. Anyone who has ever interviewed artists about their work should be aware of the difficulties. Initial responses tend to be either pompous or self-deprecating, and it is to the credit of the interviewers and editors of this program that these subjects present themselves as passionate, thoughtful, and delightful human beings.

Rather than attempt to evoke in the viewer a direct emotional response to beauty, creativity, grief, or celebration, the program allows us to connect with sympathetic people who have had these experiences. And, because of the skillful way in which the subjects were selected, interviewed, recorded, and edited, the result is quite successful in its mission to go beyond the quilt's surface to examine the underlying stories. A few awkward transitions and choices distract from an otherwise professional production, but the overall quality of the audio and video provide excellent support for the content. *Unraveling the Stories* would work well in a classroom as context for an exhibition, or in any situation in which one is asked "So, what's the big deal about quilts?"

Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour.

1998. Produced, written, and directed by Susan Stern. 54 min., VHS format, color. (New Day Films, Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J.)

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Susan Stern's film takes as its subject matter a doll whose shoes will not stay on her for five minutes, "yet ideologies adhere to her with great tenacity." The doll is, of course, the Barbie doll. Her look at Barbie was prompted by the creation of a game called "Jealous Barbie" by her five-year-old daughter, Nora. Stern explains: "My Barbie Doll had to be jealous of her Barbie doll for hours on end. Her Barbie had better hair, a better car, a better guy. Horrified, I sat Nora down and explained in my best feminist manner that women don't have to be jealous of other women. Nora listened patiently and then said: 'Okay, Mom. First let's play "Jealous Barbie" and then we can play what you want to play.'"

Stern told this story to friends, who in turn told her their Barbie stories, all of which provided the impetus for her to make her award-winning film, *Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour*. In the film, Stern, who is also the narrator, acknowledges that Mattel's marketing of the doll is brilliant, but argues that its efforts would have failed if there had not been "a million stories in America waiting to be acted out; within each buyer was a fantasy life yearning to be made plastic. Barbie was the perfect vehicle." The film traces some of these fantasies as they are enacted by children, Barbie fans and collectors, gays, artists, and groups of adults that Stern calls "Barbie players" who create fantasy lives for their dolls. "Everybody has a Barbie story," Stern says, "and the stories are about us." In the process of documenting some of these stories, she films the San Francisco Barbie Doll Club; an anti-breast implant demonstration outside of the Barbie Hall of Fame in Palo Alto, California; the National Barbie Convention in Birmingham, Alabama; and Mattel's 35th anniversary Barbie Festival held at Disney World in Florida. She also includes clips from Barbie ads; a Philadelphia TV news story with the lead-in question, "Is deep frying a Barbie part of a Satanic ritual?"; and a

contemporary musical video in which Barbie is barbecued.

One of the stories that Stern tells is the remarkable one of Barbie's creator and one of Mattel's founders, Ruth Handler. Handler's life story and personal experience narratives about being a woman in corporate America are fascinating and complex. Her creation of the Barbie doll—which was named after her own daughter (the Ken doll was named after her son)—was inspired both by seeing a German sex doll after World War II and by the adult paper dolls with which her daughter and friends played. Outside of these paper dolls, no adult dolls for children were on the market in the 1950s. Handler says she felt an adult doll could help girls deal with physical changes, such as developing breasts, as they grew up and went through puberty. She was initially told by the men at Mattel that there was no way they could make a doll with breasts. However, make a doll with breasts they did: in 1959, Barbie made her appearance, selling for three dollars. At the time, parents hated Barbie but kids adored her, and Mattel marketed directly to kids through television advertisements. Its marketing strategies over the years have paid; presently, two Barbies are sold every second somewhere in the world.

Handler's life experiences narrated in the film also include accounts of her tremendous difficulties in the 1970s. She lost a breast to cancer; was indicted for falsifying financial records; and, despite the huge and continuous success of Barbie, was forced out of Mattel. However, she then went on to found Nearly Me, the first company to make customized breast prostheses that are available in department stores.

Along with the stories about the creation and marketing of Barbie, Stern also documents the stories of those who buy Barbie. For example, she films two young girls playing with the dolls. The typical American girl owns eight Barbie dolls, and the children filmed do indeed appear to be well stocked with both Barbies and Barbie accessories. The girls are shown at play, but it is apparent the play and the doll communicate cultural messages about

being female in America to the children. For instance, one child says, "It doesn't really matter if they're pretty; it's not that important. But there is one important thing about being pretty; if you're not pretty—at least a little bit pretty—people won't really like you and then you won't have any friends." In the film, Handler says that she did not want little girls who were chubby or not pretty to be intimidated by Barbie, and she tried to keep her bland at first but admits that each year, as she got prettier, the sales increased. This section on the children is interesting and brief—too brief. Because children are one of the primary groups who play with Barbie, it seems appropriate that they should have been given a larger role in Stern's film.

Stern also presents adult "Barbie players," from those who arrange their Barbies in everything from S&M tableaux to those who create different scenes from ordinary social life. The folklorist will want more contextualization and information about the various groups from the children to the Barbie players who appear in the film. Scenes shot at a Barbie fashion show need more contextualization as well; they leave the viewer with questions like: What is the purpose of the show? What is the motivation of the participants?

Overall, this film provides a fascinating and engaging look at a toy that has become a plastic icon of late-20th-century American culture. Stern says that some may view her movie and say, "Look at all these weird people doing things with Barbie dolls!" She does not see it this way; she notes that, by 1997, a billion Barbies had been sold, and she says they are "a billion testaments to how people can create from the most mass produced of things a life that is unique." Besides being informative, provocative, and entertaining for general audiences—it aired on the Public Television series *P.O.V.* (Point of View) in the summer of 1998—*Barbie Nation* could also add to many classroom discussions, including those concerning popular culture in general, popular culture and creativity, the intersection of popular culture with folk culture, the influence of popular culture on children's folklore, and gender studies.