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Lars and the Real Girl Normalizes Artificial Females



Lars and the Real Girl, movie poster

By Alline Cormier

(This article contains spoilers)

Does being kind to others mean accepting everyone just as they are? Does being accepting of others ever come at a price? Our societies do not endorse blanket acceptance, as evidenced by our feelings toward and laws surrounding necrophilia, pedophilia, and bestiality. Some acts and behaviors are deemed unacceptable by most. Where things get complicated is when attitudes concerning what is considered acceptable by the majority changes.

History shows that our attitudes shift over time. Consider, as a few examples, smoking, spitting on sidewalks, and the consumption of pornography. Just a few decades ago men desirous of seeing women debased and degraded in pornography had to frequent the back rooms of video rental stores in seedy areas to procure it. Fast forward to present day. Now even boys may effortlessly access images of women and girls, via their electronic devices, that are orders of magnitude worse than what was on offer in those video rental shops, thanks to the Internet, lax

legislation, and a general disregard for women. Movies played a role in shifting our attitudes about pornography by normalizing its consumption.

Now movies are shifting our attitudes in ways that present even greater dangers for women (and girls). Hollywood feature films like *Lars and the Real Girl* have been normalizing artificial females. Presenting a doll in the likeness of women—and treating it as a real woman—grooms viewers for seeing women as objects (i.e. as less than human). Dehumanization paves the way for using women as parts—think surrogacy—for profit without incurring public outcries.

Men can now own “sex toys” that are customizable life-size dolls manufactured to look like real women and girls that they can penetrate at will in their anatomically correct mouth, vagina, and anus. *Lars and the Real Girl* features one such doll as one of its main characters, contributing to the normalization of artificial females.

Lars and the Real Girl is a cute, well-made comedy released in 2007. It stars popular Canadian actor Ryan Gosling as the title character. The Craig Gillespie directed feature film set in Wisconsin but filmed in Ontario was a commercial failure, making just over US\$11 million at the worldwide box office (plus an estimated US\$3.9 million in DVD sales in the United States). Still, it was nominated for a Best Writing, Original Screenplay Oscar, as well as nearly two dozen other awards. It also won seven film awards, including the best feature film and best script awards at the Torino Film Festival.

The film is full of lovely and even rare inclusions, like the husband doing chores and cooking, time spent at the lake and in the forest, speaking time for women over 50, etc. However, it is the story of an introvert who buys a life-size ‘porn doll’ (a.k.a. sex doll) online, asks his brother and pregnant sister-in-law to keep it at their house, and the townspeople go along with his delusion that it is a real woman.

Lars’ filmmakers use many devices to normalize men owning artificial females: language that anthropomorphizes the doll; presentation of the porn doll as therapeutic; calls to compassion and kindness; acceptance of the doll by women (and depictions of women handling it) and the religiously-minded; reminders that no one is perfect; humour; comparisons between the doll and women; casting; a portrayal of Lars as endearing and unthreatening; costumes (i.e. modest clothing); a portrayal of the doll as wholesome; and depictions of people saddened at the loss of the doll. These devices, working together, groom viewers and risk shifting their attitudes toward porn dolls from disapproving (harmful, misogynist) to approving (possess beneficial uses). Consequently, they merit analysis.

Language that anthropomorphizes the porn doll is one of the first observable devices. Lars names the doll Bianca and it is almost invariably referred to as ‘she’ and ‘her’ when not called by its name. This serves to humanize it, to make viewers forget that it is a sex toy and that these artificial silicone females are predominantly manufactured by men and primarily used for men’s penetration, similarly to the way

men use pornographic magazines as masturbation material. This anthropomorphizing language is used from the very first scene to include the porn doll.

The first time Lars shows the doll to his brother Gus (played by Paul Schneider) and sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer)—introducing it as if it were a real person—they have what many would consider a normal reaction: they are stunned. When Karin regains the power of speech she excuses herself to the kitchen, where Gus follows. Safely out of Lars' earshot Gus becomes very agitated, telling Karin that Lars is out of his mind. They are both at a loss as to what they should do. During supper Karin appears unsettled, especially when Lars asks her to lend the doll her clothes. This takes some convincing, as Karin is clearly hesitant. Eventually, at Lars' insistence, she manages with some difficulty to say "Sure."

The first night the porn doll spends in the couple's house, in the bedroom opposite their own, Karin examines it closely, clearly uncomfortable. She peeks under the doll's miniskirt uneasily, then gasps and says, "Oh my god!" Meanwhile, Gus rips the packing slip off the doll's delivery crate, then visits the website that sells the doll (Realdoll.com). When they retire for the night, they discuss Lars' problem. Karin says the doctor—also a psychologist—will tell them what to do. They are evidently at a loss, but helping Lars is paramount for kindly Karin, who is genuinely concerned about Lars.

The next morning the couple drive Lars and his porn doll to see the doctor (Dagmar, played by Patricia Clarkson). When Gus answers Lars curtly in the car, signaling his refusal to participate in a conversation with the doll, Karin attempts to smooth things over by pretending it is a real person. She is attempting to be kind to Lars to compensate for his older brother's chilly attitude. Since the beginning it is apparent that the absence of affection in Lars' life weighs on motherly Karin.



Lars and the Real Girl frame capture (Dagmar and 'Bianca')

During the trip to the doctor's office the use of a porn doll is presented as therapeutic, calls to compassion and kindness are made, and a woman in a position of authority treats the doll like a real person. In the examination room Dagmar plays along with Lars' delusion (e.g. she pretends to check the doll's blood pressure, touching it without aversion). When she says, "I look forward to getting to know you, Bianca" after asking Lars to set up weekly appointments for 'Bianca's' (imaginary) treatment, adult viewers can plainly see this is a ruse to secure a weekly examination of Lars—not the doll. When Gus and Karin consult with her afterwards Dagmar tells them, "This isn't necessarily a bad thing. What we call mental illness isn't always just an illness. It can be communication. It can be a way to work something out." She tells Gus the delusion will pass when Lars no longer needs it. When Karin asks how they can help Dagmar replies, "Go along with it." When the couple repeatedly say no, she tells them, "Bianca's in town for a reason" and cuts Gus' protestations that he will not do it short by stating firmly: "It's not really a choice." Karin complies with the compassionate doctor's orders, saying, "Okay. All right then. We'll do it. Whatever it takes." At the conclusion of this scene the use of a porn doll is accepted as therapeutic by two women, and three of the main characters are fully on board with pretending this silicone doll is a real woman (Lars, Karin, and Dagmar). The filmmakers have framed this approach to a man's delusion about having a "relationship" with a porn doll as the kind, compassionate, therapeutic solution. This framing is reinforced throughout. The next morning when Gus confronts Lars about 'Bianca' being a "big plastic thing" (not a person) Lars replies, "Bianca says that that's why God made her—to help people." Karin talks to the doll, making plans with it. Several other women (and men) will accept Lars' delusion and treat the sex toy like a woman.

Women who 'go along', handle the doll and treat it like a real person include Karin, Dagmar, Lars' helpful surrogate grandmothers, and his kindly female co-workers (Margo and Cindy, played by Kelli Garner and Karen Robinson, respectively). They take it on outings, dress it and brush its hair (Karin bathes it twice). In these sequences they show no aversion to touching the porn doll. Generous Margo even stands up for Lars when men criticize his strange behavior. Various women appear saddened when it is announced that the doll is "dying." These good-hearted women are showing us how kind people would treat delusional men (and their sex toys)—according to the filmmakers, of course. The message conveyed in these sequences is that women need not feel revulsion toward objects designed for men's penetration that are made in women's likeness. Acceptance by these women paves the way for acceptance by religiously-minded townspeople.

The approval of the religiously-minded is depicted in tandem with reminders that no one is perfect. Gus and Karin consult with their reverend and five parishioners about Lars taking the porn doll to church. Their initial opposition is overcome by Karin's calls to kindness and Mrs. Gruner's (Nancy Beatty) reminders that plenty of people are a few bricks short of a load. Consequently, Lars' questionable behavior is minimized—though none of the examples provided by Mrs. Gruner are on par with treating an artificial female like a real woman. She turns the tide of opinion when she interjects: "Oh for heaven's sake! What's the big deal? ... These things happen. He can depend on me." When the reverend puts an end to the debate by asking them, "What would Jesus do?" the answer seems self-evident: be kind by welcoming the porn doll to church. The fact that this is meant to be humorous does not cancel the normalizing effect.

Humor is used throughout to normalize artificial females and compare them to real women. For instance, when Gus' co-worker learns that Lars is treating a porn doll like a woman, he says, "Wish I had a woman that couldn't talk" (men laugh). When one of Karin's friends asks if the doll really has a vagina, Karin nods and a woman jokes, "She's really just one of the girls, then" (they laugh). Similarities are also found between the doll and the film's (female) characters, further narrowing the gap between women and artificial females. For instance, Dagmar cannot bear children (Lars tells her 'Bianca' cannot either). Humor is a particularly effective device; as we laugh we relax, let down our guard and think less critically about the messages conveyed. Arguably more effective is the portrayal of Lars himself.

Gosling, his costumes, actions, and lines, all contribute to shifting perceptions of the men who use porn dolls. He is considered handsome and can pull off a sweet performance. When the film premiered, he was just past his mid twenties and already an A-list, Oscar nominated actor. His old-fashioned Lars character is carefully crafted to make him appear endearing and utterly unthreatening—in no way censurable. He dresses like Mr. Rogers, very buttoned up (ties, sweaters, waistcoat). The soft-spoken churchgoer wears pink and his baby blanket around his neck. Sometimes Lars comes across as a kind, mentally challenged asexual—even though he is clearly heterosexual. He reads to the doll, takes it to the cemetery to visit his parents' graves, and wipes its forehead with a damp cloth when it is "sick." He often acts like a 13-year-old and is not shown consulting the RealDolls' website or ordering the silicone doll. His interactions with it are chaste and he never appears in a state of undress with it, penetrating it or fondling it. He doesn't bathe it—Karin and Gus do—or lie under the blankets with it. The filmmakers would have viewers believe Lars is incapable of blameworthy behavior. This portrayal works effectively with 'Bianca's' wholesome portrayal to counter the unsavory image most people have of porn dolls—and the men who use them.



Lars and the Real Girl frame captures (Lars and 'Bianca')



Lars and the Real Girl frame captures ('Bianca', Lars, Karin, and Gus)



(Lars and 'Bianca')

The doll's portrayal is arguably the most significant device used to groom viewers. It is often treated as a real person. The filmmakers are just as careful not to portray 'Bianca' as the sex toy for men that it is as they are to avoid portraying Lars as a filthy character with little regard for women. Except when it arrived in a crate it is modestly dressed (sweaters, pants, tuque, scarf, coat). It spends much of its screen time in a wheelchair, attends church and appears with children (e.g. a kindergarten class sits at its feet, pretending it is reading a story). When it is found "unconscious" an ambulance takes it to the hospital, where it takes up a hospital bed (get well cards and gifts follow). Its funeral service is well-attended. Compare this representation with the pictures on realdoll.com, where the dolls are mostly naked and shown on their hands and knees, lying naked on their back, legs splayed. The website, unlike the film, makes no attempt to conceal their real purpose. The respectable portrayal of 'Bianca' extended beyond the film, to screenings and interviews with the cast.

In interviews Gosling gave about the film he referred to the doll not as 'it' but rather as 'she' and 'her'. At the Toronto International Film Festival Q&A he said: "The amazing thing about Bianca is that she has, she really has a real presence about her... She really does... Everybody grew to really love her, and she had a real presence. And I formed a real bond with her... I really grew to feel this dependency on her. I was relaxed when she was in scenes with me..." The audience had a big laugh when he joked that was why "she" was still in his house.

American screenwriter Nancy Oliver told Margy Rochlin of *The New York Times*, when asked how she got the idea for the screenplay she wrote in 2002: "It was a 'what if?' thing. Like, 'What if we didn't treat our mentally ill people like animals? What if we brought kindness and compassion to the table?" Oliver also tellingly said, "I had a weird job that I can't talk about. But I had to deal with a lot of Web sites and a lot of lonely guys."

In a featurette about the film, producer John Cameron reveals that it was Oliver who discovered the realdoll.com website—the source of the film's doll—whilst wandering around the Internet. Oliver said of the porn dolls: "... also because you can totally see the reason for them. I mean, how many people do you know who can't really operate with real people, with real human beings? And I can completely see how that would happen." Cameron mentions that Realdolls is a real company that exists in a secret location outside San Diego and that this company created "the various Biancas that we have used in the film." Speaking about the company's dolls Gillespie describes the variety to choose from: eight bodies, 14 faces, five skin colours, and five eye colours. He also says the film is "about connecting," and it is an "incredibly touching, moving story about love." Gosling states, "And I like the idea that you can love something and it doesn't necessarily have to love you back. It doesn't need to be a transaction."

Given how damaging men's consumption of pornography has been for women (and girls) one wonders why the filmmakers—especially Oliver—chose to normalize pornified artificial females this way. Had they set out to normalize porn dolls they couldn't have done a better job; it's something of a masterpiece. Oliver's original idea for the film—to bring kindness and compassion to the treatment of mentally ill people—is a laudable goal. However, does it follow that affirming someone's delusion constitutes a kindness? We don't affirm anorexics in their belief that they must starve themselves thin. Does it follow that men's use of pornified artificial females must be normalized? We don't expect pornographic magazines and videos to help men treat or relate to women better. It isn't likely that using inanimate objects will teach people "who can't really operate with real people" how—women, unlike dolls, can disagree with men and refuse consent. More likely, using these dolls will accustom men to treating women like objects without agency. Gillespie said the film is "about connecting," but you can't connect with an object. And Gosling's statement that "... you can love something and it doesn't necessarily have to love you back" fits well with rape culture. Lars says God made 'Bianca' to help people but a growing body of evidence demonstrates that pornified versions of females for men's sexual gratification have been disastrous for women and girls. Just one example will be provided to make the point: the tragedy of Holly Jones. In 2003 Michael Briere, consumed by desire fueled by the child pornography he had accessed, abducted, raped, and murdered 10-year-old Jones, who lived in his Toronto neighborhood.

In *Lars*, wherein an artificial female is treated better than many real women, the cost to the female characters of normalizing a man using a porn doll is not satisfactorily explored. Karin must ignore her distaste for the doll. Her pregnancy is completely upstaged by Lars' delusion—she receives next to no special attention during this exciting stage of her life. Margo—Lars' other love interest—must pretend not to be hurt by his preference for the doll. Dagmar's time is wasted—particularly insulting as she is a doctor. Where is the cognitive dissonance? Kindness only seems to be extended to a deluded man here—not all the women enlisted to prop up his fantasy life.

Presenting and treating a porn doll as a real woman grooms viewers for seeing women as objects—something pornography excels at. This dehumanization of women eases the work of industries that would profit from using women as objects. At best *Lars and the Real Girl* appears irresponsible. At worst the many devices used by the filmmakers to normalize the porn doll suggest they endorse the normalization of artificial females. One wonders if this was product placement or if the filmmakers are fans of Realdolls. Filmmakers that groom viewers for seeing women as objects merit much more attention that they currently receive. One can't help but notice similarities between the normalization of the dehumanization of women in *Lars* and in real life in the gender identity industry, where women are also treated as parts for the use of men.

Realdolls

Lars and the Real Girl includes a close-up of the realdoll.com website and the porn dolls used in the film are RealDolls, which are manufactured by Abyss Creations. According to its website, the introductory price for the classic model is \$3999.00. The other silicone dolls—at the time of this writing there are 39 different dolls—cost over \$6000.00. The company sells “petites,” “extra faces” and torsos. There are breast options, “vaginal styles” and numerous faces to choose from. The customizable dolls also allow buyers to design their own face (a likeness of his ex-girlfriend or the girl down the road, why not?). The website states: “supple sex features are made with top-of-the-line materials, all lifelike to the touch.” They promise “[r]eal, ravishing expressions [that] react to your voice and delight at your touch.” You can “[f]ine-tune the pitch of her voice and create an irresistible personality with leading AI technology.” The home page also features, between the *Discovery Channel* and *Rolling Stone* logos, the *Lars and the Real Girl* title.



Screenshot from realdolls.com taken April 14, 2022



Screenshot from realdolls.com taken April 14, 2022

In 2017 CNET [reported](#) that Abyss Creations was “bringing the dolls to life using animatronics, sensor tech and artificial intelligence that gives the dolls programmable personalities.” CNET’s Ry Crist also stated that the company is based in San Marcos, California, and that he visited the robot factory. According to Crist, “One of the first things you see upon entering the Abyss offices is a wall of heads showcasing the various face and hairstyle options customers can choose from.”



Customizable appearances



Masters



Abyss Creations factory, CNET article



Shipping

Abyss Creations factory, CNET article

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