

**Film Review: *Lars and the Real Girl*. Dir. Craig Gillespie. USA: MGM, 2007.**

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*Lars and the Real Girl* is Australian Craig Gillespie's directorial debut. Ryan Gosling (*Half-Nelson* Academy Award nominee) plays the title character of Lars, a hyper-sensitive church-going small-town office worker (the film is shot in the wintry Toronto, Ontario suburbs of Uxbridge and King Township). Lars isolates himself from interacting with other people. This includes his brother Gus (Paul Schneider) and sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer) who try desperately to include him in family activities; and from an office colleague Margo (Kelli Garner) who has romantic feelings for him. Still grieving from the loss of his parents many years ago and living in the garage next to Gus and Karin's house, Lars subsequently orders online and falls in love with a full size, solid-body anatomically correct plastic sex doll whom he introduces to everyone as his "girlfriend", an orphaned Brazilian missionary named Bianca.

*Lars and the Real Girl* is actually a much better movie than the above synopsis would suggest as Lars' situation elicits sympathy and understanding from the other characters instead of fear and revulsion surrounding his "delusion". The film's approach in presenting Lars' psychiatric disability is refreshing as it touches upon the social pressures brought to bear on individuals who are perceived as "different" from the "norm" instead of the typical cinematic portrayal of a psychiatric disability as a highly negative and stigmatizing attribute that overshadows an individual's entire identity. As such, Lars' "beautiful delusion" is not portrayed in the film as a form of psychopathology,

but as a “rational” response to the trauma of losing his parents and the feelings of unresolved grief attached to such an event.

Initially, Lars’ situation causes confusion for Margo as she is not sure what to make of this new development. It creates marital tension between Karin, who is willing to indulge his delusion, and Gus, who is opposed on the grounds that indulging Lars’ delusion will only reinforce the “legitimacy” of said delusion. As such, Gus and Karin seek the help of the town’s psychologist (Patricia Clarkson) who in turn recommends (to Gus’ chagrin), the unconventional treatment that everyone in the town, including members of his church, help Lars by going along with his “delusion” to accept and treat Bianca as a “real girl” instead of a plastic sex doll. There is fear that confronting Lars with the truth about Bianca will further traumatize him. The psychologist, Gus, and Karin then concoct a plan whereby Lars will bring Bianca in every week for treatment for her supposedly low blood pressure and weak pulse, and while she is resting after her treatment, Lars will have an informal therapy session as a means of resolving the trauma that he experienced by the loss of his parents.

What is interesting about the film is that Gus and Karin begin an informal campaign to educate the townspeople about “delusional disorder” as a way to convince them that Lars’ delusion is no different from some of other common beliefs, such as government conspiracies or the existence of UFOs. This initiative, undertaken by Gus and Karin, is exceptionally beneficial and helps explain to the audience why Lars, despite his psychiatric disability, is not as stigmatized as would typically be expected in a film of this

nature. The townspeople, even though they do not fully comprehend “delusional disorder”, do not shun and avoid Lars because of his delusion. Instead all agree to accept Bianca as a real person in theory, believing that it is the right thing to do until Lars reaches a therapeutic breakthrough. In fact, some townspeople appreciate and celebrate Lars’ generous spirit in “helping” Bianca, who uses a wheelchair for mobility, must be carried, and is non-verbal.

However, the townspeople initially have some difficulty putting the principle of inclusion into practice as some are hesitant and cautious in their approach to Bianca. For example, rather than asking Bianca directly about her preferences, the townspeople ask Lars about her preferences instead –this is a common scenario that most persons with disabilities experience. Over time, the townspeople transcend their understanding of Bianca as a plastic sex doll, and view her as a full-fledged member of the community who has a viable life of her own apart from Lars. This change is the very thing that made them effective community supports. For example, Bianca becomes an active hospital volunteer, and she is elected as a local school-board trustee. Such developments are rendered slightly tongue-in-cheek by the film’s director, and do not fail to amuse sympathetic viewers (who will not forget for a moment that Bianca is plastic sex doll). The point being made, however, is that once the townspeople accept, for Lars’ sake, the fiction of Bianca’s humanity and worth as an individual, and once they accept their crucial roles as community supports, they come to believe in her reality. At the very least, they begin to value and respect her as a “real girl.” This respect is most evident when Bianca’s short illness and subsequent death plunges the entire town into

a state of collective mourning. The strong community support they demonstrate occurs only because they are able to transcend their ideas of difference and accept Bianca into the way they function as a community. It is through Bianca's death that Lars is able to "unburden" himself and come to terms with the loss of his parents. Bianca's death also allows for Lars to end his emotional solitude by allowing him to reciprocate Margo's romantic feelings. With that said, Bianca's death is controversial: she is not human and her portrayal as a non-verbal wheelchair user may inadvertently promote eugenic ideas that "real" persons with disabilities are also non-humans, whose deaths would be inconsequential.

In reviewing this film as a current critical disability studies student, I am reminded that developmental or intellectual disabilities have historically existed through the legacy of institutional labelling, rather than existing as an independent phenomenon, much in the same way psychiatric disabilities have resulted. Often, it is individuals such as educators, physicians, and psychologists who "created" and perpetuated the label of an intellectual or developmental disability in diverse ways and as a means of promoting professional self-interest. Bogdan and Taylor (1994) note that: "to name something is, in a sense, to create it. Because the objective existence of the condition it is supposed to describe has never been questioned, the phrase 'mental retardation' has become an obstruction to understanding" (p. 7). As a result of institutional labelling, persons with developmental or intellectual disabilities are often casually dismissed as "not all there" and are not accorded the same respect that other community members receive. Bianca may have easily been labelled in such a manner, despite also having definite physical

disabilities. Historically, people with disabilities have been “incorrectly” assigned the label of an intellectual disability primarily on the grounds of being non-verbal and being unable to demonstrate their “true” intellectual capacity. *Lars and the Real Girl* is reminiscent of the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (see DSQ, Volume 28, No. 2 for a review), which describes the experience of “locked-in syndrome” whereby an individual is “cognitively alert and aware but profoundly paralyzed” and who communicates through blinking. Therefore, some audience members may be inclined to posit that Bianca, on the account of being non-verbal, is being portrayed as equivalent to people with intellectual disabilities. Nonetheless, she is simply an inanimate plastic sex doll and the townspeople could have casually dismissed her as such. It is only through the process of Lars giving his plastic sex doll a name and gaining the support of the town psychologist that the townspeople are able to move away from viewing her as a plastic sex doll to viewing her as a “real girl” with her own life to live.

While persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities have made great strides in society, the lack of community acceptance and strong and effective supports remains a significant issue that negatively impacts quality of life. While this film is a stylized piece of fiction, it provides a salient example of putting the principle of inclusion into practice and demonstrating how community support is supposed to work. Inclusion is facilitated by having the townspeople move beyond the label of “plastic sex doll” to simply accepting Lars’ partner as Bianca. A similar approach in moving away from the label of intellectual or developmental disability (and the negative connotations associated with such a label) will allow for community acceptance and the support of persons with

developmental or intellectual disabilities. This film provides an interesting synopsis of how disability should have more to do with how society understands and responds to “conditions” as opposed to solely depicting disability in biomedical terms. What is also intriguing about *Lars and the Real Girl* is that it makes the audience think as to what “factors” (this term is used loosely to include the attitudinal, environmental, cultural, and societal) would need to be in place to allow people with disabilities to live full inclusive lives.

### **References**

- Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S. J. (1994). *The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation: Two Life Stories*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Church, D. (2008). Review of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 28, unpaginated.