

Real Girls

ELEANOR GARRAN

Lars and the Real Girl is a film about a man with extreme social anxiety who buys a lifelike doll—Bianca—and develops the delusion that she’s his real-life girlfriend. Of course, this film is not about Bianca at all. The camera barely looks at her. As she has no character, Bianca is purely a site for other people’s projections—in the particular instance of this film, she is a place for the community to project their love for Lars, and a place for Lars to learn how to love safely.

The film is a fantasy. It’s full of people who unselfishly love Lars, from the receptionist at his office to his sister-in-law to the people at church who, in conjunction with enchanted, enchanting Bianca, give him the space to slowly emerge.

I had thought that Lars would be ashamed. But he’s never ashamed, and no one in the community shames him. He imagines a scenario in which he is safe, held, and loved, and then lives inside it until he has been strengthened enough to let it go. It’s not about cutting the imaginary love object loose; it’s about incorporating

it into your sense of being. Nobody but Lars loves Bianca, but the community involves Bianca out of love for Lars.

The idea of such a community is the film's most far-fetched aspect—a small town, every member of which willingly participates in Lars's delusion out of kindness. A group of people who unequivocally know the way to support someone and do, simply and unselfishly.

*

I had thought I would be the doll, but I find to my surprise that I am Lars. At the same time, I am envious of Lars, enchanting himself with his doll, enchanting his family with his doll. I envy Lars from the start of the film, even before his transformation has begun. I envy him being in this film. I envy him being seen and understood by this sympathetic lens.

I'm always terrified of what awful secret about myself I might be revealing, just by being a person in relation to other people. I have never intentionally shown anyone my Bianca, but I understand why, when Bianca arrives, the first thing Lars does is introduce her to his family.

Being in relationship with other people involves absorbing their relationship to material. Entering into relationship with a person isn't just relating to the person; it's relating to the physical space around them, their body as part of that space. It matters that the film's characters treat Bianca like a person even when Lars isn't around. They respect what he sees, what he believes, even when he is not there, even though they themselves don't believe it.

*

I wish you felt comfortable enough to show me your secret life—I wish you or I were brave or desperate enough to present it to each other.

*

I expected Bianca to be fantastical, an unbelievably perfect companion, and while she does start out that way, what is most touching about Lars and Bianca's relationship is its difficulties. She does not do what he wants, her health is uncertain and stressful. Lars grows in the way one hopes to grow in relationship with a living person—he is needy, and resentful at being made to acknowledge his neediness; he fights, grows tired; he worries about her in a way that brings him to understand there is no answer to the worry. He loves the doll with more humility, more nuance, than I can often imagine a person being loved.

When we see Lars and Bianca alone, we see a silliness in him that is touching. He lies with his feet in the air, sings in funny voices like a child, unselfconscious. The greatest gift we can give each other is being with each other's private silliness and letting each other see our own. It's a different kind of secret from the type made into dolls. It's something I am just now learning to do.

