

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 06 | Spring 2008

Title	Female Effigies and Performances of Desire: A Consideration of Identity Performance in <i>Lars and the Real Girl</i>
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	06
Issue Date	Spring 2008
Publication Date	05/06/2008
Editors	Kim Richmond & Ana Salzberg

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**Female Effigies and Performances of Desire:
A Consideration of Identity Performance in
Lars and the Real Girl.**

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The Sexual Cyborg

Social identity is in many ways formed and maintained through performances that occur within the public sphere and are validated by the corresponding performances of others. In the film *Lars and the Real Girl*, a sex doll named Bianca, a cyborg animated by the performances of those around her, comes to function as an effigy figure in her community. Bianca's object status identifies her as a highly heterosexual, although potentially subversive, signifier of male sexual desire. However, the collective efforts of the community to see and engage with her as a subject rather than an object reflects a cohesive desire to reinscribe her sexually exaggerated form with a de-sexualized, socially integrated and ultimately benign female identity that maintains heteronormative and patriarchal social order. The negation of Bianca's intended object use and subsequent animation through performances of interaction reflect the disruptive potential of the sex doll and the power of social performance to inscribe social ideals of male and female identity onto human bodies. The film offers insight into the power of performative reception to re-shape desire through the character of Bianca, who is at once an inanimate sex doll and a real girl. While the subject of the film offers the potential for crude humor, the relationship between Lars and Bianca, as well as between Bianca and the rest of the community, is carefully explored without laboring over Bianca's object-identity as a sex doll. This decision on the part of director Craig Gillespie encourages the audience to accept Bianca as a real girl and an active character in the film, although it is interesting to note that seeing Bianca as a real girl effectively negates her desirability as a sexual object. The film was released by Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, a small production company, in North America on October 25, 2007 and took in only six million dollars over a period of four months, the result of limited advertising and some hesitation on the part of audiences to watch a film in which a sex doll plays the female lead. While not a huge commercial success, *Lars and the Real Girl* garnered some critical acclaim with an Oscar nomination for best screenplay (2008), as well as winning the National Board of Review USA

(2007) award for best screenplay. In addition, Ryan Gosling, who played Lars, received a Golden Globe nomination for best actor (2008).

Sex dolls are, by their very definition, objects of sexual desire. It is the object nature of these dolls that enables them to function as sites for the projection of fantasy and the construction of narratives, both simplistic and elaborate. In his book, *Love and Sex with Robots*, David Levy discusses the gendered use of sex dolls in the United States and Japan, noting that the largest sex doll company, RealDolls, offers fourteen female base models that can be made to customer specification from a wide range of potential options. However, there is only one male model available for purchase, indicative of a definite gender divide in the sex doll market (Levy 244). Because such statistics suggest that heterosexual men are the most likely to engage in this type of sexual interaction, as well as because of the gendering that exists in the film *Lars and the Real Girl*, I will limit my discussion of the gender politics at work here to a consideration of male desire towards female objects and subjects. In mapping out reasons for the relative popularity of such dolls in the Western marketplace, Levy argues that:

the marketing of RealDolls and their cousins from other manufacturers tends to be based on the idea that they are ‘the perfect woman,’ perfect because they’re always ready and available, because they provide all the benefits of a human female partner without any of the complications involved with human relationships, and because they make no demands of their owners, with no conversation and no foreplay required. (247)

In descriptions such as this, the dolls are simultaneously recognized as both human and non-human. While these dolls do not qualify as human because they are not alive, they take human form and can be animated through sexual fantasy, even if this animation occurs only in the perception of their male partners. The power of fantasy in creating satisfying interactions, both sexual and non-sexual, is a primary element of the human/doll relationship and is compellingly depicted in the film *Lars and the Real Girl*.

The sex doll, simultaneously defined as a technological object and a potential subject, is the product of a complex relationship between humans and technology. Donna Haraway’s groundbreaking essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”, calls for a rigorous reconsideration of the definition and parameters of human identity in an increasingly technological world. Haraway argues that the interaction with or application of technology on the human body, while at times changing that body only imperceptibly, nonetheless has a dramatic impact on how humanity can

be conceived of and defined. While Haraway uses the term 'cyborg' to reference the application of technology onto human bodies, I suggest that the definition of this term could also be expanded to include instances in which technology is designed to take on human form, particularly when that technology is recognized and treated as human and is specifically designed for human interaction. There are many examples of such adapted technology today, such as automated switchboard operators who respond to verbal requests and maintain the conventions of polite conversation when answering calls from the public. Just as Haraway broadens definitions of humanity in light of the impact of technological advancement, I suggest the need for a similarly expansive and dynamic term of reference for technologies that mimic human identity and encourage human-style interaction. Such examples of the 'technologically human', as I refer to them, challenge the category of 'human' through performances of human identity. While these performances may not be sufficient to qualify such robot-cyborgs as human, it is in the reception of such 'human' performances and the interactions that such performances encourage that the dynamic nature of human identity can be seen. Moreover, the fact that a semblance and performance of human identity can in some circumstances prove sufficient to merit a corresponding performance from 'real' human highlights the power of performance in all human interactions.

Critical thinking concerning the figure of the cyborg offers insight into the potential power of the sex doll. Jennifer González, writing about the cyborg body, states that "of the examples which I have found of such [cyborg figures], a decided majority represent female bodies providing some form of entertainment" (60). This caveat certainly holds true in the case of female sex dolls, whose primary purpose is to provide male partners with sexual pleasure. The sex doll is the epitome of a stringently codified female beauty that reflects current Western concepts of sexual attractiveness. Beyond the primary physicality of the cyborg, González raises the social and cultural implications of the constructed cyborg body for consideration, arguing that "it should therefore come as no surprise that the traditional, gendered roles of Euro-American culture are rarely challenged in the visual representations of cyborgs – a concept which itself arises from an industrially 'privileged' Euro-American perspective" (61). Although the dolls seem to offer freedom to male sexual desire by allowing that desire to wholly shape each interaction, they also reinstate a negotiated heteronormative order that prioritizes heterosexual interaction and an objectified female partner whose physicality is primary. This is

an important reminder that the cyborg body is not exempt from social and political imperatives, and indeed, that such constructed bodies are perhaps more susceptible to the narratives and hierarchical structures that subtly and not so subtly shape Western society. As an object, the doll enables and encourages uninhibited male sexual fantasy, performing a kind of vacuous female sexuality that accommodates a range of potential male desires. The very nature of the sex doll's physicality makes her a desirable object for the sexual male gaze while her construction to the specifications of individual male desire reinforces the patriarchal positioning of women as objects, rather than subjects, of the gaze. The compulsory heterosexuality that is implied by the cyborg body of the female sex doll also validates the performance of heterosexual desire enacted by her male partner, although this validation is complicated by a primarily Western perception that sex dolls represent a potentially deviant or problematic sexual interaction. The malleability of the cyborg body and its potential for performance endows it with both normative and subversive potential, a fact of which González is well aware when she writes that "the cyborg body is the body of an imagined cyberspatial existence. It is the site of possible being. In this sense it exists in excess of the real. But it is also embedded within the real" (58). Haraway recognizes and praises the potential of the cyborg to challenge existing social, cultural, and political imperatives, arguing that:

cyborg imagery can help [...] embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts. [...] Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. (58)

The sex doll, as an example of technologically-human cyborg, draws attention to the problematic sexualization of the female form for male consumption, as well as to the ways that engagements with this hypersexual femininity serve to fortify hierarchies of gendered identity that constrain both men and women.

Social Effigies

Although I defined the sex doll as an object of fantasy, it is also important to recognize the ways in which this somewhat simplistic designation can be complicated and nuanced through an examination of the role that Bianca plays in the film *Lars and the Real Girl*. I suggest that the

sex doll can be seen to function, both within the film and in broader social instances, as an effigy figure as defined by Joseph Roach. In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach states that:

beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth, there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh. Such effigies are made by performances. They consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions. I argue that performed effigies [...] provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specialty nominated mediums or surrogates...[such as] actors. (36)

It is not difficult, nor is it particularly compelling, to argue that the sex doll is an “ostensibly inanimate effigy” as described by Roach. Bianca, by virtue of her technologically constructed body, functions as an effigy of a ‘real girl’ in a very straightforward way. However, through a more rigorous consideration of the roles played by sex dolls, and Bianca in particular, it becomes evident that sex dolls, animated through fantasy and use, do “hold open a place in memory” that maintains patriarchal and hyper-sexualized ideals of female identity. The sex doll functions as a living effigy by enacting and fulfilling the sexual desires of her male partner while simultaneously requiring and eliciting a performance, sexual as well as social, from that partner. As objects of fantasy, these dolls offer a seemingly uninhibited sexual possibility that is carefully located within the constraints of heterosexual interaction. The doll is a complex figure precisely because she instigates fantasy and is animated by that fantasy in the mind of her partner, however, her very physicality at all times identifies her as an object rather than a subject. As Roach observes:

this dichotomy provokes a constant alternation of attention from actor to role, from vulnerable body to enduring memory [...] this makes the effigy a monstrosity. As a monstrous double, it reconnoiters the boundaries of cultural identity, and its journey to the margins activates the fascination and the loathing that audiences feel for its liminality. (82)

The sex doll proves to be a problematic figure precisely because she is never simply an object, nor can she be seen as an autonomous subject. She refuses absolute objectification but is denied social acceptability within the larger social organization of Western society. The social discomfort with sex dolls is more evident in North American culture than in Japan, where the dolls have been more fully integrated into the socio-sexual discourse. Levy notes that in Japan,

sex dolls are commonly referred to as “dutch wives” and have “their own special place and treatment within the confines of Japanese culture” (249). The very term “dutch wife”, the etymology of which is briefly traced by Levy, is an example of how cultural recognition and an adapted social discourse can allow an effigy figure to more comfortably inhabit a social, as well as private, space.

Although the film *Lars and the Real Girl* certainly presents the sex doll as an effigy figure of female sexualization and objectification, Bianca’s role as an effigy is revealed to be far richer and more complex as she takes on a non-sexual and ultimately social identity. Roach’s definition of the living effigy calls attention to the interaction between the actor and the community in the maintenance of social identity. Roach explores the living effigy through the example of Thomas Betterton, a 16th century English actor whose consistent performances of royal identity on-stage prompted his community to treat him as royalty while off-stage. Although born the son of an under-cook to King Charles I, his ability to convincingly inhabit a range of kingly roles transformed him into true royalty in the eyes of his audiences. When he died in 1710, he was buried alongside the kings of England in Westminster Abbey and the public outpouring of grief at his loss was comparable to the loss of a member of the monarchy. It is precisely this power of performance in the creation of public identity that I am invoking here. Betterton’s performance both echoed and reinforced public understanding of how a king should comport himself, while simultaneously affirming the hierarchy that maintained royal authority. As an effigy, Betterton reminded the public of the long history and power of the monarchy and allowed his audiences to feel themselves close to that history and power precisely because he was accessible to them in the public space in a way that the true king was not. Roach points out that this relationship between Betterton and his audiences actually strengthened the power of the monarchy by allowing the public to feel a tangible connection to their (true) king through their observation of, and interaction with, Thomas Betterton. My analysis of Bianca and those who interact with her clarifies how this sex doll comes to function as an effigy of a socially acceptable female identity, while simultaneously procuring a desirable male performance from Lars.

The film introduces Lars as a socially awkward man who avoids physical and emotional contact with those around him. He exists outside of the domestic space, choosing to live in the garage behind his brother and sister-in-law’s home, and he spends his time watching the outside

world at a distance through his binoculars. Both at work and at home, he is positioned as a social outsider in his community. Conversations between his brother and sister-in-law suggest the possibility of a medical or psychological issue, although no direct diagnosis is offered. However, it is important that Lars' rejection of social relationships is presented as a medical problem rather than a valid lifestyle choice, particularly in light of the film's investment in the creation of harmonious social interactions. It is into this lonely and solitary life that Bianca is delivered, suggestive of a belief that sex dolls are substitutes for human interaction and companionship for those who do not, for whatever reason, forge functional human relationships. Certainly, the film discourages the reading that these dolls are desirable on their own terms for those who are sexually and socially active. The filmography underscores the doll as an object as she is unpacked from the crate in which she is delivered to Lars' garage. There are several extended shots of Lars, seemingly unsure of what to do with the doll, simply watching her as she sits on his couch. While this scene is intended to be read humorously, there is a distinct sense of discomfort, both for Lars and for the audience, when faced with Bianca as a purely sexual object. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (62-63)

Such codes of representation are underscored in this scene by the very nature of this female object, as she has no purpose other than to command the male gaze. However, the sexual desire that Bianca is intended to prompt and satisfy is quickly and interestingly complicated as Lars brings her to his brother's home, introducing her as his girlfriend. Immediately, Lars begins to construct Bianca's identity for his audience, becoming the fabricator, narrator, and interpreter of her identity and desires. He details her past, explaining that he and Bianca met on the internet, that she is in a wheelchair as a result of a childhood accident, and that she has recently finished first-aid volunteer work in a remote country. Humorously, he also explains that her extremely provocative outfit is the result of having her luggage lost en-route. What is key to note is that

Lars refuses to see or deal with her as an object. Rather, Lars constructs an elaborate, social, and primarily non-sexual identity for Bianca, one that is in opposition to the type of purely sexual desires or fantasies that she, as a sexual object, would more commonly be shaped by. Although Bianca is intended to fulfill a sexual fantasy, she is in fact put to work as a social fantasy to Lars. At this point, she is functioning as an effigy who performs “a set of actions that hold open a place in memory” into which a real woman will eventually step (Roach 36).

Feminist film critic Sharon Smith argues that “the role of a woman in a film almost always revolves around her physical attraction and the mating games she plays with the male characters. On the other hand a man is not shown purely in relation to the female characters, but in a wide variety of roles” (14). This is certainly the case here, as Bianca’s identity is developed by and interwoven with Lars’ identity. For a large portion of the movie, Bianca does not appear without Lars and all of her social interactions are dependent on his ability to speak for her and about her. Conversely, Bianca’s presence encourages Lars to begin to form social relationships with those around him and the town’s desire to treat Bianca as a real girl requires that Lars initially act as a communicative intermediary until Bianca assumes an independent role in the community. Laura Mulvey further argues that “the man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator” (63). This is a particularly important point because it is Lars’ investment in Bianca as a real girl that encourages his community, as well as the audience, to see her in the same way. Although she never speaks or moves independently, the audience participates in Lars’ belief that she is alive and is animated through his interactions with her.

Desirable Female Performances

Rather than a sexual object, Lars constructs Bianca as a social female partner, and the form that this fantasy identity takes is fraught with limiting constructions of desirable female identity in the social sphere. Bianca performs the role of an ideal woman for Lars, dressing conservatively, being actively involved in community causes, and generally making his social interactions more comfortable. She also functions as a sounding board for Lars as he talks to her endlessly throughout the film, explaining his thoughts, fears, and perspectives on a range of different topics. While these scenes may seem benign, it is unsettling to realize that she is an effigy of what Lars really desires in a female partner. Bianca is an ideal woman precisely

because she cannot interrupt or contradict him, instead remaining demurely and silently beside her man. What is subversive about this recognition is that the audience has invested in Lars' social rehabilitation through Bianca, and while she is never more an object than in these scenes, Lars is animated in a way that he has not yet been in the film. Because the audience has actively invested in Bianca as a real girl in order to validate the relationship between Bianca and Lars, the audience has also participated in the creation of this effigy of silent and paralyzed femininity. In a broader context, Bianca as a subject is indicative of a patriarchal imperative that discourages women from voicing their ideas and opinions, that expects women to be socially and outwardly, rather than inwardly, focused, and that criticizes blatant displays of sexual identity and desire. Roach's conception of the effigy complicates Bianca's character because as the film progresses, it is made clear that Lars is not the only one shaping Bianca's identity. As she is integrated into the community, the social interactions that shape her identity develop in much the same vein, as she attends hen nights with a circle of female friends, is elected to the school board committee, and participates in church discussion groups. The men and women of this community are as involved with the performances that shape Bianca's identity and the product of those performances is a frighteningly conservative and limiting effigy of marginalized female identity.

A close consideration of the film *Lars and the Real Girl* reveals much about how human identity is constructed through performance, particularly as Bianca's object status is overwritten by the narrative and performative efforts made on her behalf. Haraway defines the cyborg as "a matter of fiction and lived experience" and certainly in this case, Bianca becomes an arguably autonomous subject through the fictions that Lars and his community create and the "lived experience" of being treated as human (50). Bianca's constructed identity and the roles that she takes on in the community emphasize the degree to which all human identity is constructed and maintained through interactions in which individual performances of identity are accepted as valid and appropriate. The social construction of Bianca's identity within the film reveals a great deal about the performances of female identity that are desirable, as well as the performances that are socially undesirable. As an object, Bianca represents an alternative sexual desire that does not line up neatly with the ideals of a heteronormative social order that takes the nuclear family as the basis of its organization. It is only by treating her as a subject that the potential, although never realized, sexual relationship between Lars and Bianca is brought into closer

alignment with the ideal of heteronormative interaction that is made explicitly desirable, both in the film and in Western society. As Balsamo notes:

cyborgs offer a particularly appropriate emblem not only of post-modern identity, but – specifically – of woman’s identity. Cyborg identity is predicated on transgressed boundaries. They fascinate us because they are not like us, and yet just like us. Formed through a radical disruption of other-ness, cyborg identity foregrounds the constructedness of otherness. Cyborgs alert us to the ways culture and discourse depend upon stable notions of ‘the other’ that are arbitrary and binary, and also shifting and unstable. Who or what gets constructed as other becomes a site for the cultural contestation of meaning within feminist politics. (155)

The discomfort that Bianca initially causes Lars’ family and the community, as well as the audience of the film, is indicative of how ‘other’ identities, interactions, and desires threaten the heteronormative order that structures social interactions, particularly as shown in the film. It is only by treating Bianca as human and refusing her object status that she can be accepted. Bianca’s introduction and integration into the community parallels Lars’ own social development. Prior to Bianca’s arrival, Lars is an awkward character who shuns social interactions and it is only through the widespread acceptance of Bianca that Lars becomes comfortable within his community and begins to develop heteronormative and homosocial relationships. It is by refusing Bianca’s ‘otherness’ that Lars’ own ‘otherness’ is rehabilitated and both become full members of the community in which they live. Karin, Lars’ sister-in-law and the first character to accept Bianca as a real girl, explains to Lars that:

Every person in this town bends over backward to make Bianca feel at home. Why do you think she has so many places to go and so much to do? Huh? Huh? Because of you! Because - all these people - love you! We push her wheelchair. We drive her to work. We drive her home. We wash her. We dress her. We get her up, and put her to bed. We carry her. And she is not petite, Lars. Bianca is a big, big girl! None of this is easy - for any of us - but we do it... Oh! We do it for you! So don't you dare tell me how we don't care. (*Lars and the Real Girl* 2007)

What is made explicitly clear here is the degree to which the town is invested in Lars’ fantasy of Bianca as real and the extent to which Lars’ rehabilitation as a ‘normal guy’ is dependent on the maintenance of this fantasy, both by Lars and his community. Furthermore, Bianca’s ‘humanization’ is in no way an act of lip service, but the result of the full and active participation

in the construction and enactment of her reality by those around her. What is particularly compelling is that these performances, initially intended to validate Lars' perception of Bianca as real, become even more elaborate outside of Lars' presence. This dedication to Bianca's animation reflects the discomfort that Bianca's object role causes, as well as suggesting the power of performance in constructing 'reality' and the pleasure that can be gained from such constructions. This situation can be seen as an example of Adrian Piper's notion of "passing", in which the acceptance of identity performance by members who share that identity is recognized as more important than the identity performance itself (58). Certainly, Bianca's performance as a real girl is facilitated by the same people who validate her 'passing' for a real girl. Her audience is actively involved in and committed to her 'passing' as real to avoid the discomfort of her object status as a sex doll and the perceived complications that such a status confers onto Lars' heteronormative masculinity.

Negotiating Gendered Performances

As Bianca performs an ideal female effigy, Lars undergoes dramatic changes and becomes more socially involved with those around him. Far from being the awkward loner that we are introduced to at the beginning of the film, Lars begins to take on a more traditionally masculine identity, becoming more assertive with those around him, expressing aggressive emotions, and beginning a subtly flirtatious relationship with one of his co-workers. The film initially pairs Lars' failed masculinity with an overtly constructed female sexuality but by rejecting the blatant sexuality of the sex doll in favor of a conservative, non-sexual, and ultimately subservient femininity, Lars' masculinity is rehabilitated and he can become the romantic hero of the film. Unsurprisingly, Bianca does not survive this transition as Lars narrates her into an unknown illness from which she is unable to recover and she dies. The universally perceived reality of Bianca's identity in the community is highlighted most effectively during her 'funeral', when Reverend Bock preaches that:

Lars asked us not to wear black today. He did so to remind us that this is no ordinary funeral. We are here to celebrate Bianca's extraordinary life. From her wheelchair, Bianca reached out and touched us all, in ways we could never have imagined. She was a teacher. She was a lesson in courage. And Bianca loved us all. Especially Lars. Especially him. (*Lars and the Real Girl* 2007)

While this direct recognition of the power of Bianca's humanity validates her performance and the performances of those around her, it also reflects the complex system of expectations and ideals that shaped the construction of Bianca's human and female identity, particularly in light of the social role that she was made to perform. Lars' sense of loss at her death is shared by the whole community, however, it is out of this loss that Lars begins his first romantic interaction with a truly 'real girl'. It is precisely because Lars could claim narrative power over Bianca that she proves such an ideal partner for him and it is through this relationship that Lars learns to take on the masculine authority that he lacks at the beginning of the film. While Bianca's death can potentially be seen as the demise of the problematic female identity that she was made to perform, it seems more appropriate that her death be read in context with Lars' emotional and social development. Bianca dies only once Lars is sufficiently socialized to form a more 'valid' romantic connection, leaving Lars free of guilt and fully ready to enter into a new relationship. This death is not the death of the effigy but the ultimate incarnation of that identity, a selfless and self-effacing woman who exists to support her man in his own quest for happiness. The sex doll, a grotesque exaggeration of female physicality, is in this instance re-created through performance to embody an equally extreme and limiting social construction of female identity, making clear the power of desire to construct individual identity through performance and counter-performance.

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