



## Article

# Healing with the Nonhuman Actor: A Study of the Recuperation from Loneliness and Isolation Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic through the Cinematic Text *Lars and the Real Girl*

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**Abstract:** Loneliness and isolation were two factors introduced as “effective measures” during the COVID-19 crisis. The lockdown exacerbated loneliness among those already suffering from acute illnesses. In this context, a rereading of the film *Lars and the Real Girl* by Craig Gillespie is particularly relevant as it offers novel perspectives on loneliness. The interplay between Lars’s desire to be in a compassionate relationship and the fear of meeting and socializing is comparable to what was witnessed across the coronavirus-afflicted world. This paper explores the potential for understanding delusion caused by traumatic experiences as a form of communication rather than a mental disorder. The film explains how a silicone sex doll functions as a medium between the lonesome Lars and society in resolving the trauma. The paper focuses on the infantile nature of humans and uses infantilism in a conducive manner to understand anthropomorphism for bridging the gap between a lonely/delusional person and society while drawing examples from the film. The introduction of a nonhuman actor—an anatomically correct doll—becomes an opportunity for a traumatized person such as Lars to know himself well and gradually open up to socializing. As he moves from external to threshold en-rolling, followed by internal en-rolling, it indicates his opening up to communication as he moves from language to *lalangue* and creates his world with the doll. This film presents a therapeutic approach to treating schizoid personality disorder with the assistance of a nonhuman actor.

**Keywords:** delusion; loneliness; COVID-19; communication; nonhuman



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## 1. Introduction

Loneliness is grief, distended. People are primates, and even more sociable than chimpanzees. We hunger for intimacy. We wither without it. (Lepore 2020, para. 5)

With the whole world thrown into a state of temporary shutdown starting in March 2020, the fear of loneliness and of being left out entered into the public imagination on an unprecedented scale. The paranoia was not unfounded. The desire to keep ourselves and loved ones safe while simultaneously suspecting that everyone was carrying the disease became a premise that lit up dystopian fiction, particularly the focus on the tattered delusion of safety that the world held on to, like a thread. Even the nations that boasted of having the best healthcare systems were hobbled by their lack of preparation. Exacerbated through the traumatic effects of extended quarantines in the face of such failures, the facet of loneliness that has an asymptotic relation to our lives realized its presence as an undeniable force to humanity. If someone had not yet succumbed to COVID-19, they were likely to succumb to loneliness instead. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Brigham University, indicated that people who experience loneliness have a 26% greater chance of dying than people who are clinically obese, smoke cigarettes, or drink excessive alcohol (Benson 2020, para. 8). According to Holt-Lunstad, the science

behind loneliness suggests that “loneliness is a biological cue much like hunger and thirst. But in the current atmosphere where it’s seen as unpleasant to seek social connection, it’s as if we’re all incredibly thirsty, but we’re being told the water’s not safe to drink” (para. 16).

Following the abrupt rupture of social life that forced the masses to endure loneliness and isolation, a collective trauma was experienced in the form of “corona psychosis” (Martin 2020). Using the cultural memory of the 1918 influenza pandemic as a starting point, David A. Davis writes about collective trauma:

Most trauma theorists locate trauma’s impact in the individual memory, where the unsettling experience disrupts the victim’s identity, but when a disruptive event affects a large population simultaneously, a collective trauma occurs.... One might stipulate that collective trauma merely consists of numerous individual traumas, but collective trauma amplifies the individual’s experience by taxing the network of social resources that ordinarily stabilize the individual victim. (Davis 2011, p. 56)

Taking a cue from Davis’s readings of the amplification of individual traumatic experiences exacerbated by collective trauma, a similar effect was observed during the coronavirus epidemic that played out similar “social trauma” (see Andreescu 2021). In addition, COVID-19 has been shown to induce psychotic behavior in individuals without any psychiatric history (see Bakre et al. 2022) and to aggravate the effects of PTSD in individuals who suffer from other mental health disorders (see Bridgland et al. 2021). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that people who have experienced traumatic events are more likely to report delusional experiences (see Scott et al. 2007), a subject addressed in this paper. Nonetheless, rather than viewing delusion from a negative viewpoint, the purpose of this paper is to see it as a positive force that can relieve anxiety and distress caused by a state of uncertainty (cf. Bortolotti 2015).

Against the backdrop of the terror of loneliness, as social media platforms seem ineffective at bringing people together, Craig Gillespie’s *Lars and the Real Girl* (Gillespie 2007) offers a new perspective on a “sense of responsible togetherness, sense of community and participation” (Procentese et al. 2019). The film portrays Lars as a person who has a schizoid personality disorder resulting from traumatic childhood experiences.<sup>1</sup> However, with the aid of a sex doll, he is brought back to normalcy, regaining his sense of belonging to society. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how an inanimate object, such as a sex doll, is capable of healing traumatic experiences, allowing the individual to communicate with the rest of society.

This paper analyzes *Lars and the Real Girl*, a film unrelated to the current pandemic in the sense that it predates it by thirteen years in terms of how it depicts the healing process from trauma caused by loneliness and isolation. During the pandemic, lives were disrupted unexpectedly, and everything known as the established order became dismantled, consequently requiring the development of “new vocabularies that are detached from linear and rationalist ideas” (Steiner and Veel 2021, p. 10). This film illustrates an uncanny similarity between the issue of loneliness during the pandemic as well as the lack of touch, which became a significant concern during the outbreak of the pandemic. The act of touching is characterized by a “double movement that binds entities together and has potential to alter those involved” (ibid.). The pandemic rendered many people bereft of the experience of touch and the process of healing. During the pandemic, sex-doll companionship emerged as a unique method to avoid loneliness. Sex-doll companionship was particularly recommended for the elderly and the disabled (see Yoked 2020) and for sexual intimacy among others (Cookney 2020). Finally, this nonhuman prop became a means of dealing with the issue of loneliness.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, this film, with its treatment of sex-doll companionship to recuperate from trauma, is more like speaking to people of the future, acting as a “prememory” (Beiner 2014), anticipating a future need to cope with the traumatic effects of quarantine isolation—a future where “language will fail as the emotional and physical pain increases” (see Scarry 1985, p. 4). A sex doll, Bianca, is used by Lars to communicate with those around him and

allows others to view his imaginary world through her. A close reading of this film reveals how an inanimate object, such as a sex doll, serves as a bridge between a person with a schizoid personality disorder and society and helps him cope with the traumas of his past.

## 2. Growing Up in an Infantile World

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, loneliness became a more acute problem for those already suffering from some acute medical conditions. In the UK, Alison Griner reports that approximately 82 per cent of people with dementia have experienced deteriorating health conditions since the lockdown (Benson para. 18). The US also reported a higher number of dementia-related deaths between 1 February and 9 October 2020 than in previous years. However, it is puzzling that in this age where people spend more time on their cell phones than with each other, it seems that this pandemic has unraveled the illusion of self-sufficiency. As a result, this illustrates how humans, in general, are a species that relies heavily on the proximity of their fellow beings. The choice of being alone is very different from being lonely; a lesson learned the hard way. Jill Lepore, Professor of American History at Harvard University and columnist in *The New Yorker*, mulls over this and writes:

Before modern times, very few human beings lived alone. Slowly, beginning not much more than a century ago, that changed. In the United States, more than one in four people now lives alone; in some parts of the country, especially big cities, that percentage is much higher. You can live alone without being lonely, and you can be lonely without being alone, but the two are closely tied together, which makes lockdowns, sheltering in place, that much harder to bear. In 2017 and 2018, the former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy declared an “epidemic of loneliness,” and the U.K. appointed a Minister of Loneliness. (Lepore 2020, para. 5)

The anthropological history documents umpteen crises that have threatened humanity’s existence. Therefore, the outbreak of this pandemic is not an isolated event, and to suggest that such may never be repeated would be hyperbolic. The excruciating pang of loneliness that emerged from this crisis made our technological advancements to this point insignificant. It was always evident that a catastrophic event of this magnitude could occur. Still, the world was fed into dreaming its infantile dreams, and only now has it become aware of the potential dangers that it is leaving behind for the future. The infantilization of the culture is the result of capitalism’s desire to entrap its customers with products they might not need but purchase for their aesthetic value. Jacopo Bernardini (2014) elaborates on this aspect of the kidults, stating that “the postmodern adult is by now characterized by an unprecedented *infantilist nature*. He chases the aesthetics and lifestyles of young people, lives in a state of continuous present, postpones or eludes those stages that used to mark the social recognition of maturity” (p. 40). Therefore, the Disney spectacles, Marvel(lous) heroes, and iPhones that are released every year with a promise to provide unique insights into the world, along with Netflix’s enormous catalog and the constant bombardment of advertisements, from billboards to social media, continue to provide access/excess to consumers that, like children, have an insatiable appetite for more content.<sup>3</sup> This aspect of materialism (propelled by American consumerism) does not make us materialistic. Instead, our actions embody anti-materiality, as they are motivated by the impetus to bury the “ever-increasing number of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles” (Bennett 2010, p. 5).

The coronavirus crisis has revealed the fallacy of human excess. The human race faces this calamity and will meet many more in the future unless we gain a general acceptance that humans are not the prime actors on this planet. How can this understanding be dispersed among the masses, in which the majority are incapable of realizing the vitality of materials, by relying solely on human means of experience? For this purpose, one of the methods that can be employed is anthropomorphism, as Jane Bennett suggests: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett 2010, p. xvi).

The film *Lars and the Real Girl* is unique in that it brings a nonhuman actor to center stage and illustrates how interacting with a nonhuman agency can profoundly impact human relations. Children are made to learn about human relations using nonhuman actors by anthropomorphizing them. Can adults do the same? By saying this, infantilism is not being emphasized here as the only way for humans to appreciate “other than human” agencies, though it can be one. Kendall L. Walton argues that infantile games may have profound meanings behind them. As an example, he illustrates a game that children in the Auschwitz concentration camp played called “going to the gas chamber”. However, despite its role as a game, it became “an earnest attempt” (Walton 1990, p. 12) on the part of the children to come to terms with their situation. Consequently, make-believe situations can be taken seriously, and there is no exception for the case of adults participating in such fantasies as part of “collective imagining” (ibid., p. 18). An article by Joye Weisel-Barth also highlights the collective collaboration of the community in presenting Bianca as a “transitional object” (Weisel-Barth 2008, p. 115) for Lars, endowing her “with affective, human presence . . . making her emotionally “real” so that she can both listen to and speak to Lars” (ibid.).

Thus, *Lars and the Real Girl* emphasizes the infantile nature of human beings and uses infantilism in a therapeutic way to bring community members together. This film follows the story of Lars, a character who is socially distant and introverted, avoiding social invitations. A touch or any form of physical contact makes Lars uncomfortable. While he lives in the outhouse of his paternal home, the main house is occupied by his brother Gus and his wife, Karin. The film opens with Lars looking out the window of his outhouse. He wraps a shawl around him, a shawl that his mother made. In response to Karin’s approach, Lars begins to blink excessively, demonstrating his discomfort. He tries to end the conversation with a tight-lipped smile as soon as possible. His behavior cannot be explained by labeling him as feeble-minded. He is fully functioning, has a job, attends church, etc. Even though he does not socialize and remains a recluse, he is a caring individual. His community loves him, and everyone wishes to see him settle with a nice girl. When he interacts with people, he avoids eye contact. He dislikes the idea of being compared with his father, who went into seclusion after the death of his wife. The death of his mother and the silence of his father were traumatic experiences for Lars, as it led him to self-immolate. Lars’s father was not fond of being with anyone, whereas Lars is looking for a meaningful relationship. The scene of him sitting alone on the couch at night, gazing out through the window, conveys a more profound longing to fill the void that he feels in his life.

The interplay between the desire to be in a compassionate relationship and the fear of meeting and socializing is comparable to modern society, which experienced coronavirus-induced isolation. It has been a difficult time for some people in the past couple of years. Despite their desire to express affection and care, they remained averse to socializing. Social media is one of the few options available to individuals living alone in such a situation. Malka Margalit tries to conceptualize loneliness in the context of social media and highlights “conflicting interpersonal trends”. As she explains,

On the one hand, there is an increasing and urgent need for constant connectivity (expressed in behaviors such as regular checking of e-mails, frequent contacts with cell phones in public places, sending instant messages) and endless communication . . . . On the other hand, there is a growing recognition for needs of intensified individualism as expressions of the self, encouraging independent mind-set trends, providing increased opportunities for selective meeting of individual choices of living, working, dressing, and leisure activities. (Margalit 2010, p. 1)

While Lars is not a victim of social media, he certainly is a victim of conflicting interpersonal trends. A subtle indication of conflicting interpersonal attitudes can be found in the film, in which everyone wants Lars to participate in the community and mix with everyone. However, on the other hand, Lars’s decision to isolate himself and to exhibit his

individualism by living in the outhouse is entirely acceptable to his brother. When faced with such a conflicting situation, Lars opts to purchase an anatomically correct sex doll.

In the film, the news that Karin is expecting a child triggers a subdued memory for Lars of his birth, which followed the death of his mother. To cope with his anxiety, he orders a lifelike doll named Bianca from an adult website that he learned about from his office colleague. He introduces Bianca to Gus and Karin as his girlfriend. Lars requests that Bianca stay in the home as he would prefer not to engage in any sexual relations with her before the wedding. Clearly, Lars is not seeking a sexual relationship but, rather, a genuine one where he can express his love and care without fear of judgment. Hence, the doll proves to be a perfect companion for him. As evidence of his ease, he does not blink as much when he is with her. With the presence of Bianca, he becomes more comfortable as he starts to sing and socialize. Moreover, the wheelchair-bound doll enables Lars to display a sense of care and protection.

### 3. Lars, a Hero-Upside-Down

A review of this film by Manohla Dargis in *The New York Times* suggests that the film functions as a bait, working on the traditional models of Hollywood melodrama, without the anguish that the protagonist is not involved with “alienation in the modern world or even real pain” (Dargis 2007, para. 5). It is possible that Dargis is not entirely incorrect in assuming that the film is “100 percent pure calculation” (para. 2). That may be what illuminates the film’s effectiveness, as it tells a familiar romance tale with a twist. The twist refers to the path Lars takes to realize his life’s potency. Considering that he believes he is in a relationship with a sex doll and then chooses to follow his own story, moving towards the truth, this speaks volumes about the contemporary world. Such delusional personae are being fabricated by an increasing number of individuals on social media. This problem was, however, exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis. The delusion got a reality check. The fabric of socializing and networking was torn apart, revealing how lonely and isolated individuals are.

As the world went into lockdown, first the fear and then the fatigue seeped into exposing the shallowness of the mundane existence, which demands the propinquity of an actual body rather than mere virtual connection. In this sense, the film resembles *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (which Lars reads to Bianca in one of the scenes), which reflects upon the changing world of its time, as noted by Carlos Fuentes:

Many things are changing in the world; many others are surviving. “Don Quixote” tells us just this: this is why he is so modern but also so ancient, so eternal. He illustrates the rupture of a world based on analogy and thrust into differentiation. He makes evident a challenge that we consider peculiarly ours: how to accept the diversity and mutation of the world while retaining the mind’s power for analogy and unity, so that this changing world shall not become meaningless. (Fuentes 1986, para. 5)

Lars, like Don Quixote, is a “hero-upside-down” (Struhal 2018, p. 53) who misreads the reality of his time, an action that “metamorphoses into the genre of the comic” (p. 53). This misreading has evolved since the present era construes to provide the effects of sufficiency within the virtual. Much like the heroics of Don Quixote, who is chasing the windmills as monsters of the modern world, Lars, as an ideal romantic hero, creates the illusion of a relationship with a doll. Both these protagonists incorporate elements of a hero “by transgressing the ordinary limitations of normal men” (p. 53), as one follows the old chivalric models of heroism in pursuing his delusion, while another fulfils heroism by becoming a lover. However, as their “reality stands in constant conflict to a general understanding of the real world” (p. 53) and the role they perform within it, they “cannot serve as behavioral models for their readers” (p. 53). While such heroics are not desired, they are unavoidable in these times, as Lars, similar to Cervantes’ hero, is only complementing the world in which he lives.

The advent of social media brought the world closer together by offering a way for people to communicate, socialize, and interact with others whom they may have never met otherwise. As technology progressed, so did the toxicity adjunct with social media: the abuses, trolling, and hate comments. Steadily the realization of how damaging this addiction could be has begun to dawn upon everyone. Even before the chaos of social media started, some people recognized the efficacy of fake relations and embraced it positively. These people belong to the community of sex doll enthusiasts who are devoted to silicone figurines.

Jenny Kleeman, in her book *Sex Robots & Vegan Meat* (Kleeman 2020), records her experiences of meeting with such people, one of them being Davecat, who is in a relationship with a doll, Sidore, a Leah Face4 RealDoll whom he refers to as his wife (Kleeman 2020, p. 28). She is not the only doll in his life; there are others with whom he describes himself as being in a polygamous relationship (p. 29). Davecat is not alone in this regard, as a whole community could be found online exchanging knowledge of their synthetic companions. There is a huge demand for sex dolls, particularly in Japan, where Fembots, also known as “call girl” service, were extremely successful in their target market, and even Malebots were commercially successful, demonstrating that even women used these dolls for pleasure (Kolivand et al. 2018, p. 31). One of the reasons behind the appeal of these dolls is their potential to be used as therapeutic tools, “for instance, to address first-time sex-related anxiety, or treat sexual dysfunctions, treat pedophilia or potential sex offenders, or promote safer sex” (Fosch-Villaronga and Poulsen 2020, p. 1). Additionally, it could be helpful to people who are insecure about their sexual orientation as well as to people with disabilities, as they may not be able to experience sexual pleasure to the same extent as nondisabled people, and the same is true for the elderly who are often ignored in terms of their sexual requirements.

However, *Lars and the Real Girl* took a different turn in its display of the therapeutic use of the doll in treating schizoid personality disorder. Michael G. Miceli understands buying a sex doll by Lars “as a ‘rational’ response to the trauma of losing his parents and the feelings of unresolved grief attached to such an event” (Miceli 2016, p. 163). Upon seeing Lars with the doll, Gus believes that he has gone completely insane and worries about how others perceive him. Karin suggests taking him to their family physician, Dr. Dagmar. As a result, they fabricate that Bianca is ill and take Lars to the doctor, where the doctor suggests that his brother play along with whatever Lars is doing, and perhaps something positive will result in the end. Accordingly, the doctor’s response is informed by the fact that the delusion performs “a specific function and that, to begin the treatment, the analyst must take what the psychotic says . . . as delusion functions as a theory of a ‘truth’ that the psychotic knows” (Fimiani 2021, p. 66). Exposing the truth about Bianca being a silicone doll could have caused additional trauma for Lars. In discussing Lars with the elders and clergy of the church, Karin and Gus gain support from them since Lars is loved by all. Thus begins the story of a community coming together and inviting Bianca into their fold, which at times is reminiscent of grown-ups playing with a doll. In this way, Bianca became an object of transference in the eyes of Lars and the whole community, who began acting like adults and dealing with the issues surrounding her. Bianca provides Lars with the opportunity to communicate with real human beings and to resolve the trauma caused by his mother’s death and father’s neglect. The presence of the doll gives a sense of inclusion and reduces the episodes of distress and loneliness.

Nowadays, individuals tend to make their online avatars or use virtual backgrounds to communicate more comfortably and confidently. By using a virtual avatar, the speaker detaches himself from his real personality, thus creating a distance in communication. In contrast, when a child plays with a toy, it is always possible that other children or parents will join in. This creates a sense of belonging. This is precisely what Bianca proves to be for Lars. Bianca is as real to Lars as any other human being. It is not the goal of this paper to explore the possibility of hallucination or mental illness but rather to emphasize the human side of the nonhuman character. While this anatomically correct sex doll is meant for sexual

gratification, Lars perceives her as a real companion since he can sense her “touch,” which may or may not be possible with “touch-screen” or with human contact. It is shown in the film that he detests being touched or embraced by anyone other than Bianca.

#### 4. Delusion as Communication: Know Thyself, Virtually

The delusion of Lars has a purpose, as Dr. Dagmar states that “mental illness is not always an illness, but it can be a communication, it can be a way to work something out” (29:55–29:58).<sup>4</sup> The film tries to normalize Lars’s relationship with Bianca by illustrating the attachment of his colleagues to their toys, such as Kurt’s argument with Margo, who has hidden his action figures. In anger, Kurt threatens Margo with harming her teddy bear. In accepting Bianca, the elderlies demonstrate their openness to Lars’s new way of communicating and socializing with others. Bianca serves as a means for Lars to express himself. Lars informs his brother that Bianca continues to ask questions about him, as she is very curious about him. As a result, Lars has the opportunity to acquire a greater understanding of himself. Lars takes her to the lake where he used to play as a kid, and to the treehouse where he used to hang around for hours. Lars experiences the city with Bianca, telling her about his father and the library. Even during the conversations with Dr. Dagmar, in which she wants to know about Bianca’s history, Lars subconsciously tells his own story. What is important to note is that Lars also evaluates Bianca’s position and appeals to the fact that she should be treated as normal. In a sense, Lars promotes anthropomorphism, which demands striking a balance between human and nonhuman actors. On the one hand, Lars is talking to the doctor, and on the other, Gus’s friends discuss the concept of delusion and Bianca’s presence in Lars’s life. As a result, the director attempts to communicate the message on two levels: through Lars’s perspective, which may or may not appeal to the audience, and through Gus’s friends’ perspective, which is more likely to affect the viewers as they can relate to Gus’s friends.

Further, the film shows the development of a gradual acceptance of Bianca within the community. It begins with the very first hospital scene when Gus takes Lars to see the family doctor with the pretext of Bianca being ill. The scene opens in the waiting room with a three-shot where a woman sits with a young boy on her lap; next to her sits a young girl, and then next to her is an older man. In the subsequent shot, Lars and Bianca are seen sitting together. Lars tries to make Bianca feel comfortable by asking if she would like to read a magazine. At the end of this scene, we see a child sitting on Bianca’s lap, similar to the young boy who was seated on the lap of a “real” woman earlier. By doing this, the film draws a parallel between the woman and Bianca and indicates the direction in which the film will proceed regarding people seeking compassion from the doll.

The film further depicts how Lars gradually opens up and starts socializing. In a significant step, Lars decides to take Bianca as his date to a party. Due to his introverted nature, this is an important decision on his part, and he would not have been able to make this choice without the support of Bianca. Women specifically receive Bianca warmly in their circle, where she is actively involved in various tasks, ranging from storytelling to children at schools to volunteering at hospitals. With Bianca, Lars experiences life with a range of emotions varying from happiness to possessiveness, anger, jealousy, and belonging, and more importantly, he learns to express them. As Nancy Gillespie, in her article “Posthuman Desire,” explains,

Lars is a one-all-alone who uses a product of capitalism, a life-like sex doll, in an unusual way. This product becomes the creation of defense against the excess of unregulated jouissance that floods his body when his psychosis is triggered. It enables him to form a delusional narrative, which is developed by psychotic subjects in lieu of a fantasy, once they are triggered because they have no shield from the object *a* and the desire of the Other . . . Although the film is a bit of an indie fairy tale, it illustrates that the way to treat a delusion is not to try to remove it through various drugs or therapies that try to silence the body. Rather, it is to find a way to let the *lalangue* of the body speak, to transform the delusion into

a new invention that the subject can live with, a *sinthome* that the subject can identify with. (Gillespie 2018, p. 164)

The solutions to Lars's delusion were present in his delusional narrative. A deep yearning to detach himself from his father (Name-of-the-Father) and experience himself as an independent entity was impossible since his past (mother's death) kept returning to him as *sinthome*, symptoms he could not explain (Lacan 2013). Upon seeing Karin pregnant, the symptoms returned, "Delusions arise whenever an individual undergoes anomalous experience, whether they arise in the environment, in the sensory-receptor system, or because of the impairments in the central nervous system" (Maher and Ross 1984, p. 406). The doctor's decision to allow Lars to make his own decisions was beneficial, as she understood his cry for help. Delusions are a means of communicating the question: What is happening? Why are others ignoring what is happening? Why is it happening to the person? Lars's mind invents Bianca as a solution to confronting his trauma. Bianca becomes an object of his fascination with which he enters into a negotiation to remodel his existence. Consider this idea in the context of "transitioning to virtual environments" (Gualeni and Vella 2020, p. 38) as propounded by Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella in their book *Virtual Existentialism*:

When the user takes their first steps in a virtual world they have not engaged with before, they are likely to have only a very limited knowledge of the subjectivities they are afforded within that world. They might not yet be aware of the capabilities they are granted or the limitations that define their possibility to inhabit that world. As such, they might have no idea of what kinds of projects it is possible for them to take on, let alone which project(s), if any, are suggested, explicitly or less so, by the implied designer. In short, the user might not know what they *can* do or what they *should* do—and, as a result, because these are integral components of such an understanding, they might not know who they are in the virtual world. (p. 38)

Lars's delusional mind enrolls him into a virtual existence in which Bianca exists. On the other side, others enroll themselves voluntarily without knowing the "rules of the game," something which Lars devises, provided that he knows what he is doing. He knows, however, that if not him, his delusional self will take decisions on his behalf. Bianca, thus, becomes the device for the process of "external en-rolling" (p. 40) through which everyone, including Lars, enters into their virtual avatars. Once they accept Bianca, the "threshold en-rolling" (p. 40) commences. As in any video game, the players go through the process of watching introductory videos, knowing the menus, choosing the avatars, designing its strengths—in other words, threshold en-rolling—that is, transitioning from being engaged in the actual world to being absorbed in the virtual world. Accordingly, in the film, everyone formulates their roles based on Lars and Bianca as they transition from the symbolic realm of the actual world to the symbolic realm of Lars. The last is the "internal en-rolling" (ibid.) which detaches from the actual and submerges into the virtual. In the film, this is precisely what happens when everyone is concerned about Lars's treatment of Bianca when he screams at her, because they do not believe this is how a woman should be treated. Bianca became a reality for everyone as they immersed themselves in Lars's world.

Lars, who initially struggles to communicate his thoughts within the language of the cultural framework, creates Bianca, with whom he starts imagining himself anew. By processing the information he obtains in the real world, he fabricates it in accordance with how he wishes to present it. As he progresses from external en-rolling to merging himself entirely into his make-believe world, he conceives himself in the manner he envisioned. That is what happened at the party when he introduced Bianca for the first time as his girlfriend. When he sees that everyone is responding affirmatively, he is ecstatic. Although he struggles to phrase his emotions, he expresses them through his body, dancing by himself with his eyes closed and smiling. While returning, he asks Bianca whether she had fun and then, after a pause, as if he were listening to her, he sobs in exhilaration and



states that he is just happy. He listens to Bianca, and through him, everybody else listens to her. The Real, which is inarticulate, formulates itself for him in the form of Bianca, with whom he interacts and sees himself as if looking into a mirror, having an eidetic appearance. The phenomenological perceptions that he has experienced from the actual world become the repository when he is on the threshold of crossing into the world of his imagination. In fact, Bianca is Lars, which becomes evident in the scene where Lars is sitting in the wheelchair and Bianca, on the contrary, is sitting on a regular chair surrounded by people (58:58–1:00:00). Later on, Lars decides to switch roles with Bianca and starts to interact with others in her absence.

The more Lars becomes efficient and comfortable with his newfound identity, the more Bianca drifts away from him. One day, she does not awaken because she has fallen into the deep unconscious for him. When the doctor says that she is very sick, Karin is shocked and turns toward Lars, who says she is dying. Lars brought her into life, and it is he who is taking her away. Bianca has become a significant part of the community as they cope with and share Lars's trauma and subsequent healing with her. Before she dies entirely for him, he kisses her on the lips and holds her for a few seconds before hugging her. When he looks at her, he is looking at his old self, knowing that it is no longer alive. He speaks with his brother at one point in the film about the processes and rituals associated with becoming an adult: "I was talking to Bianca, and she was saying that in her culture they have these rites of passages and rituals and ceremonies. Just all kinds of things, you know, that when you do them, at least when you're done, if you live through them, that you know that you're an adult" (1:11:19–1:11:36). When Lars takes Bianca into the lake, he undergoes the ritual of shedding his old self, realizing the transformation of becoming an adult. As Lars dives into the water with Bianca, he drowns his old self while baptizing the new Lars. As a result, the next scene takes place inside a church where the entire community gathered to respect the memory of Bianca (which is the memory of the old Lars) and to welcome the new Lars, who is now at ease in his skin (literally and figuratively).

## 5. Conclusions

In his review of the film, Roger Ebert stated that the film's appeal lies in the fact that it explores a topic that has all the ingredients of creating a failure, which the film avoids by displaying sincerity toward the subject it addresses. This film is about Lars and "how he relates to this substitute for human friendship" (Ebert 2009, p. 249). Since the virus brought with itself a state of "affective stasis" (Bernhardt and Slaby 2022), exhibiting opposite poles of experience ranging from an absence of motion to radical social change, it created an inquisitiveness surrounding how to address this situation. When viewed from a contemporary perspective, the film provides—although perhaps not the most effective—a method, nevertheless, of assisting those who may experience emotional scarring for the rest of their lives. How would humanity proceed from here on? To begin with, we must learn to live with the problems and the dangers that come with this damaged planet. According to American scholar and feminist Donna J. Haraway, the future would be characterized by the "Chthulucene" (Haraway 2016, p. 3). In other words, she implies that humans cannot survive on this planet on their own without considering the existence of other agencies on the planet, living or not. *Lars and the Real Girl* does precisely that, as it brings out the story of the healing and redemption of a man who is rescued by his community, accompanied by a nonhuman actor/friend, Bianca. The film intuitively depicts what could be the "future of intimacy," which Kate Davelin contends is not "a bleak and isolated vision but a network of connected people who want, as humans have always wanted, to be together" (Davelin 2018, p. 270).

It is indeed an indie film replicating the familiar American studio drama films described by Manohla Dargis. However, it does challenge the predictive reading of the audience, resulting in the discounting of their confirmation biases. The practice of prediction reading is accepted when there is insufficient evidence (Garrison and Hoskisson 1989,

p. 482). Providing an alternative way to resolve the delusion caused by trauma, the film challenges conventional thinking in an important way.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The study of articles such as “Psychological Trauma and Schizotypal Symptoms” (Berenbaum et al. 2003), “Psychological trauma and schizotypal personality disorder” (Berenbaum et al. 2008), and “Childhood Trauma and Dissociation in Schizophrenia” (Sar et al. 2009) has shown that traumatic childhood experiences can lead to the development of schizotypal personality disorder.
- <sup>2</sup> There have been several studies that suggest that loneliness has several long-term consequences. According to Tsur et al. (2019), subjective physical health and loneliness are reciprocally correlated. A study by Lim et al. (2016) found that loneliness may be associated with social anxiety, paranoia, and depression. Finally, according to Segrin et al. (2017), loneliness indirectly affects substance abuse through stress. As a result of these findings, it appears that loneliness can lead to adverse health effects on an individual’s physical and mental health.
- <sup>3</sup> It might be argued that a fundamental aspect of materialism, namely the influence of material objects on the psyche of an individual with the constant bombardment of advertisements creating a wanton desire for more, is outdated. In spite of the fact that it might sound true for the developed world, considering it within the same parameters for the rest of the world may be a mistake. Advertising gimmicks continue to sway the crowd into believing that acquiring the material will enhance their lives. Many aspects of this phenomenon are also valid for the developed world, which is characterized by the belief that possession of certain “brands” can establish one’s own unique identity or enable one to reflect their membership in a particular clique, just as a child believes having a toy makes them special and stand out from their peers.
- <sup>4</sup> Several studies have indicated that trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are risk factors for developing delusions. Scott et al. observed an increase in the endorsement of delusional experiences due to exposure to any traumatic event. Bailey et al. (2018) found a significant correlation between childhood trauma and the severity of delusions and hallucinations. These studies demonstrate that delusion plays a crucial role in conveying a person’s trauma.

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