

Lars and the Real Girl: Lifelike Positive Transcendence

SAGE Open
1–10
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244011408346
<http://sgo.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

The 2007 film *Lars and the Real Girl* challenged viewer's expectations, not simply through its unusual premise (a man having a relationship with a doll), through its consistent refusal to resolve the plot's various conflicts through verbal or physical violence. Instead, the plot resolves in a way consistent with what peace researcher Johan Galtung has termed *positive transcendence*, a means of coming to a resolution that meets the needs of all parties. Although the film's far-fetched plot makes direct practical application of the characters' actions unlikely, the film performs a more important role in helping to expand moviegoers' "horizons of expectation." By prompting its audience to accept an utterly nonviolent, nonconfrontational resolution to the central conflict of the plot, *Lars and the Real Girl* subverts the notion that satisfying cinematic endings must involve winners and losers. It helps make room for a greater acceptance of nonviolent resolution of problems in popular film.

Keywords

conflict, nonviolence, film, Galtung, transcendence

In "*The Spitfire Grill*: Nonviolence as Social Power," Ellen Gorsevski (1999) argues that our culture often doesn't know what to "do" with cinematic texts that model nonviolent rhetoric. Her study focuses on the critical reaction to *The Spitfire Grill* as a case study in how even knowledgeable filmgoers find difficulty in reading a movie that undercuts our conventional wisdom about what makes a good film.

In this article, I push this idea further, suggesting that a film that celebrates nonviolent conflict resolution can both succeed as a narrative and, in the process, help subvert our expectations of conflict resolution in film and, by proxy, conflict resolution more broadly. Through a close study of a specific film, I look at how a cinematic text invites its audience to broaden their vision of how conflict can be resolved. Specifically, the 2007 film *Lars and the Real Girl* provides an example of positive conflict transcendence (as described by Johann Galtung [2004], one of the founders of peace studies) and in so doing, offers viewers instruction in how to read films that deny the typical modes of conflict in mainstream cinema. It succeeds in this not by offering a concrete, practical, "how to" example of conflict transformation but by challenging its audience's horizon of expectations about the way conflict is resolved in movies, particularly in its treatment of masculinity.

In what follows, I summarize the movie's plot and critical reception, then suggest how the movie's plot offers a case study of Galtung's (2004) idea of positive transcendence of conflict. I then make the case that the centrality of masculinity as a theme in *Lars and the Real Girl* makes it a particularly potent vehicle for the idea of nonviolent conflict resolution

given the traditional association of masculinity and violence in mainstream American movies. This leads to a discussion of how the film achieves a meaningful effect on its audience. Here, I draw on Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) idea of the "horizon of expectations" a reader brings to a text and the potential of a change in such expectations to have a practical effect on the reader's perception of the social world. I end with an examination of several possible objections that might be raised to the thesis that *Lars and the Real Girl* offers a representation of positive transcendence, making the case that such objections fail to acknowledge the film's complexity.

The Plot of *Lars and the Real Girl*

The premise of *Lars and the Real Girl* is admittedly shocking: A shy young man orders a sex doll and insists on treating it as a real woman, with his family and neighbors willingly participating in the delusion.

However, as the plot unfolds, a more subtle story emerges. Lars lives in the garage of a home owned by his brother and sister-in-law in an unnamed small town in the upper Midwest. Despite the efforts of his sister-in-law to draw him into the family's life, Lars rebuffs almost all of her social overtures.

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Although he holds a nondescript job, Lars is unable or unwilling to relate to his coworkers, particularly women. After a cubicle-mate at work shows him a website offering custom-made, ultra life-like sex dolls, Lars orders one. However, rather than using the doll for its intended purpose, Lars treats her as a chaste girlfriend, naming her Bianca and inventing an elaborate backstory for her (they met on the Internet, she's from Brazil, is confined to a wheelchair, and doesn't speak very good English).

Lars's brother and sister-in-law, understandably concerned, take him to the town doctor, who suggests that Lars's delusion is a form of communication and the best thing to do is to go along with it. But because Lars insists on taking Bianca around town (including to church), it becomes an issue for the entire town. Fortunately for Lars, the close-knit town, after some consternation, decides to go along with it. Soon, Bianca finds herself with a job, a volunteer position at the hospital, and a spot on the school board.

Meanwhile, both Lars and Bianca keep appointments with the town doctor, ostensibly to monitor Bianca's health, but in reality for the doctor to interact with Lars and draw him out. In a parallel story, Lars engages in a flirtation with a sweet but shy coworker, Margo. Although Lars makes it clear he would never "cheat" on Bianca, he also finds Margo intriguing, a feeling she reciprocates.

Eventually, Bianca falls "terminally ill" (importantly, Lars himself makes this determination). Bianca dies in Lars's arms. The town comes to the funeral to say goodbye to her. The film ends with Lars and Margo seeming to connect, with a promise of a future "real relationship."

Critical Reception of *Lars and the Real Girl*

As an independent film, *Lars and the Real Girl* received relatively low box office numbers, being screened primarily at art house and independent movie theaters. The film took in a little over US\$5 million, barely a blip compared with the haul made by a typical Hollywood blockbuster (BoxOfficeMojo.com, 2009). However, it received a fair amount of critical acclaim, garnering an Academy Award nomination for best original screenplay, a Golden Globe nomination for Ryan Gosling's performance in the title role, and a host of nominations for lesser awards. This recognition came despite what, as Gorsevski (1999) points out, is an almost hardwired predilection among movie makers and movie critics to see violent conflict resolution as an essential part of mainstream cinema.

Roger Ebert (2007) of *The Chicago Tribune* says of the movie that "[t]here are so many ways *Lars and the Real Girl* could have gone wrong that one of the film's fascinations is how adroitly it sidesteps them. Its weapon is absolute sincerity." Ann Hornaday (2007) of *The Washington Post* says that despite the marketing of the movie as a comedy,

I didn't laugh—much—during *Lars and the Real Girl*, but I almost cried several times, encountering so much spiritual generosity. If the movie occasionally goes overboard in its depiction of Lake Wobegon sweetness, those moments are far outweighed by its rigorous morality.

Sean Means (2007) of the *Salt Lake City Tribune* writes,

The odds against *Lars and the Real Girl* working are astronomical . . . But *Lars and the Real Girl* turns all of those disadvantages into advantages, resulting in one of the strangest, funniest and most romantic movies you're likely to see.

Despite the generally positive critical reception of *Lars and the Real Girl*, several prominent critics dissented. The two most commonly cited complaints were the unrealistic portrayal of the town's reaction to Lars's behavior and the lack of clear conflict.

Writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, Lisa Schwartzbaum (2007) advises audiences that they should feel unashamed at blurting out "these people are bonkers, and enablers, too!" in response to the insistently accepting behavior of the film's townsfolk. She ends her review with the rhetorical question, "Will no one talk to Lars honestly about the pitfalls of dating a golem?" Geoff Pevere (2007) of the *Toronto Star* criticizes the film for not pursuing the "darker implications" of the film's premise, "by generating some genuine conflict between Lars's delusional certainty and a sex-doll-freaked community." He cites this lack of conflict as evidence of the filmmakers' unwillingness to take "some real risks." Jason Morgan (2007) of *FilmCritic.com* deems the portrayal of the town's unconditional acceptance of Lars's behavior "a storytelling misstep" because it undercuts the film's dramatic qualities. Richard Roeper of *At the Movies* (Plummer, 2007) says in his review as follows:

When everybody is so sensitive to this character's delusion, I'm thinking, well, these are either the stupidest people or the most sensitive town in movie history. And I think we needed a little bit of a conflict where somebody was saying at some point, "Okay, come on, we can't keep going along with this to the point of our own lives being sublimated just so we can all help Lars overcome his difficulties."

David Edelstein (2007), writing for *New York Magazine*, praises the cast of the movie and its humor but concludes that "the underlying message is so suspect that it's hard to suspend disbelief. I promise I tried."

This critical dissent by itself is not as notable as the consistent themes invoked, particularly the lack of conflict in the film. I suggest that the critics put their collective finger on

precisely the aspect of the film that is most noteworthy: Its deviance from the Hollywood formula of conflict, replacing it with a plot that revolves around the transcendence of conflict. In particular, the two main sources of potential conflict, Lars's delusion itself and the reaction of the town, are not framed in terms of conflict but rather in a way in which they are sublimated. By denying the more obvious cinematic conceits, *Lars and the Real Girl* serves not so much as a realistic portrayal of how nonviolent conflict resolution works but as a way of opening up the narrative horizons of its audience in a way that invites them to question the assumption of conflict implicit in mainstream media.

Lars and Real Positive Transcendence

To fully appreciate the nonviolent approach taken by Lars's community, we must note the extent of the aggressiveness in Lars's actions. His purchase of a doll designed to serve as a sexual surrogate and insistence on making it part of his life crosses several boundaries. First, parading such a doll will likely offend the sensibilities of his neighbors for any number of reasons, from the simple fact of a glorified sex toy being publically displayed to the misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes such a doll connotes (as a passive, powerless tool for male pleasure). The doll also distracts others who are going about their daily lives. Bringing Bianca to church, for example, can do nothing but disrupt the congregation. The doll also causes Lars's friends and family to worry about his sanity and fundamentally changes the nature of their relationship with him, insofar as Lars is not simply Lars but part of the couple of Lars and Bianca. Lars forces those around him to adjust to his assertion that Bianca is part of his life. Finally, the purchase of the doll is also a form of aggressiveness by Lars against himself. It potentially draws him yet further from human contact, inviting deeper alienation.

So, Lars's actions disrupt the norms of his community and make an aggressive assertion of his own desires at the expense of those around him. In short, Lars creates conflict. Given this, Lars's community has several possible responses. One way of looking at the variety of ways a resolution might be reached in this conflict is to use Joahann Galtung's (2004) diagram of conflict transformation (see Figure 1).

Galtung's (2004) diagram visualizes the five basic ways a conflict between two parties, A and B, can be resolved. At Pole A, all of A's goals are met and none of B's are. A Wins. Pole B represents the opposite resolution: B's goals are met but not A's. Galtung labels the state in which both A and B lose as "negative transcendence"—no one's goals are met. The center of the graph represents the various combinations in which some of A's goals are met and some of B's goals are met, but neither one wins completely. This is compromise. Positive transcendence is the name Galtung (2004) gives to the best possible outcome of a conflict: A state in which all of A's goals are met *and* all of B's goals are met as well.¹

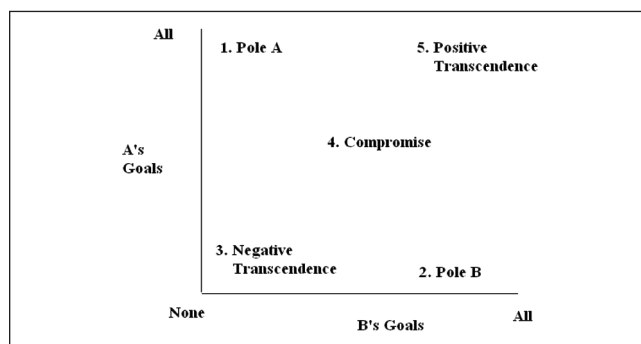


Figure 1. Johan Galtung's Conflict Transformation Diagram

If we apply this to the conflict between Lars and his community, we could say that Pole A represents the case in which the community "wins" by punishing Lars, destroying Bianca, forcing him to admit Bianca's unreality, or in some other way eliminating his relationship with Bianca. This would resolve the conflict by ending the threat to the community's standards.

Pole B represents the opposite case: Lars wins and the community loses. In this case, Lars would freely parade Bianca around town without anyone taking notice. The community would simply acquiesce to Lars's delusion, passively accepting it, despite its effects on them.

In negative transcendence, neither Lars nor the community achieves their goals. If, for example, Lars felt rejected by the community and became a recluse, living and interacting only with Bianca, Lars would lose by not being part of the community, and the community would lose by both losing Lars as a member and not "curing" him of his delusion. By simply avoiding the conflict altogether, both lose.

The mode of conflict resolution usually considered optimal, compromise, could take several forms. For example, Lars might be allowed to have Bianca be part of his interactions with his family but be discouraged from bringing her out in public. Alternatively, those around Lars might allow him to bring Bianca wherever he goes but stop short of interacting with her themselves, instead only addressing her through Lars.

Galtung (2004) points out that compromise, although better than some possible outcomes, is not the optimal result. Instead, he urges us to look for outcomes that allow for "positive transcendence" in which both parties involved in the conflict reach their goals: a "win/win" scenario.

This involves creativity and flexibility from both sides in the conflict, often in a much more radical way than compromise demands. But *Lars and the Real Girl* offers viewers an example of just such a sort of transcendence. This happens through the community's radical acceptance of Lars's fantasy. Rather than fighting against it, the community not only accepts Lars's assertion of Bianca's reality but also carries it even further than Lars himself does. By blending with Lars's aggressive assertion rather than ignoring it or fighting against it, the community (and Lars) reach a conclusion that might

not have seemed possible to begin with but leaves both parties better off than they were before, using the tension of the conflict to attain both Lars's goal of companionship and the community's goal of remaining intact.

Lars: A Real Man?

Gorsevski (1999) notes that films that deemphasize violence in their plots often receive the label "women's films" or the even more dismissive epithet "chick flicks." Yet, Gorsevski points out that it's not difficult to find examples of films featuring male characters in which nonviolent problem solving is used (her examples include *Dead Poets Society*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *Gandhi*).

The relationship between nonviolent cinema and gender plays a particularly important role in discussing *Lars and the Real Girl*. Not only is the title character male but also the plot centers around notions of masculinity. In a pivotal scene, Lars and his brother Gus discuss what makes "a man":

Lars: I was talking to Bianca, and she was saying that in her culture they have these rites of passages and rituals and ceremonies, and, just all kinds of things that, when you do them, go through them, let you know that you're an adult. Doesn't that sound great?

Gus: It does.

Lars: How'd you know?

Gus: How'd I know what?

Lars: That you were a man.

Gus: Ahhh. I couldn't tell ya (Kimmel & Gillespie, 2007).

This is as close as the audience comes to finding out what inner struggle has caused Lars's delusion. Lars understands all too well that he does not fit the standard definition of a "man" and is ambivalent about taking on this role, at least in its usual trappings. He wants to see himself (and have others see him) as a man but lacks the ability and inclination to perform masculinity in the standard ways.

However, the issue of Lars's masculinity reaches through the screen. Not only do Lars, his family, and his friends struggle to reconcile their notions of masculinity with Lars's actions but we, the audience, do as well. Lars fills the role of the "leading man" in a romantic comedy (the genre, the film best fits into), but he bears little resemblance to the archetypal male lead in such movies. We, the audience, must deal with our own conflicting attitudes about Lars—our empathy for him, mixed with the unease caused by the dissonance between Lars's character and what we expect of the hero of such a film. Cary Grant, Tom Hanks, and Adam Sandler

might be foolish, stubborn, or insensitive, but they are, at least to the audience, endearing and masculine (albeit often in a comically broad way). Lars's brokenness tests our ability to see him as a man in a cinematic context just as it tests his neighbors' ability to see him as a man in the social context of their town.

The issue that foregrounds the issue of gender in the film is sex. Even in the scene in which Lars and his brother talk about what it means to be a "man," sex is the first specific criteria that comes up:

Lars: Was it . . . okay, was it sex?

Gus: Um. Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's uh, yeah, yeah it's kind of—it's uh—no. Well, it's kind of sex but it's not uh, you know? I don't know. I don't know. It's—uh—good question, good question (Kimmel & Gillespie, 2007).

Gus eventually decides that being a man means "you don't jerk people around, you know, and you don't cheat on your woman, and you take care of your family, you know, and you admit when you're wrong, or you try to, anyways," moving away from sexuality as the defining aspect of masculinity, although sexual fidelity is still included in the equation.

Lars's ambivalence about sexuality is central to the film's plot. After all, Bianca is a doll created specifically to serve as a sexual outlet. Yet there is no evidence in the film to indicate that Lars ever uses Bianca in this way. It is left to the other characters to comment on Bianca's anatomical correctness and comically speculate on the sexual possibilities she could provide.

Both Lars's friends and the audience must deal with their own conflicting feelings about Lars's sexuality and the role that plays in seeing him as a man. On one hand, Lars's terror at even the most innocent of interactions with any woman strikes those who witness them as a pathetic example of Lars's deficiencies (for his neighbors, this is tragic; for the audience, it is comic). On the other hand, the introduction of an overtly sexual object, Bianca, into Lars's life leaves both the other characters and the audience ill at ease (again, this unease is comic for the audience in a way it cannot be for the characters in the film). Lars's asexuality disturbs us, but the possibility of overt sexuality that goes beyond the boundaries of normalcy also disturbs us. We in the audience, along with Lars's friends and family, must face our assumptions about sexuality (and the constraints on sexuality) as a defining aspect of our conception of masculinity.

Lars's sexuality, or lack thereof, and its connection to the central role of masculinity in the film underscores two important points. First, it shows that the level to which *Lars and the Real Girl* challenges our typical way of reading movies goes beyond the movie's avoidance of physical violence. As Gorsevski (1999) notes, nonviolent films often baffle critics because they run counter to a worldview that not only accepts violence as a given but also takes human

beings' "animalistic" nature as a truer reflection of ourselves than our rational side. Freudian notions of the centrality of sexuality to our actions are part of this worldview (Gorsevski, 1999, p. 11). By challenging our notions of sexuality, male sexuality in particular, *Lars and the Real Girl* challenges the underlying set of assumptions that make nonviolence seem foreign or strange.

Second, it gives us a specific example of the way in which the film puts the audience in the same boat as the townspeople who deal with Lars. Lars challenges the same expectations and sense of propriety in both his friends and in us. We, like the characters in the film, struggle with conflicting feelings about Lars as we try to fit him into our notions of what he ought to be. For Lars's neighbors, this involves their expectations of what a good member of their society should be. For us, it involves our concept of what a cinematic leading man ought to be. These two sets of expectations overlap significantly, particularly in the area of sexuality, and as the film positions the audience to identify with the townspeople, it invites us to deal with the challenges Lars presents in a way that parallels how those who love Lars deal with him in the film. It is this move that makes the film a powerful example of how film can lead us toward a fuller understanding and appreciation of positive transcendence.

The Audience as Lars

However "transcendent" Lars and his neighbors are in resolving their conflicts, the fact remains that the details of the film do not necessarily offer a practical guide to conflict transformation as described by Galtung (2004). Lars's problem and behavior are extreme, and the community around him is admittedly unrealistic in their universal radical acceptance of Lars's delusion. Given this, does the film offer anything more than a pleasant fairy tale?

I believe it does, and the way the question is posed suggests the answer. Ultimately, the conflict that is transcended is not "real" any more than Bianca is a real girl. The film does not give us an actual example of conflict transformation but a representation of conflict transformation. This, however, is crucial. After all, much of our habits of thought about resolving conflict are learned through representations of this process, and a great number of these representations take the form of television or cinematic texts. Particularly in American cinema, with the tradition of the Western and the action flick, there is an overt emphasis on violence in representations of conflict resolution. From the first true narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery* (which begins and ends with the image of an outlaw shooting a gun directly at the camera and has a plot totally determined by killing) to *The Dark Knight*, cinematic texts often center on physical violence as the preferred, and perhaps only, way of dealing with "bad guys."

However, we do not need to focus on action-based movies to see this lack of conflict transcendence in mass mediated narratives. Most commercial films involve plots where the

conflict is resolved at either Pole A or Pole B of Galtung's (2004) diagram—someone wins, someone loses: the bully is humiliated, the leading lady rejects the supercilious snob for the nice guy, the conspirators are revealed and brought to justice, and so on. Although these plots may not involve physical violence, they do not involve transcendence in Galtung's (2004) sense.

This shouldn't surprise us, given that, since Aristotle at least, we've known that plot involves conflict and that the two central elements in a plot are a protagonist and an antagonist. From fairy tales to postmodern novels, these elements are crucial, and the most obvious way for the plot to resolve itself is for the protagonist to win (comedy) or the antagonist to win (tragedy). This expectation becomes ingrained.

Lars and the Real Girl subverts this expectation at every turn, and in the process, it denaturalizes the winner/loser, hero/villain model of conflict resolution. By representing positive transcendence within a medium (cinema) that is so ensconced in "polar" resolution, the film opens up the interpretive horizons of viewers. The film could not do this if it did not involve a dramatic conflict that came to a satisfying (both to the characters and to the audience) conclusion. Had Lars resolved in a more ambiguous way (in the mode of one of Shakespeare's "problem plays"), its challenge to traditional audience expectations would not be nearly as effective. The film succeeds precisely in that it gives us a classic Hollywood happy ending (Lars gets the girl—a real, real girl) but does so in a way that subverts the expected ways of reaching this resolution.

Given the premise of the film, the notion of an unambiguously happy ending seems unlikely. A darkly absurdist or ironic denouement might be more consistent with audience expectations. Indeed, many of the negative reviews of the film critique it for glossing over the apparently obvious mental illness of the protagonist. But it is precisely the cinematic nature of the narrative that keeps the specter of Lars's disturbed nature at bay. In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer (1960) suggests that film often presents us with agitating visions that violate our sensibilities and cultural taboos, yet it does so in a way that distances us. If such scenes were played out before our eyes in reality, we would be too caught up in our visceral reaction to contemplate the action more dispassionately. Via the camera's lens, the audience is put at a distance, one that actually allows for a less distorted vision of a potentially disturbing reality. Cinema, Kracauer says, "Aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer" (p. 58). In this case, the distance from which we, the audience, view Lars's fixation with a doll makes room for a Hollywood ending, underscoring the unreality of the situation as a means of gaining perspective on it. It is the separateness from the situation that cinema provides that allows us as spectators to see the transcendence acted out.

Within the genre of the romantic film, *Lars and the Real Girl* also asks the audience to transcend its own expectations

of what a proper romantic relationship is. As Tanya Krzywinska (2006) notes in *Sex and the Cinema*, the tension between “proper” and “improper” couples has been a staple of dramatic plotting since long before the invention of cinema. Although the way it is used varies among genres, the essential tension it provides is in putting together two characters that are in some way mismatched. The plot may involve the one or both characters changing so that they become matched, one partner leaving the mismatched partner to join with a more appropriate one, the couple staying together but suffering in some way, and so on. In the case of Lars and Bianca, we have what seems to be an obvious example of an improper couple because one of them is not even human. In this sense, the story is one of Lars finally abandoning his improper match and becoming part of a proper couple. This is a valid way of reading the film. But I suggest that given Bianca’s role in Lars’s transformation, and the social acceptance of this role within the world of the film, the simple duality of proper/improper couples is challenged. After all, Lars himself is not fully human at the beginning of the film either; perhaps his inhumanity is less literal than is Bianca’s, but he is at least a socially inanimate object, receiving attention from others but not giving it. In this sense, the Lars/Bianca pairing is proper—a pair involving the Lars we see at the beginning of the film and any living woman would be improper given Lars’s closed nature. Rather, Lars moves from one proper coupling to another at the end of the movie, at least for him. The move from an improper to proper couple happens as well, of course, but the improper/proper is in terms of what social norms dictate as improper or proper. This movement toward what Lars’s community (and the audience) feel is a proper relationship is what makes for the movie’s satisfying ending. Yet, Lars’s community does not treat the improper as a deviation or reversal of the proper but as a necessary step toward the proper, and the audience is asked to similarly suspend judgment and accept the transitory propriety of the Lars/Bianca pairing. I suggest that this is in the spirit of Galtung’s (2004) notion of conflict transcendence, where unequivocal dichotomies are eschewed (“Lars is a pervert!” and “Lars is free to do whatever he wants!”). In their place is a kind of transcendence: There is nothing “improper” in the Lars/Bianca pairing, although certain conditions apply. It is not to be condemned out of hand but rather accepted for what it provides. It is when the pairing no longer serves Lars’s needs (in moving toward satisfaction of his own goals) and those of the community (gaining Lars’s full participation in the social world) that the relationship would become improper if continued. But it is not. The audience is asked to challenge their conception of what is proper versus what is perverted by showing that this duality is unstable and unhelpful (at least in some cases) in creating a harmonious world.

Literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss (1982) offers us a useful phrase with which to understand this process: horizons of expectations. Jauss suggests we can understand the reception

and effect of a work of literature on an audience by looking at how it reinforces or challenges the assumptions its audience has when reading it. What assumptions and values does the audience likely bring to the reading of the text? How does the genre of the text affect what its readers expect from it, and how does the text interact with these expectations? A work that not only subverts expectations but does so in an aesthetically powerful way can cause a change in these horizons, altering not only the readers’ understanding of the text itself over time but also of other texts in its genre.

Although Jauss (1982) himself addresses literary texts, film theorists have made use of his idea of “horizons of expectation.” For example, Janet Staiger (1992) uses this concept to look at the historical reception of particular films, whereas Stephen Neale (2000) points out that cinematic genres form horizons of expectations in viewers. This is not surprising. “Horizon of expectation” is a particularly useful concept in discussing popular mass media narratives, given its foregrounding of situated audience response as well as the role that genre expectations play in reception of Hollywood films.

I suggest that *Lars and the Real Girl* plays with these expectations in a provocative way, undermining audience expectations on several levels and shifting these expectations in important ways. Specifically, the film opens up the possibility of positive conflict transcendence as an acceptable plot resolution. This does not simply give *Lars’s* audience a sense of satisfaction at the end of this particular film but subtly shifts the audience’s expectations of future cinematic texts. In more concrete terms, someone who sees *Lars and the Real Girl* is more likely to see cooperative solving of a collective problem as a valid and satisfying resolution to a movie’s plot. To the extent that *Lars and the Real Girl* succeeds in doing this, it opens the door to more films taking this route and defanging the criticism that such films fail because they do not involve direct conflict. Moreover, when audiences do see a film that relies on more traditional good guy/bad guy conflict with winners and losers (if not actual physical violence), they will be more likely to see this outcome as not necessary but a choice made by both the characters within the film and the filmmakers themselves in telling the story. *Lars and the Real Girl* takes a small but significant step in denaturalizing destructive conflict in movies.

In his discussion of horizons of expectation, Jauss (1982) says,

[t]he social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of [one’s] lived praxis, performs [one’s] understanding of the social world, and thereby also has an effect on [one’s] social behavior” (p. 39).

A fictional text can affect the behavior of its audience, not necessarily by providing a literal model to emulate but by symbolically opening up space for new ways of considering

one's role in the social world. *Lars and the Real Girl* contributes to an increasing awareness of Galtung's (2004) idea of conflict transformation not by offering a case study in how to do it in real life but by showing us a representation of it in a medium that is dominated by violence and which contributes to our socially constructed attitudes about the inevitability of violence and a winner/loser model of conflict resolution. As Bianca, although not real, serves as a role in helping Lars live a more emotionally fulfilling life, the film itself offers audiences a fantasy of a world where conflict is positively transcended, broadening our horizons of expectation, allowing us to see, at least in our imagination, how we might live a more peaceful life.

Objections

There are several possible objections to the claim that *Lars and the Real Girl* broadens the horizons of interpretation of its audience and particularly the notion that it is an example of Galtungian nonviolent transcendence of conflict. We can see most of these implicit in the negative reviews that the movie received from some quarters. For example, several critics argue that there is no real conflict in the film. If we accept this characterization of the film, it is difficult to say that *Lars and the Real Girl* offers any meaningful contribution to the idea of positive conflict transcendence. If there's no conflict, what's to be transcended?

But as we've already seen, there is conflict in the film, most of which is initiated by Lars, despite his passivity. The imposition of Bianca into the lives of his family and neighbors creates conflict within his community. Moreover, although Bianca serves as an attempt to solve his own problem of loneliness, Lars's actions risk harming himself, at least emotionally, by putting up an even greater barrier between himself and the rest of humanity. Moreover, despite the reviews that suggest the town's reaction was unquestioningly accepting, the fact is that the movie offers us several examples of characters debating with one another how to best handle the situation. Lars's brother and sister-in-law argue over how to treat the Lars/Bianca relationship, and they both debate with the town doctor, Dagmar, over how to deal with Lars. Members of Lars's church haggle over the proper response to the situation, and Lars's coworkers show their discomfort when first confronting Bianca "in the flesh." In short, there is plenty of conflict. The difference is rather than having this conflict resolved through one party achieving its goal at the expense of the other, the conflicts are transcended to find a solution that works to the benefit of all.

Another objection raised by a number of critics is the treatment of Lars's delusion in the film. According to some viewers, Lars's illness is not transcended at all. Instead, Lars's friends and family are "enablers," and the relationship implied at the end of the film, between Lars and Margo, is doomed before it begins, given Lars's pathology.

However, two points complicate this reading of the film. The first is that the assertion that Lars's behavior is a pathology that must be confronted as such does not necessarily gibe with professional psychiatric attitudes. In an article about the film appearing in *Canadian Psychiatry Aujourd'hui*, a publication of the Canadian Psychiatric Association, Harry Karlinsky and Franny Karlinsky (2008) note that the approach of Dagmar, the town doctor, to Lars's delusion is unorthodox in that she accepts Lars's delusion and also never brings up the issue of medication. But, although admitting that the approach to Lars's delusion is not the norm, Karlinsky and Karlinsky also say that such acceptance is not as unorthodox as it might seem at first, given that it allows Dagmar to "establish an empathic, supportive, and at times, even an appropriately confiding relationship" (p. 3). Moreover, the practice of challenging the reality of a delusion is not the obviously sensible approach to take. Karlinsky and Karlinsky note that there is at least some indication that such challenges could lead to violent acts by the patient.

More important, the world of *Lars and the Real Girl* is fictional and makes no explicit claim to realism. Within the world of the film, Dagmar articulates the role of Lars's delusion: It is communicative rather than pathological. As Karlinsky and Karlinsky (2008) note, there is some therapeutic backing for this idea. But even if this was not the case, the film need not adhere strictly to clinically realistic understandings of delusion to make a larger point about conflict transcendence. The more material issue is what the delusion represents within the world of the film—how and why it creates a challenge that the characters must overcome. Rather than an instance of deviance that must be snuffed out, the film asks the audience to see Lars's delusion as Dagmar does, a way of Lars to come to grips with the problem of his isolation. The film asks us to, at least for the length of the movie, posit a world in which a phenomenon that we normally see in adversarial terms (a "disease" that must be "cured") is best seen as an invitation to cooperation and transcendence. To what extent this world corresponds on a literal level with our own is only an issue if we see the film as offering us specific guidance on how to practice positive transcendence. But as I suggest, this misses the true point of the film, which is to challenge our horizon of expectations of how conflict is resolved in films.

A third objection brought up by the film's critics is the lack of reality in the setting. The town and the people who populate it strike some critics as not realistic enough to allow for the willing suspension of disbelief. One might ask how can a film built on such credulity-defying characters offer an object lesson in conflict transformation, a process that is (one hopes) based on real-world practice or at least the potential of its practice.

There can be little argument that the town Lars calls home is unlike any town we might actually find. It is no accident that the town's location is not made clear (the suggestion is

that it is a northern town, possibly in the upper Midwest but that is only hinted at) nor does it have a name. The town's residents are almost laughably diverse, including African Americans, Latinos, and Asians.

If the demographics of this "Anytown, United States" are hard to believe, the actions of the townspeople are even more head-scratching. Although Lars's actions puzzle his neighbors, no one disparages or mocks him. The community is troubled by Bianca but primarily because of their genuine concern for Lars and what Bianca's appearance might say about his well-being. There are no cabals of self-appointed morality police plotting to protest or shun Lars. Instead, the whole town unites quickly in an effort to deal with the conflict Bianca's presence creates.

This sort of reaction is, admittedly, unrealistic. Having said that, the filmmakers have created almost the only setting in which this sort of reaction would be plausible, even in fiction. Could anyone's willing suspension of disbelief sustain itself for 2 hr had Lars and Bianca found similar acceptance in New York City, Chicago, or any American suburb for that matter? Of course not. The idyllic small town, a mainstay of American cinema, with its associations (fictional or not) of neighborliness and protectiveness, is the only possible setting for Lars's story, at least the way it plays out in the film.

Yet, it is not realistic. But is that a problem? I suggest that to critique the film's lack of realism is to miss the point. The filmmakers set the film in a community that serves in much the same way as Bianca serves Lars. Of course it's not real but perhaps spending time with it may help us begin to interact with the all-too-real world in new and productive ways.

Just as many of our inherent attitudes about the centrality of conflict to life are imbibed by fanciful tales of knights and dragons, of fairy godmothers, and wicked stepsisters, so can challenges to these notions be framed in unrealistic, fantastical stories. Few of the narratives we chastise for celebrating violence as a method of conflict resolution bear even a passing resemblance to the real world. Shoot-'em-ups, slasher pictures, and even movies featuring more stylized violence such as courtroom dramas are populated largely by characters that are (at best) two dimensional. They live in worlds that we, the audience, do not recognize as our own. Yet they play a role in enculturating our attitudes toward conflict and violence. Why must a film that *counters* this process necessarily be realistic?

A final, much deeper and significant, objection addresses the notion of gender in the film, an issue that, I've suggested, is of particular importance in understanding the contribution *Lars and the Real Girl* makes to challenge our horizons of expectation in a way that makes room for positive conflict transcendence. Specifically, one could argue that *Lars and the Real Girl*, far from representing the transcendence of conflict, reinforces hegemonic ideas of normalcy and patriarchy, covering up this celebration of structural violence in a patina of feel-goodism.

Kate E. O'Neill (2008) makes this case in her essay "Female Effigies and Performances of Desire: A Consideration of Identity Performance in *Lars and the Real*

Girl." O'Neill argues that although Bianca is a "potentially subversive signifier," the actions of Lars's family and friends, far from being accepting, are a means of silencing the implicit challenge to sexual and gender norms Bianca makes:

[T]he 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. (p. 1)

O'Neill (2008) suggests that Bianca becomes a vehicle through which Lars's "illness" is cured, and he is trained to perform a more acceptable and traditional role of heterosexual masculinity. Pointing to the framing of Lars's fantasy as an illness rather than a lifestyle choice, O'Neill says Bianca becomes an "effigy," both in the eyes of the townspeople in the film and the film's audience, one that coaxes a more palatable social performance from Lars by filling the role of the ideal woman, one who "cannot interrupt or contradict him, instead remaining demurely and silently beside her man" (p. 6). She concludes that Bianca, a physically "grotesque" exaggeration of an idealized feminine form becomes an equally grotesque embodiment of a highly conservative and limited feminine social role, one that helps Lars precisely because she allows him to play the role of masculine authority. By allowing Lars to maintain "narrative power" over her, Bianca prepares Lars to assume a similar patriarchal role within his community (p. 8).

No film that celebrates oppressive patriarchal values could be said to represent the ideal of conflict transcendence described by Galtung (2004). If one accepts O'Neill's (2008) characterization of the film, her argument deals a death blow to the notion that *Lars and the Real Girl* illustrates positive transcendence or that it might broaden the audience's horizons of interpretation. This second point is crucial. As I do, O'Neill believes the film's plot can affect the attitudes of the audience by having them participate vicariously in the town's interactions with Lars. If her interpretation of the film is sound, O'Neill shows that *Lars and the Real Girl* not only represents conservative, patriarchal (and hence coercive and violent) values but also encourages the audience to accept them. The fact that this encouragement is camouflaged in the warm, fuzzy trappings of nurturing and love makes it all the more insidious.

However, *Lars and the Real Girl* disrupts such a univocal reading. The film goes to some length to show that part of Lars's development depends on him giving up narrative power over Bianca. Lars's family and neighbors do not simply accept Lars's delusion; they take part in it, and in doing this, they wrest at least some narrative control from Lars and give Bianca an existence that goes beyond her role as Lars's paramour. She gets a job. She volunteers. She's elected to the school board.

Although the idea of a doll serving in elected office makes us chuckle, the fact that Bianca's identity does not depend solely on Lars, complicates a reading of her as an image of passive femininity. As with much of the film, these episodes are both comic and thematically important. The film underscores this point with two brief scenes that show us Lars dealing with the growing complexity of Bianca's identity. In the first, Lars plans to play Scrabble with Bianca, only to discover that she has a meeting she's scheduled to attend. This leads to an "argument" between Lars and Bianca, and ultimately between Lars and Mrs. Gruner, one of his female neighbors, over Bianca's obligations that take her away from Lars. Hearing Lars raising his voice as he complains to Bianca, Mrs. Gruner says to Lars's sister-in-law, "I don't care for his tone!" As Mrs. Gruner loads Bianca into her car, Lars asks, "What about me?" to which Mrs. Gruner responds, "Big baby! You're just like my husband. She'll be home at 11!"

Later in the film, Lars drives with Bianca out into the countryside where they again get into an argument, with Lars pleading with her, "Don't talk to me like that! . . . Stop yelling!" He then gets out of the car and paces around it in anger.

Both of these episodes, although filled with comic overtones, also make O'Neill's (2008) characterization of Bianca as a woman who "cannot interrupt or contradict [Lars], instead remaining demurely and silently beside her man," untenable. Such a reading ignores the significant developments in the Lars/Bianca relationship as the film progresses. Although Lars's transformation begins in the creation of Bianca as a nonthreatening and utterly passive companion, much of the movie follows the increasingly complex set of social relationships that Bianca participates in (with and without Lars), and Lars's need to recognize and accept that she has a social role beyond being his companion. O'Neill rightly points out that that the film's plot revolves around bringing Lars into the fold of community norms, but her dismissal of these norms as oppressively patriarchal does not square with the content of the film.

Conclusion

Lars and the Real Girl, despite its quirky premise, received generally favorable reviews. However, its audience was small, and a significant number of critics (including some who were generally positive about the film) bemoaned its lack of plausibility. I suggest that both the praise and critique of the film stems from its insistent subversion of audience expectations for how conflict is resolved. Specifically, I argue that the concept of positive transcendence of conflict, as described by Galtung (2004), describes how *Lars and the Real Girl* approaches the resolution of conflict. The effect of this creative plotting of the film is amplified by its focus on masculinity as a theme. Given our cultural associations of masculinity and violence, particularly in film, *Lars and the Real Girl* asks viewers to adopt new ways of reading film by

giving them a plot that satisfies them, although also undermining their expectations. I have suggested Jauss's (1982) concept of "horizon of expectations" as a useful one in describing this process. Finally, I have suggested why the most likely arguments against these points are not persuasive.

Although *Lars and the Real Girl* does not offer a direct object lesson in conflict transcendence, what it does offer is a lesson in how cinematic texts can work as narratives, although representing positive transcendence of conflict. It invites filmgoers to change their horizons of expectation, asking them to ponder alternative ways in which the central conflict in a movie plot might be resolved in a way that offered transcendence. At the very least, it suggests that cinematic texts do not *have* to resolve in a win/lose manner. This does more than simply open up new possibilities for the plots of mainstream movies. By undercutting our expectations of how the conflicts in the movie will be resolved through its representation of positive transcendence, *Lars and the Real Girl* makes a small but significant contribution to our collective awareness of the extent to which positive conflict transcendence is not on our radar screens as a viable option of resolving cinematic plots.

Moreover, this critical approach—looking at how films operate as films to complicate our ideas about conflict resolution—suggests productive ways of thinking about the intersection of peace studies and cinema studies. Films can operate self-referentially to call attention to the interpretive commonplaces that audiences use to interpret film and complicate them. *Lars and the Real Girl* does this skillfully, which is perhaps one reason why, despite the lack of plausibility cited by so many critics (including many who liked the movie in general), it received a generally favorable response from its (admittedly small) audience.

To the extent that movies serve as a way we collectively enshrine our shared values about right and wrong (and thus serve as ways we frame our understanding of our own actions), *Lars and the Real Girl* opens us up to at least the possibility—even if only in the form of a cinematic lifelike simulation—that positive transcendence is a method of conflict resolution with which we should become more intimate.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Some have pointed out the inherent utopianism in Galtung's (2004) focus on "win/win" solutions. Writing a review of *Transcend and Transform* for *Political Studies Review*, Anthony

Egan (2006) says, “[T]he cynic in me says they are hopelessly idealistic given human rigidity and the win-lose/vengeance mindset” (p. 189). However, he also notes that despite this, and even perhaps because of it, Galtung’s provocative notion of conflict transcendence is worth considering. I would add that even if Galtung’s notion of transcendence might be unrealistic in its hopefulness, this makes it all the more appropriate as a tool with which to examine a movie, given that films are our way of collectively dreaming other worlds into existence.

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Bio

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