

# The Necrophilic Fantasy

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*Psychoanalytic Reflections on Craig Gillespie's movie Lars and the Real Girl (2007)*

This article is a shortened version of a chapter in my book *Narcissistic Fantasies in Film and Fiction - Masters of the Universe*, London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

*Lars and the Real Girl* is a 2007 American-Canadian comedy-drama written by Nancy Oliver and directed by Craig Gillespie. The film follows Lars (Ryan Gosling), a sweet but socially inept young man, who develops a romantic, intimate, yet platonic relationship with a sex-doll, a “RealDoll” named Bianca.

Lars Lindstrom lives a secluded life in a small town in Wisconsin. The film gradually reveals that Lars' mother died when he was born, turning his grief-stricken father into a distant parent to Lars and his older brother, Gus. Gus leaves town as soon as he can support himself, returning only when the father dies.

Lars avoids social contact, finding it difficult to interact with his family, co-workers, or members of his church. One day Lars informs Gus and Karin that he has a visitor whom he met via the Internet – a life-like doll named Bianca that Lars apparently ordered from an adult website. Concerned with his mental health, Gus and Karin convince Lars to take Bianca for a checkup to the family physician, Dr. Dagmar Bergman, who is also a psychologist.

Dagmar advises Lars to bring Bianca in for weekly treatments, since she wants to maintain regular contact with Lars. She considers Lars' delusion as a manifestation of an underlying problem, and urges his relatives to assist with his therapy by treating Bianca as a real person. Lars begins to introduce Bianca to the townspeople as his girlfriend. Because of their concern for Lars, everyone treats Bianca as a real person. Lars soon finds himself interacting more with people, and especially with Margo, his co-worker. She invites him to go bowling, and, as they part, Lars takes his glove off to shake Margo's hand – a significant improvement in his ability to interact with others. Earlier he had explained to the doctor that when others touched him, it felt like “burning”.

Lars asks his brother what it means to be a man. Gus says that he became a man when he began doing the right things for the right reasons, even when it hurt. Gus states that he should never have left Lars alone with their father, and he apologizes for having been selfish.

One morning soon after this conversation, Lars announces that Bianca is unresponsive, and an ambulance rushes her to the hospital. Bianca “dies” and is given a full-fledged funeral that is well-attended by the townspeople. Bianca is buried in the local cemetery, and Lars asks Margo to take a walk with him instead, to which she happily agrees.

## **The necrophilic fantasy in *Lars and the Real Girl***

Necrophilia, also called “Thanatophilia”, is a sexual attraction or sexual act involving a corpse. At times, the acts performed are not overtly sexual, but have an unmistakable pressured, cyclical, and instinctualized quality. The fundamental aim of these acts is to preserve a relationship with a lost object at any cost (Brill, 1941). The object of such hostile and frozen mourning is usually an

ambivalently held dead mother. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuscript of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), proposes a classification of necrophilia which includes the “necrophilic fantasy”. This is a narcissistic, omnipotent fantasy connected to giving and withholding life. It is a fantasy about having sex with lifeless object, without ever actually having sex with a corpse.

In my opinion, Lars’ fantasy of falling in love with a doll is a necrophilic fantasy. Bianca is fulfilling the role of a physical object that helps to overcome separation-individuation conflicts (Akhtar, 2003). The physical object serves as a string which brings the mother back, thus helping Lars to master the traumatic separation from his mother who died in childbirth.<sup>[1]</sup> Bianca may also be regarded as a “transitional object”<sup>[2]</sup> that helps Lars to develop and mature, and eventually achieve a better relationship with reality (Winnicott, 1953).

Although the function of Bianca as a transitional object seems very plausible, I wish to suggest that she is a pathological object of Lars’ necrophilic fantasy which stems from his complicated mourning towards his dead mother. Because Lars felt abandoned by his mother, he remained fixated in his “pathological grief reaction” (Freud, 1917) towards her, and could not resolve his oedipal conflict and consolidate his male identity. The object of his frozen mourning, as well as of his libidinal attraction remained his ambivalently held dead mother, whom he brought back from the dead in order to unite with her.

In the literature on necrophilia (Segal, 1953; Jones, 1951; Klaf and Brown, 1958), I find Segal’s paper to be the most relevant to our discussion. Despite the fact that it is restricted to a single case history, it implies the prevalence of necrophilia as a theme in fantasy.

The childhood history of Segal’s patient parallels that of Lars’ in several ways: Like Segal’s patient, Lars was the youngest member of the family. Like him, he lost his mother, and suffered a great deprivation in childhood. In both cases we find the omnipotent attempt of giving and withholding life. In the case of Lars, his mother’s death led to an additional deprivation: his grief-stricken father was unable to develop a close relationship with his two sons. The death of his mother, which was probably experienced by Lars as a threat to his very existence, eventually led to his ego-distortion: Lars developed a schizoid personality, had difficulty relating to people in general and to women in particular.

Segal believes that her patient’s deprivation in childhood must have led to his overwhelming destructiveness and greed. The patient felt that he had emptied his mother of life: Segal’s patient once said, “If I could remember so far back, I know what my first memory would be, I would remember realizing my mother’s existence and feeling, ‘it is either you or I’ “(p 101). The patient’s emotional situation persisted throughout his life in the form of a necrophilic fantasy.

Segal argues that this fantasy stems from profound emotional deprivation in early childhood. Normal separation anxiety is intensified to the point where separation means death for one or the other, since both cannot be alive simultaneously. At times he is dead; at times his mother is.

I believe that by lovingly taking care of the doll, Lars is fulfilling polarly opposed roles in which life and death are intertwined: Lars is the living, loving child who tries to cure his deathly ill mother (the doll), with whom he is fused. At the same time, Lars is the living, loving mother who takes care of the dead child (the doll), with whom he identifies.

The relationship with Bianca contains traces of both necrophilia and matricide. Relating to the doll as

if she were a live girlfriend served to imbue his mother's corpse with life. At the same time, by deciding that the doll was very ill and going to die, Lars realized his unconscious fantasy of matricide. The unconscious thought underlying Lars' necrophilic fantasy was that in giving life to her son, his mother is sucked dry of life as well as of milk. Since his life was conditioned by his mother's death, beneath his conscious fantasy of rescuing his mother there must have been his hidden unconscious matricidal wish to get rid of her.

The necrophiliac derives much pleasure from his omnipotence, which he expresses by giving and withholding life. Lars takes Bianca to the doctor and treats her caringly and with love, but when he no longer wants to be with her, he tenderly kisses her goodbye, and organizes a respectable burial ceremony for her. In the end, Lars comes back to life and is able to create a relationship with a live woman, by rendering Bianca – the dead mother whom he had brought back from the grave – a corpse.

But why did this necrophilic fantasy of being intimate with his dead mother materialize when Lars was a young adult? The reason may be his tremendous fear of sexuality. Ferenczi's (1952) explanation of the meaning of necrophilia is that many neurotics unconsciously regard coitus as an activity which, either directly or subsequently, is calculated to injure life or limb, and in particular to damage the genital organ. Thus, coitus is an act which combines gratification and severe anxiety, but coitus with a dead object serves the purpose of avoiding anxiety because the love-object is incapable of inflicting injury; gratification can then be enjoyed, undisturbed by castration anxiety. As Bianca is an inanimate object, she is harmless, and Lars feels that coitus with her, in contrast to a live woman, will be safe.

Lars' inability to touch a live woman because it gives him a "burning" sensation demonstrates his fear of being burnt, consumed by the fire of passion, and trades on classic castration anxiety. In spite of being a sex doll, Lars presents his doll as being a missionary and very religious. The doll thus protects Lars from his fear of sexuality, and this makes him prefer intimacy with an inanimate object rather than with a live woman. The fear of sexuality, which is evoked by an imagined avenging father introjected into his own superego, may stem from his unconscious oedipal attraction to his dead mother.

By "killing" Bianca, Lars succeeds in overcoming his oedipal desires towards his mother, which are embodied in the "live" doll. Only after Lars mourns what he must lose, she who is as good as dead, can he turn to life and sexuality with a live object.

Lars' choice of an inanimate object as his partner, while pathological, had curing potential. This was mainly due to an environment which adjusted itself to his needs. The environment, which helped Lars overcome his necrophilic fantasy and choose a live object as a partner, contributed two valuable therapeutic elements: The maternal love with which Lars' therapist, his family and the community in which he lived enveloped him. They all provided a holding environment, which enabled Lars to first enact and then overcome his necrophilic fantasy of uniting with his dead mother. The paternal love bestowed on him by his brother, who functioned as an available, loving, substitute father. Lars has the opportunity to identify with a genital-father imago (Colarusso, 1990; Ross, 1975), a father whose maleness is confirmed by the fact that his wife is pregnant and will soon have a baby. This fact is important to Lars: He wants to overcome his necrophilic fantasy, separate from his mother, and become a man like his brother, who loves a live woman and becomes a father himself. The overcoming of his Oedipus complex and castration anxiety, and the identification with a genital father imago, are all elements which strengthen his masculine identity and help him choose life over death.

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[1]Winnicott (1960) and Fischer (1991) have referred respectively to the older child's use of strings and the fantasy of a transatlantic cable to overcome separation traumas. Another famous example is Freud's (1920) observation of his 18-month-old grandson who used an inanimate object to master such concerns.

[2]Winnicott (1953, p.232) uses the term "transitional object" for an object carried around by a 4-6 to 8-12 month-old child. The child finds an object which he cuddles affectionately, mutilates excitedly and maintains an attitude of personal ownership. The transitional object is based on its associative connection with a maternal or maternal-like presence, symbolizes this presence, and has developmental value.