

LABERINTRO

AN ELECTRONIC JOURNAL
OF EARLY MODERN HISPANIC
LITERATURES AND CULTURES

VOLUME 12

2019

LABERINTO JOURNAL 12 (2019)

EDITORS

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle
Arizona State University

Daniel Holcombe
Georgia College & State University

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

María José Domínguez
Arizona State University

EDITORIAL BOARD

Frederick de Armas
Barbara Simerka
Christopher Weimer
Bruce R. Burningham
Marina Brownlee
Enrique García Santo-Tomás
Steven Wagschal
Julio Vélez-Sainz
Lisa Voigt

COVER DESIGN

Caroline Capawana Burget

Laberinto is sponsored by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), affiliated with the Spanish Section at the School of International Letters and Cultures (SILC), Arizona State University, and published in Tempe, Arizona. Arizona Board of Regents © www.laberintojournal.com

<https://acmrs.org/publications/journals/laberinto/about>

Special Issue: Reinventing Don Quixote in Cultural Production

Table of contents

Articles

Images of the Third Degree: Dulcinea and the Classics

Frederick A. de Armas, University of Chicago.....1

Don Polindo, Don Quixote, and Cervantes's Transformation of the
Knight Errant to an Erring Knight

William Worden, University of Alabama.....29

“Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?”: The Burgeoning of Sancho's *Panza*

Margaret Marek, Illinois College.....50

Lars and the Real Girl and the Quixotic in the 21st century

Ryan Prendergast, University of Rochester80

Women's Mental Health Advocacy in *Lars and the Real Girl* and the *Don
Quixote* Connection

Bonnie L. Gasior, California State University, Long Beach.....103

La democratización del privilegio social en España y sus representaciones
en *Don Quijote*

Xabier Granja Ibarreche, University of Alabama.....117

Reviews

Día y noche de Madrid. De Francisco Santos. Ed. Enrique García Santo-Tomás. Madrid: Cátedra, 2017. 364 pp. ISBN: 978-84-376-3624-5

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle, Arizona State University.....140

Lars and the Real Girl and the Quixotic of the 21st Century

Ryan Prendergast
University of Rochester

In the middle of director Craig Gillespie's 2007 *Lars and the Real Girl* (LRG), a film about how a man takes a life-size, anatomically-correct silicone love doll named Bianca as his girlfriend and treats her as a *real* girl, the titular Lars reads a passage from *Don Quixote*. The selection is from the Manchegan knight's time in the Sierra Morena, where he performs acts of madness due to his love for the imagined, idealized Dulcinea, imitating famous knights from his beloved chivalric tales. The inclusion of this intertextual moment was apparently the idea of Ryan Gosling who plays Lars, and the scene both highlights the theme of the impossible male-constructed feminine ideal as well as establishes the subtext of *Don Quixote* in the film. This scene also signals an affinity with Cervantes's exploration of serious questions of reality and fantasy as well as the novel's interrogation of contemporary social structures and mores. The quixotic that we encounter in the film is a 21st-century sort, illustrating the protean nature of some of the novel's themes that lend themselves to creative reframing and suggestive recontextualizations.

Variously described as a romantic comedy, a dramedy, "Europeanesque-drollery" (Woodard), and "unnerving comedy" (French), the film defies facile categorization. Even though it contains comedic aspects, screenwriter Nancy Oliver pulls back from most of the obvious salacious humor about a man and what he does with his sex doll. She also avoids a parodic take on having a synthetic girlfriend that would present Lars as a solely risible, crazy character. Instead, the focus is on how Lars's love for Bianca transforms him, his family, and the entire town. The film thus offers an analogous, though much more limited, treatment of the Baroque topos of *ser vs. parecer*, which is reminiscent of Don Quixote's *locura*, especially as it relates to his imaginary beloved, Dulcinea del Toboso, and the clashes between reality and illusion that predominate in the novel. Lars and his relationship with Bianca mirror, stretch, and reinvent the quixotic themes related to both isolation and desire that are fundamental to Cervantes's protagonist and to the text. The film's approach to Lars and his synthetic girlfriend pushes beyond the taboo of sex dolls while offering a quixotic tale

for the 21st century, representing the effects of loneliness and love, while also resisting the strictures of a traditional romantic comedy.

It should be clear that *LRG* is not a direct imitation or even a conscious adaptation of *Don Quixote*, but like many cultural products, it has absorbed some of the core themes of the novel. Through the repetition, inversion, or transference of settings and some of the characters, *LRG* reframes Don Quixote and the quixotic in the Internet age, when one can meet a future partner on-line, or more recently, use a 3D printer to create a synthetic male companion (Devlin, *Turned On* 85).¹ It is, perhaps, more accurate to consider *LRG* a “re-accentuation” of the *Quixote*. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin, referencing the novelistic image of Don Quixote, asserts that re-accentuated novelistic images take on “enormous heuristic significance, deepening and broadening our artistic and ideological understanding of them” and that these images can be “creatively transformed in different eras” (422). A recent collection of essays uses the Bakhtinian notion of re-accentuation as its unifying theme to explore the influence of Cervantes’s novel on a variety of cultural objects. In this volume, Tatevik Gyulamiryan explains that re-accentuation is “related to but not quite the same as, concepts such as re-writing, parody, imitation, and adaptation” (13).² She includes *Man of La Mancha*, which she designates as an example of an adaptation. Dale Wasserman’s *Quixote*, Sancho, and Dulcinea are “not re-accentuations of Cervantes’s protagonists.” The Don Quixote of the play and film is not a “character who tries to be *like* Cervantes’s Quixote, he *is* Don Quixote brought into a new genre” (15, italics are the author’s).

I include Gyulamiryan’s *Man of La Mancha* example because I see *LRG* as having absorbed some of its quixotic characteristics by way of the play and film rather than directly from the novel.³ Film scholar Dina Smith argues that *LRG* is a rewriting of *Don Quixote*, yet her understanding of the novel seems to be filtered through the lens of *Man of La Mancha*. Most notably

¹ Lars tells people that he met Bianca “on the Internet” to which his sister-in-law responds: “Everyone’s doing that these days” (00:16:37).

² This coincides, in part, with what Bruce Burningham argues in his reading of *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*, specifically that neither are renditions or imitations but might be best seen as emulations (79).

³ Burningham notes that *Toy Story* is a work that is a product of the absorption of *Don Quixote* into popular culture *through*, among other works, *Man of La Mancha* (78).

when she compares Lars to the knight, Smith asserts that “Quixote constructs [...] a romantic consort out of a farm girl/prostitute” (192). This reading of Aldonza/Dulcinea as a prostitute is clearly based on the amalgam of the two characters (plus Maritornes and the prostitutes from the inn) that Wasserman offers in his reconceptualization for the stage. Wasserman’s interpretation of the novel, which he describes as “a play about Miguel de Cervantes” rather than an adaptation of *Don Quixote*, allows him to break free of the need to compress an unwieldy novel into a logical dramatic and commercially viable structure (125-26). The playwright eschews the notion that he wrote an adaptation of the novel, thereby resisting Gyulamiryan’s classification of the play as such. However, one could argue that the merged Aldonza/Dulcinea of *Man of La Mancha* constitutes a “new” character, and as such might fall into the category of a re-accentuation of these characters, especially as the combined characters have little to do with Cervantes’s novelistic representations of the two. In *LRG*, Bianca, who is described as very religious, is also a sex doll, mirroring Wasserman’s combination of the idealized and chaste Dulcinea and the more worldly Aldonza into one character.

Gyulamiryan also proposes that conscious re-accentuations of *Don Quixote* occur when an author or producer “determines the most defining features” of the original characters and “creates new characters who embody those traits” (15). These re-accentuated characters, for example, can be dreamers, readers, adventurers, and lovers. It is this latter category that most readily points to Lars being a re-accentuated Quixote, as he falls in love with an “unsuited” beloved, “weaving a knotty love story” (15).⁴ The “unsuited” beloved in this instance is the love doll, Bianca, and their relationship begets the unconventional—and what some might argue as the kinky—love story that forms the basis of the film, seemingly couched as a kind of romantic comedy. However, *LRG* is about much more than a man who appears to be an agalmatophile, that is, an individual who is sexually attracted to a statue,

⁴ Gyulamiryan opines that the trait of “lover” is Quixote’s “most versatile feature, encompassing idealization, obsession, and blindness, as well as loyalty and commitment.” Moreover, the re-accentuated lovers “aspire to love and be loved by their partners” (18-19).

doll, or mannequin.⁵ Lars never once treats Bianca as the sexual object she is marketed to be, even as almost all the other characters initially see her as precisely that kind of girl. Moreover, the film is expressly focused on Lars's psychological and emotional development rather than on the specific romantic relationship.

Points of Contact/Inversions/Diversions

It is useful to establish some basic points of contact and transferences between *Don Quixote* and *LRG*, even if they are unwitting examples of the quixotic. First, the action of the film takes place in a nameless town (¿de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme?) in what is likely the upper-Midwest of the United States (though filmed in Ontario, Canada). Much of the film develops over the course of the long winter, with several wide-angle shots of the frozen, unwelcoming, and essentially barren landscape to punctuate its starkness and to establish an environmental solitude that parallels Lars's emotional and psychological isolation. The winter landscape—on which one could easily envision a field of windmills—is an inversion of the estival plains of La Mancha, the dry, stark backdrop of many of Quixote's adventures. These ambient details parallel the wizened state of both Don Quixote's body and his dried-up brains, “del poco dormir y del mucho leer” (I, 1; 100).⁶ Physically though, Lars is nothing like the emaciated, *cincuentón*, Alonso Quijano/Don Quixote. He is 27 years old, well-fed and burly, though he does have a memorable moustache. Psychologically, while both Lars and Don Quixote can be considered delusional, Lars does not take on a new persona like Quijano/Quixote, and his delusion is strictly limited to treating Bianca as a human being. However, Lars does reveal that he wears a type of protective clothing: multiple layers of shirts and sweaters to avoid the pain

⁵ Some might recall the 1987 cliché-ridden romantic comedy *Mannequin* (20th Century Fox, director Michael Gottlieb's retelling of the Pygmalion myth, in which the male protagonist falls in love with an inanimate female mannequin. She comes to life only for him at first, but toward the end of the film she becomes and stays human. An actress replaces the mannequin in the scenes where she becomes human. She and her beloved marry in traditional romantic comedy fashion at the end of the film.

⁶ I use John J. Allen's Cátedra edition throughout. For direct quotes I cite volume, chapter, and page number.

of being touched by anyone. His hole-ridden sweaters are analogous to Quixote's suit of ramshackle armor, but Lars's is borne from the need to protect himself from the painful touch of others, a somatic manifestation of the emotional scars he appears to have developed over time.

We might be able to trace some connections between the description of Lars by Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* as “a holy fool, and a martyr in waiting, a subject of mockery and a means of redemption” and some of the interpretations of Don Quixote as a kind of Christ-figure dating back at least to Miguel de Unamuno.⁷ There is also a sense of Christian community that undergirds both works. Like Don Quixote, Lars regularly attends services, and it is to the church that Lars's family members turn for help supporting Lars and who agree to go along with his delusional behavior about Bianca. In the novel, Don Quixote's niece and housekeeper, along with the Priest and Barber, attempt to either keep Don Quixote at home or bring him back once he has sallied forth. They, too, engage in a certain amount of playing along with the chivalric narratives that form the scaffolding of the knight's intricate fantasies, with the end goal of trying to cure him or to keep him out of harm's way. The housekeeper and niece convince Don Quixote that a wizard has sealed up his library (I, 8). The priest devises and casts the actors of the Micomicona adventure and with the help of the barber, Dorotea, and others execute both this adventure and the dramatic imprisoning of the knight in a cart in order to bring him home at the end of Part I. The novel's trope of “playing along with” Don Quixote often entails the need to follow a chivalric romance narrative, and it requires many of the characters to wear costumes or disguises. In *LRG*, however, the more theatrical or spectacular aspects of the novel, most notably associated with the Duke and Duchess's elaborate staging of adventures, are completely absent. Bianca is the spectacle, but only initially. The multiple clashes between fantasy and reality—most often resulting in physical injury—that Quixote and Sancho experience primarily in Part I, do not have a parallel in the film. Lars is not treated as a marginalized *loco*, and Bianca is quickly incorporated into the fabric of the town community. Viewers are drawn into

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar includes a discussion of Don Quixote in a broader discussion of what he calls holy fools. However, he avers that Don Quixote is not a Christ-figure (170).

a fictional world that is entirely verisimilar, even though one of the principal characters is a sex doll.

Reframing Madness and Lust

Beyond these similarities, inversions, and distinctive plot details, there are more complex parallels between the film and the *Quixote*, including the broader implications of the quixotic in *Lars and the Real Girl*. The title of the film continually reminds me of the chapter title that Carroll Johnson uses in *Madness and Lust*: “Dulcinea and the Real Women.” In the two chapters that bear this title, Johnson offers readings of how the knight responds to the *real* women he encounters throughout the novel, including Marcela, Dorotea, and Altisidora. He suggests that Quixote’s need to flee his home is motivated by a mid-life crisis and argues that the repressed desire he feels for his niece needs an acceptable outlet. Johnson suggests that Aldonza is Don Quixote’s “first, failed attempt to find an acceptable substitute for his niece” (86). He also emphasizes the role of Aldonza—real, but essentially unknown to him, though apparently known to Sancho—and that of Dulcinea—imagined or invented based on the poetic topos of the idealized, beautiful woman and the model of the damsels from chivalric tales.

However, the film’s approach to what is “real” is more complex because Bianca is a physical presence. Unlike both Dulcinea and Aldonza, who never appear in the novel, Bianca is palpable and many of the characters interact with her directly. This notion of what is real is highlighted early in the film when Lars’s brother, Gus (Paul Schneider), initially refuses to play along with Lars’s delusion, exclaiming: “Pretend that she’s real? I’m not doing that!” The town doctor and psychologist, Dagmar Berman (Patricia Clarkson), replies: “Of course she is. She’s right outside” (00:31:09). Unlike Don Quixote’s *locura*, Lars’s condition is diagnosed as a delusion by a trained mental health professional. The doctor draws up a treatment plan that includes weekly talk therapy sessions (presented to Lars as special treatments for Bianca) and the need to go along with how Lars perceives Bianca. But even this clinical diagnosis does not prevent other characters from using words like crazy, weirdo, insane, and sick to describe Lars. Johnson uses the term “delusional projection” to describe how Quixote sees inns as castles

and prostitutes as *doncellas* (89).⁸ Something similar happens with Lars, seeing and treating Bianca as a “real girl.”

Different from the Manchegan knight though, Lars is firmly rooted in the real world of his family, coworkers, and small town. Treating Bianca as human is his only apparent delusional manifestation, though he does appear to experience serious bouts of social anxiety. The significantly limited scope of Lars’s condition allows the film a more nuanced and less comical representation of Lars’s psychosis. In fact, when Dr. Berman speaks with Lars’s relatives for the first time, she emphatically states that sometimes “what we call mental illness isn’t always just an illness. It can be a communication; it can be a way to work something out” (00:30:38). While Lars’s brother only wants her to fix what is wrong, the doctor says that Bianca “is in town for a reason” and will be there until Lars does not need her anymore (00:31:23). As is appropriate for its 21st-century context and is necessary for its development, the film’s approach to Lars’s disorder is treated with more understanding than anything we see in the *Quixote* or especially at the end of Avellaneda’s apocryphal continuation, where Don Quixote is committed to an asylum. There is certainly a fear of how Lars will be derided, explicitly stated by Lars’s brother (“Everyone is gonna laugh at him” [00:31:35]), but the film pivots quickly away from the kind of mocking, cynical, and malicious laughter, played out most dramatically in the novel by the Duke and Duchess across a number of elaborate episodes in Part II.

The “lust” in *LRG* is seemingly more indirect than Johnson’s characterization of Quixote as “a man with sex on the brain” (76). Lars’s desire, if it can be categorized in these terms, is symbolized by and channeled through Bianca, a Real Doll, the name of an actual line of life-size love dolls available for customization and purchase via the Internet.⁹ Despite still being taboo in certain circles, topics such as adult films, their actors, frank

⁸ Sherry Velasco notes that Don Quixote undertakes a “conversion process” with a variety of the women in Part I (the prostitutes at the inn and Maritornes) changing them into beautiful and idealized versions. This includes how he “transforms the raw material of the *marimacho*” seen in Aldonza into the feminine Dulcinea (69).

⁹ Abyss Creations, LLC began manufacturing the Real Doll in 1996. These dolls are sold worldwide, and as of 2013, there were ten faces and three bodies available for the female dolls. Male dolls are also sold. <https://www.realdoll.com>.

discussions of sex toys, and even relationships with fictional or two-dimensional human partners have found their way into more mainstream discussions about sex, love, and the nature of intimacy. The film capitalizes on Bianca's primarily sexual ends as a Real Doll by fighting against the stereotype that most viewers and characters have: she symbolizes sex, even when she is "reading" to children, with little to no make-up on and dressed in frumpy attire. When Lars takes her to a party, his reason for buying Bianca is discussed by several attendees. A brief exchange between a woman and her boyfriend evokes what everyone is likely thinking. She asks: "Does he have sex with her?" and her boyfriend responds: "Babe, that's what she's for" (00:52:50). Lars's cubicle-mate, Kurt, and another man are also focused on the physical and sexual aspects of the doll with Kurt saying "she doesn't even know how hot she is" speaking about Bianca as if she were human. He immediately comments on how flexible she is—immediately objectifying her (00:54:12). While Lars treats her with respect and does not objectify her, Bianca initially symbolizes nothing but sex or a sexual proclivity that should be kept private. The fact that Lars can begin to reframe her identity in such a public context is where the film moves beyond the novel's representation of Dulcinea, whose existence and identity is constantly challenged or rewritten by a variety of characters, despite Don Quixote's best efforts to control the narrative about her. To an extent, Lars is successful where Don Quixote is not, since he eventually is able to get everyone to see Bianca as he does.

Don Quixote is a "reclusive, celibate bachelor," much like Lars (Johnson 89). Though both characters do maintain a few relationships, even if superficial, they appear to spend a fair amount of time alone. Lars goes to work every day, but at night he retreats to a spartan studio apartment attached to the garage, actively avoiding contact with his brother and sister-in-law who live in the family's house. Lars has some friends or acquaintances from church and work, yet his social circle is limited. We have no evidence of any love interest prior to the arrival of Bianca, just like there are few details about how Don Quixote has gotten to his fifties without being married. Lars seems to keep everyone at arm's length. We do know that his mother died giving birth to him and that his father retreated into himself after that, likely suffering from depression. Lars's brother admits to leaving home as soon as possible, probably to escape his father's dark mood. Deprived of typical familial bonds and the doting hand of his mother, Lars's emotional and

psychological isolation and apparent fear of intimacy manifest in physical pain when touched. He tells Dr. Berman that only Bianca's touch does not cause him pain, which may explain, in part, his ability to bond with a synthetic companion.

Lars's choice to make a sex doll his girlfriend, however, makes explicit a kind of desire based on a long tradition of the objectification and hyper-sexualization of women via pornography. Yet, the notion of having a love doll as something more than a sexual partner is not as uncommon as one might think. As Kate Devlin states: "The media like to paint sex doll owners as being very isolated men who are bad at social communication – probably, you know, stuck locked away in their basement or their bedroom with a sex doll [...] These people who own the dolls do so for a number of reasons [...] In fact, very few of them are driven by sex; a lot of it is [...] companionship" (quoted on *Hidden Brain* 34:00-34:41). In this sense, Lars seeing Bianca as a true companion whom he could marry is in line with Devlin's assertion; sexual desire is not the sole or even apparent motivation for Lars's purchase of the doll.¹⁰ In fact, if we take what we see on screen as the full extent of their relationship, Bianca is Lars's vehicle for engaging more with the world. As soon as she arrives, Lars begins interacting with his family more frequently, and he engages in more regular social behavior in general. He becomes more talkative and emotive as well. This is all due to the role Bianca plays in his life and how Lars begins to communicate with the people in his life. Don Quixote's apparent *raison d'être* is proving he is worthy of Dulcinea's favor, and this desire motivates him to sally forth, bringing him out into the world and engaging with people in ways he never could have imagined. He is a catalyst for change, even if that change is more disruptive and violent than anything Lars initiates. In the cases of both protagonists, their idealized beloveds are the impetus for the development of the storylines.

The Real Girls

The Real Dolls, as described to Lars by his colleague and cubicle-mate, Kurt, are made-to-order products: "Like if she'd weigh 125 pounds,

¹⁰ Ian Condry discusses a 2008 petition signed by several thousand Japanese citizens, calling for the legal right to marry two-dimensional anime characters (186-87).

then she weighs 125 pounds. You can customize everything; they got all different heads and parts. You can design your own woman [...] They're anatomically correct" (00:07:45-00:08:01). The ability to imagine one's ideal or "fantasy" woman and then make her a physical reality supersedes what Don Quixote undertakes to rhetorically create his beloved Dulcinea, moving beyond the purely imaginative and linguistic. Nevertheless, Don Quixote's idealization of Dulcinea, based on other chivalric tales and the Petrarchan poetic ideals of beauty, also focuses on some of the corporeal aspects that are customizable on the dolls Kurt has described. Don Quixote says:

pues en ella se vienen a hacer verdaderos todos los imposibles y quiméricos atributos de belleza que los poetas dan a sus damas: que sus cabellos son oro, su frente campos elíseos, sus cejas arcos del cielo, sus ojos soles, sus mejillas rosas, sus labios corales, perlas sus dientes, alabastro su cuello, mármol su pecho, marfil sus manos, su blancura nieve, y las partes que a la vista humana encubrió la honestidad son tales, según yo pienso y entiendo, que sólo la discreta consideración puede encarecerlas, y no compararlas. (I, 13; 186)

What Quixote has read demonstrates the active construction of his beloved even down to the kind of rhetorical dissection that happens when each part of the body is described separately. This kind of ekphrastic representation is essential as a model for the incorporeal Dulcinea's existence, if only for Don Quixote: "Y para concluir con todo, *yo imagino* que todo lo que digo es así, sin que sobre ni falte nada, y *píntola en mi imaginación como la deseo*, así en la belleza como en la principalidad" (I, 25; 312, emphasis added). In *LRG*, Kurt is decidedly more focused on the physical attributes of these dolls, as it is possible to customize their physical attributes. Kurt does admit that it is a kind of porn, tacitly recognizing that these dolls attempt to make corporeal (and attainable for the consumer with the money to purchase one) the overly-sexualized female bodies of heterosexual pornography marketed to men. This kind of adult film is the narrative-visual model on which the construction of the Real Dolls is based, giving rise to silicone realizations of male sexual fantasies and desire; these dolls are hyper-sexualized objects that

stand in for the real hyper-sexualized and objectified women they represent.¹¹ Lars does not seem even remotely interested in looking at the website, while Kurt is almost drooling over the possibilities.

After a jump cut to six weeks later, we see a large wooden crate being delivered to Lars's garage apartment. Viewers were not privy to Lars's "creation" and customizing of his doll, and the suspense builds slowly. Lars dresses up, changing his sweater several times. He primps in the mirror clearly excited to meet his doll, as if it were a first date after meeting on the Internet (which it is). However, when he initially describes his "visitor" to his family, he appears to be keenly aware of the preconceived notions and narratives of heterosexual male pornography and the taboos associated with a love doll. As such, he immediately and preemptively seeks to mitigate what Bianca symbolizes and to desexualize their relationship. He tells his brother and sister-in-law, Karin (Emily Mortimer), that because he and Bianca are young, single, and she is so religious they should not share a bed or a room (00:17:15). He goes on to offer more details about his visitor, among them that she was a missionary, who was raised by nuns and is now "on sabbatical to experience the world" (00:18:29-00:18:34). By emphasizing her purity (religious), selflessness (missionary), and apparent sexual naiveté (raised by nuns/experiencing the world for the first time), he creates an image for both the viewer and his family, and perhaps for himself. Bianca's first appearance immediately follows this verbal description, and the contrast is made more jarring by a jump cut to Lars and Bianca seated on the couch across from Gus and Karin. They are both mouth agape, speechless, and staring at Lars and his doll. Bianca is dressed in the stereotypically provocative attire of an exotic dancer or adult film actress (fishnet over a short shiny silver dress and knee-high boots), her look accentuated by a bit too much makeup, and with her full lips parted sensually. These visual details radically undermine Lars's initial innocent description of her life as a sheltered and innocent former missionary.

Lars goes on to offer more biographical information about Bianca, rounding out her narrative backstory. She is half-Danish and half-Brazilian

¹¹ In the DVD extras, we learn that the number of choices the Real Doll website offered when they were looking at possible Biancas: eight bodies, fourteen faces, five skin colors, five eye colors ("The Real Story of Lars and the Real Girl" [00:05:56]).

(00:20:59) and therefore does not speak much English, thus explaining her silence. He also shares that she uses a wheelchair that was stolen along with her luggage en route to meet Lars. With this information, Lars both cleverly justifies Bianca's inability to walk and explains why she only has the clothes on her back. When read together, many of Bianca's biographical details might seem more than coincidental, and they are. After meeting Bianca, Gus goes on the Real Doll website to get more information about the doll, and he and the viewer are presented with the backstories of a few other dolls available for purchase. Natasha was forced to strip for the Russian mob but has escaped and is looking for an "American male to love" (00:25:07). Midori is a successful business professional from Tokyo, but "unsatisfied as a woman" (00:25:17), and Tammy is a cowgirl who joined the rodeo but might be tamed by the "right cowboy" (00:25:25). Now, Bianca's half-Danish/half-Brazilian heritage, coupled with her religious upbringing, come into sharper focus.

It is logical to assume that Bianca's "biography" is, therefore, one of the multiple male fantasy narratives written by the company to market the dolls. What is striking and supremely quixotic is that Lars interprets Bianca's "life" literally, avoiding its sexual valence and erotic implications. In sharp contrast to the narratives that both objectify and overly sexualize these dolls, Lars reframes the inherited backstory to make it better fit his own, non-salacious, objectives. Here, he is like Don Quixote, whose chivalric idealization of women frequently removes them far from the sexual sphere (e.g., the prostitutes are *doncellas*). But if reading chivalric tales literally is a hallmark of Don Quixote's existence and the basis for the repeated clashes with the real world, Lars's "authorial" additions about the need for a wheelchair and Bianca's lost luggage are an attempt to fill holes in the fictional narrative, in order to make everything as *real* or believable to others as it already is to him. Unlike Cervantes's protagonist, Lars is successfully pulling Bianca out of the fantasy world to inhabit the real world, and he does so on his own terms.

Don Quixote also adds certain details to his own narrative to accommodate the various realities with which he clashes as he performs his role as a knight errant. Perhaps the best illustration of this tendency is the evil magician Frestón, invoked as Quixote's excuse when reality and fantasy clash or when he fails or is embarrassed. Having Frestón as an enemy helps him justify how or why his perception or understanding of reality differs from anyone else's. For example, he says to Sancho: "aquel sabio Frestón

que me robó el aposento y los libros ha vuelto estos gigantes en molinos, por quitarme la Gloria de su vencimiento” (I, 8; 146). Unlike Lars, however, he admits to Dulcinea being an invented idea or a literary convention akin to the contrived beloveds of many of the famous poets. Don Quixote tells Sancho that it is sufficient for him to believe that Dulcinea exists and that Aldonza has the characteristics he attributes to her:

No, por cierto, sino que las más se las fingen por dar sujeto a sus versos, y porque los tengan por enamorados y por hombre que tiene valor para serlo. Y así, bástame a mí pensar y creer que la buena de Aldonza Lorenzo es hermosa y honesta, y en lo del linaje importa poco, que no de ir a hacer información del para darle algún hábito, y yo me hago cuenta que es la más alta princesa del mundo. (I, 25; 312)

Aldonza being a farm girl and from Toboso, known for its inhabitants of Muslim heritage, is inconsequential to Quixote’s estimation of her, just as it has no bearing on his use of her as the *real* stand-in for his rhetorically conjured Dulcinea. In a similar fashion, the erotic conventions of Bianca’s own “lineage” (presumably determined by the company’s website) is only significant to Lars to the extent that it allows him to impose a distinct, less sexually explicit identity for his girlfriend because he imposes a different interpretation. He never admits to or recognizes Bianca’s origins as a silicone sex doll.

The disparity between the details offered by Lars about Bianca and Bianca’s appearance gesture toward the marked difference between the idealized, chaste, and patently beautiful descriptions of Dulcinea offered by Don Quixote in multiple moments. The characterizations are also connected to Sancho’s description of Aldonza Lorenzo from chapter 25 of the first volume, part of which includes him characterizing her as “nada melindrosa, porque tiene mucho de cortesana” (311), which surely plays with the double meaning of *cortesana*.¹² The episode when Don Quixote encounters the

¹² Based on Sancho’s description of Aldonza, Mary Gossy argues for the consideration of a *butch-femme* dynamic represented by Aldonza and Dulcinea, respectively. This dual nature occupying one subject position, or at least represented as such, is seen as much in the Aldonza/Dulcinea of *Man of La Mancha* as in Lars’s Bianca.

Toledan merchants and demands that they declare Dulcinea the most beautiful maiden in the world is also germane here (I, 4; 121). The merchants demand some form or proof, like a portrait, because otherwise she could be “tuerta de un ojo” (I, 4; 122). In this instance for Don Quixote, there is only one permitted narrative and perception of Dulcinea: his own. As he makes clear, “la importancia está en que sin verla lo habéis de creer” (I, 4; 121). Similarly, Lars is the one who establishes the parameters of Bianca’s identity and existence. The fact that Bianca is *real*, that is, corporeal (even if made of silicone) and physically present makes for a more verisimilar approach than anything Don Quixote can rhetorically create. No matter how firmly he believes his description of Dulcinea and vociferously attempts to impose his imagined reality on others, he is only using words, and we see that their effects on everyone else are limited.

Within the context of perception and belief, we can discern another coincidence between *LRG* and *Don Quixote* related to what Dulcinea/Bianca represents for Don Quixote/Lars—or at least what others might think these women symbolize. When Gus and Karin ask what appears to be the advisory council of the church Lars attends for help going along with his delusion, one of the men interjects: “She’s a golden calf!” to which another responds defensively: “He’s not worshipping her, they’re just dating.” (00:37:11). A similar situation takes place between Don Quixote and a traveler he encounters en route to the shepherd Grisóstomo’s funeral. This traveler, familiar with a number of chivalric tales, questions how knights errant, before undertaking some dangerous action, always commend themselves to their beloveds and not to God: “cuando se ven en ocasión de acometer una grande y peligrosa aventura, en que se vee manifiesto peligro de perder la vida [...] antes se encomiendan a sus damas, con tanta gana y devoción como si ellas fueran su Dios: cosa que me parece que huele algo a gentilidad” (I, 8; 184). The fear of Bianca being the object of Lars’s idolatry and the critique of perceived pagan behavior of knights errant in *Don Quixote* reveal the preoccupation with channeling devotion and desire inappropriately according to the Christian context established in both works. To elevate anything above God suggests a perversion of the Christian paradigm that undergirds Lars and Quixote’s identities. In clear contrast with most of Quixote’s family and friends, however, Lars’s church community and his family fully embrace his perception of Bianca as human, and they are able to

look beyond her inherent sexual identity, perhaps because she attends Sunday services with him.

Physically present and increasingly treated as more “real” throughout the film, Bianca differs from the imaginary Dulcinea and the real, but only described, Aldonza. Bianca takes on a life of her own, accepting invitations to model clothes in a shop window twice a week, volunteering to visit sick children at the hospital, and even being elected to the school board. It is, therefore, natural to infer that Bianca is the real girl from the title, given that Lars and many other characters treat her as if she were real and because she is a product called a Real Doll. However, *LRG* incorporates another important female character, Margo (Kelli Garner), who sings in the choir at church, is Lars’s co-worker, and who emerges as Bianca’s most serious rival for the title of “real girl.” In Margo’s first scene—notably before Lars even knows that Real Dolls exist—she says hello to Lars outside of church. He has just been given a flower by a parishioner so he can give it to someone he likes. Upon being greeted by Margo, Lars, supremely uncomfortable at the prospect of talking to her, flings the flower away, turns tail, and runs. Later, the secretary at work tells Lars that he should consider asking out the “new girl,” that is, Margo. Lars is silent and stone-faced at this suggestion. In another scene, Lars stares blankly at Margo when she proposes that they carpool to work.

Margo occupies the position of the traditional girl next door, a common figure in romantic comedy films. She is attractive, if considerably plainer than Bianca, and a bit awkward. Lars keeps his distance from the outgoing, kind, and quirky Margo, and this aloofness only increases when Bianca arrives on the scene. Margo is clearly interested in Lars, but when he announces he has a girlfriend, she turns her attention to someone else: another co-worker, Erik, who seems to be a placeholder for Lars. He is the opposite of Lars in terms of personality, and Margo is clearly trying to make Lars jealous when she introduces them. This seems to work because Lars squeezes Erik’s hand very hard when they shake hands, barely grunts a hello, and surveys him suspiciously. While Lars may not yet be prepared to actively pursue a relationship with Margo, he does show interest. Much like the tropes of a romantic comedy, his interest grows when he sees the “girl next door” with someone else. Lars sees Erik as a rival of sorts, and his crushing handshake is a display of strength and masculinity.

The way Lars forcefully throws the flower away when Margo greets him at the start of the film and how he freezes when the receptionist suggests that they date hint at Lars's interest in Margo, even if unconscious or repressed. In addition, his reactions make patent his arrested social-emotional development. The film carefully allows for Lars to become closer to Margo, with Lars comforting her when she breaks up with Erik. The timing of this is significant because it occurs as the distance between Lars and Bianca begins to increase. Bianca has a multitude of commitments that often do not include Lars, and they have begun to argue. It becomes apparent that Bianca has been Lars's way of rehearsing a dating relationship—of expanding his ability to be emotionally vulnerable and more socially engaged. Lars and Margo finally spend time together on a platonic date when Bianca is at a school board meeting. After a night of bowling and having a good time together, Lars makes clear to Margo at the end of the evening that he does not want to give her the wrong idea because he would never cheat on Bianca. Akin to the multiple instances of Don Quixote's chaste devotion to Dulcinea in the face of perceived temptation, Lars is ever loyal to his beloved, even if, as he reveals to Dr. Berman, Bianca has turned down his marriage proposal. Importantly, Margo reacts by saying she would never try to make Lars cheat on Bianca, making apparent that she and Lars share the same values. This scene ends with Lars shaking hands with Margo, seemingly without the pain that skin-to-skin contact usually causes him. Lars's therapy is having positive effects, and Margo is becoming someone with whom he can interact with relative ease.

Imitation and Difference

Lars and Don Quixote's actions manifest a need for performative imitation on each of their parts. In the case of *Don Quixote*, the knight's reliance on and attempt to recreate chivalric tales is evident from the earliest chapters. This mimetic desire reaches one of its peaks in the Sierra Morena when Quixote speaks extensively about his beliefs about Dulcinea, as well as his desire to imitate two other paragons of knight errantry. Don Quixote admits to Sancho: “quiero imitar a Amadís, haciendo aquí del desesperado, del sandio y del furioso, por imitar juntamente al valiente don Roldán” (I, 25; 303-04). Quixote's mimetic aspirations, based on stories of Amadís of Gaul and Orlando Furioso, form a part of his plan to do penance and to woo

Dulcinea by showing that he is willing to go crazy. He says to Sancho: “Loco soy, loco he de ser hasta tanto que tú vuelvas con la respuesta de una carta que contigo pienso enviar a mi señora Dulcinea; y si fuere tal cual a mi fe se le debe, acabarse ha mi sandez y mi penitencia; y si fuere al contrario, seré loco de veras, y siéndolo, no sentiré nada” (I, 25; 304). He admits to performing and imitating literary *locura*, and he entertains the possibility of truly going crazy in order to demonstrate his love for Dulcinea: “y ésa es la fineza de mi negocio; que volverse loco un caballero andante con causa, ni grado ni gracias: el toque está desatinar sin ocasión y dar a entender a mi dama que si en seco hago esto, ¿qué hiciera en mojado?” (I, 25; 304). The boundary between seeming crazy and being crazy has entirely disappeared for anyone who observes the knight’s actions, yet Don Quixote distinguishes between choosing to perform as if he were crazy and the palpable reality that indicates that he already might be *loco*.

Lars also displays a penchant for the mimetic in his relationship with Bianca, but, as we have seen, he tends to draw on the tropes of a standard romantic comedy or dating scenario. He brings Bianca to the woods and treehouse where he played as a child because she has been asking him all about his childhood. While in the woods, Lars seems to be performing the role of a courting suitor, serenading Bianca with Nat King Cole’s “L.O.V.E” and boasting about his physical prowess: “You should watch me chop wood, too. I’m really good at it.” (00:43:35). He takes on the role of the jealous boyfriend when Bianca is too busy with her other social obligations to spend time with him. They argue with each other, even when no one is present. We even come to find out that Lars has asked Bianca to marry him and that she has rejected the proposal. To the extent that a relationship with a love doll can be real, it seems to be so, insofar as Lars has imitated the ups and downs of a “typical” 21st-century relationship, from meeting on the Internet, to the honeymoon phase, the emotional intimacy, interpersonal complexity, and, ultimately, the conflict and decline of the relationship.

Within this context of imitation, the one direct intertextual moment of *Don Quixote* in the film, though brief, takes on more significance. Situated almost at the middle of the film’s two-hour run time, it is immediately preceded by a long shot of their home and the frozen terrain from which we jump cut to Lars reading aloud to Bianca from an English translation of the *Quixote*: “Y así, se entretenía paseándose por el pradecillo, escribiendo y grabando por las cortezas de los árboles y por la menuda arena muchos

versos, todos acomodados a su tristeza, y algunos en alabanza de Dulcinea” (I, 36; 319).¹³ This excerpt from Don Quixote’s time in the Sierra Morena is highly suggestive in terms of the themes of madness and love. Prior to his carving on trees and writing in the sand and in advance of Sancho’s departure to deliver a missive to Dulcinea, Don Quixote admits his plans to imitate Amadís and Orlando discussed above. Gosling’s choice of the section that Lars reads also situates us in the part of the novel where the Priest and Barber have crossed paths with Sancho, and he tells them all about Don Quixote’s letter (lost and poorly memorized) to Dulcinea and about his master’s “crazy” antics in the Sierra Morena. It is the section of the text where the Priest and Barber devise their plan to dress up and create a story that would enable them to bring Don Quixote home, in hope of curing him. That is, while Don Quixote is attempting to imitate his idols, the Priest and the Barber are also imitating and staging the chivalric tales that comprise Don Quixote’s reality. Lars’s reading from *Don Quixote* might be considered too “on the nose” for some, like the critic who states that he “could have done without the bit when Lars reads Bianca to sleep with *Don Quixote* – that self-consciousness poking through” (Hanks). However, this quick wink and nod to the attentive viewer is supremely Cervantine, and intertextuality is an undeniable aspect of the *Quixote*. That it is a moment focused on reading—and more specifically on reading aloud—highlights yet another thematic parallel with Cervantes’s novel. The metafictional nature of this reference to the novel is also one of the few moments when the viewer is potentially jostled out of this verisimilar world in which Bianca is essentially real for everyone. This scene also opens up evocative interpretational possibilities for the themes of madness, love, and fantasy, as I have been attempting to show. It is a pivotal moment in the film because it is not long after this that the relationship between Lars and Bianca begins to manifest more problems. As with Don Quixote, so with Lars, the imaginary world of the male-constructed feminine ideal proves unsustainable, ultimately provoking crises that threaten to overturn each

¹³ In an interview, director Craig Gillespie mentions that including this intertextual reference was Ryan Gosling’s idea (14:20). Interviewer J. Robert Davis mentions that the allusion is subtle (15:07) and sees Lars as akin to Don Quixote “fashioning his reality and other people coming alongside of that” (15:36). <http://www.erratamag.com/podcast/audio/Episode-006-Craig-Gillespie.mp3>.

hero's world. The crisis leads to each protagonists' ultimate renunciation of his fantasy and the existential consequences that this decision entails.

Endings

For Lars, Bianca has been a way to rehearse a relationship and functions as a bridge for his blossoming relationship with Margo. But for reality, sanity, and hence a form of order to be restored, in concert with the tropes of a romantic comedy, Bianca must ultimately go, an outcome foreshadowed by her apparent rejection of Lars's marriage proposal and their frequent arguments. The sudden development that moves this film more into the realm of drama is when Lars reveals that Bianca is very sick, precipitating a call to 911 and a visit to the hospital. After a rather short illness, Bianca dies in a poignant scene in which Lars kisses her goodbye, the first and only kiss they share on screen. An emotional funeral gathers all of Lars and Bianca's friends. The pastor reminds everyone in attendance of the transformative power Bianca had on the entire community ("She was a lesson in courage" [00:39:22]) and how much she loved Lars. Like any other member of the community, she is buried in the cemetery. The final scene is graveside, with Lars and Margo chatting and deciding to go for a walk instead of heading to the post-funeral gathering. The film moves rather quickly from Bianca's illness to her death, but the breakdown of her relationship with Lars has been building for some time. Lars appears to replace Bianca with Margo just as quickly, which may be disconcerting. However, this kind of "happy ending" points again to the pull of the romantic comedy model that, in part, undergirds the film. Not only that, the film cannot end with Lars married to a sex doll, because that would likely be too odd or risqué for many filmgoers. It seems that Lars decides that Bianca is sick and should die because he no longer needs her. Now, suddenly and surprisingly, he is delusion-free and able to hold hands with Margo without any discomfort. Lars is not "crazy" anymore. With hints that he and Margo will begin their romantic relationship, the couple can be inserted into a traditional heterosexual male-female relationship dynamic, the kind of fare appropriate for an American romantic comedy film. There is closure, but the film gets us to this ending rather precipitously.

Something similar could be said about how *Don Quixote* ends. Like Lars being "cured," the return of Don Quixote's *cordura* seems sudden; like

Bianca's, the knight's death, though anticipated still comes across as abrupt. While Cervantes provides us with plenty of evidence that depression has overcome Don Quixote after his defeat by Sansón/Knight of the White Moon, the move from depression to death can catch many readers by surprise, even though the prologue to Part II announces that Don Quixote will be dead at the end. Don Quixote's confession, drafting of a will, and complete renunciation of books of chivalry indicate his reinsertion into his life as Alonso Quijano. Don Quixote says: "Yo fui loco, y ya cuerdo; fui don Quijote de la Mancha, y soy agora, como he dicho, Alonso Quijano el Bueno" (II, 74; 575-76). The act of proclaiming that he is cured and that he is Alonso Quijano again, coupled with his religious confession and the drafting of his will represent an almost complete return to normal. Quijano, though still referred to as Don Quixote by the narrator after stating he is Alonso Quijano again, is at home, apparently mentally stable, and welcomed back into the bosom of the Church.

In a way similar to how Don Quixote determines and declares that he is cured of his *locura*, Lars determines the state of Bianca's health and when her life will end. Bianca's illness and death are entirely a product of Lars's narrative about her. When Lars's family demands that Dr. Berman explain how Bianca can be sick and dying, she replies: "I'm not letting it happen. It's Lars. It's always been Lars. He's making the decisions" (01:30:47). Both Don Quixote and Lars choose how their stories will progress and end, just as they decided the way their stories would begin. These choices reinsert the works into more familiar and, perhaps, acceptable paradigms for their respective contemporary audiences. The rebellious Don Quixote renounces his knightly identity and denounces the chivalric tales that fueled his desire to seek out adventures. By enacting the rituals of confession and drawing up a will, Alonso Quijano is reinserted into the narrative appropriate for a 17th-century hidalgo: at home, reconciled with the Church, and legally passing on his property. The disorder that Don Quixote has represented throughout the course of the novel is replaced by the order and stability signified by Alonso Quijano's end-of-life actions. In an analogous fashion, the ending of *LRG* pivots away from the quirky, kinky, and dramatic tropes that have been present since the start, and viewers are returned to the certainty of the romantic comedy framework.

Lars and the Real Girl moves across the boundaries of the romantic, the comedic, and the dramatic, and in that sense is very much like *Don*

Quixote, incorporating and blurring the lines between and among various genres in productive ways. The film is about love, but it is also about being different, the bonds of family and friendship, and how people respond to having an atypical person in their midst. In all these ways, *LRG* is punctuated by unwitting quixotic leitmotifs, alongside clear thematic affinities with the novel. Reading the film through the critical lens of *Don Quixote* reveals its multi-layered structure and demonstrates how these themes have both endured and morphed in critically fruitful ways over the centuries. Lars is not meant to be Don Quixote, but he shares with the Manchegan knight the ability to have us reflect on what determines identity as well as the transformative power and limits of the imagination. The inclusion of the excerpt from *Don Quixote* not only shows Ryan Gosling's interpretative intuition, but also provides viewers with a lens that adds depth and breadth to the film, dimensions often denied the romantic comedy genre. This quixotic optic creates the opportunity for critical interventions that link the plots of the film and the novel in revealing and productive ways.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*. Trans. Andrew Louth, et al. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991.
- Burningham, Bruce R. *Tilting Cervantes: Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2008.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *El ingenioso Don Quijote de la Mancha I y II*. Ed. John J. Allen. Madrid: Cátedra, 2000.
- Condry, Ian. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013.
- Dargis, Manohla. "A Lonely Guy Plays House with a Mail-Order Sex Doll." Review of *Lars and the Real Girl*, directed by Craig Gillespie. *New York Times*. Oct. 12 Oct 2007. Web. 30 May 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/12/movies/12lars.html>.
- Davis, J. Robert, host. "Interview: Lars and the Real Girl." Audio blog post. *Errata*, 28 October, 2007. Web. 17 June 2019.
<http://www.erratamag.com/podcast/audio/Episode-006-Craig-Gillespie.mp3>.
- Devlin, Kate. Interview by Shankur Vedantam. "Mechanical Sex: The Relationship Between Intercourse and Intimacy." Audio blog post. *Hidden Brain*. NPR, 14 June 2019. Web. 29 June 2019.
<https://www.npr.org/2019/06/14/731731328/mechanical-sex-the-relationship-between-intercourse-and-intimacy>
- Devlin, Kate. *Turned On: Science, Sex, and Robots*. London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2018.
- French, Phillip. Review of *Lars and the Real Girl*, directed by Craig Gillespie. *The Guardian*. 22 March 2008. Web. 27 May 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/mar/23/comedy.drama>.
- Gossy, Mary S. "Aldonza as Butch: Narrative and the Play of Gender in *Don Quixote*." *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*. Ed. Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 17-28.
- Gyulamriyan, Tatevik. "On Re-accentuation, Adaptation, and Imitation of Don Quixote." *Don Quixote: The Re-accentuation of the World's Greatest*

- Literary Hero*. Eds. Slav N. Gratchev and Howard Mancing. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2017, 11-22.
- Hanks, Robert. Review of *Lars and the Real Girl*, directed by Craig Gillespie. *The Independent*. 21 March 2008. Web. 25 May 2019.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/films/reviews/lars-and-the-real-girl-12a-798619.html>.
- Johnson, Carroll. *Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quixote*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.
- Lars and the Real Girl*. Dir. Craig Gillespie. MGM, 2008. DVD.
- Mannequin*. Dir. Michael Gottlieb, 20th Century Fox, 1987.
- Smith, Dina. "Movies and the Art of Living Dangerously." *American Cinema of the 2000s: Themes and Variations*. Ed. Thomas Corrigan. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012. 172-93.
- Velasco, Sherry. "Marimachos, hombrunas, barbudas: The Masculine Woman in Cervantes." *Cervantes* 20.1 (2000): 69-78.
- Wasserman, Dale. "Don Quixote as Theatre." *Cervantes* 19.1 (1999): 125-30.
- Woodard, Josef. Review of *Lars and the Real Girl*, directed by Craig Gillespie. *Santa Barbara Independent*. 1 Nov 2007. Web. 25 May 2019.
[http://www.joewoodard.com/Lars%20and%20the%20Real%20Gi
rl.pdf](http://www.joewoodard.com/Lars%20and%20the%20Real%20Girl.pdf).