

The Life and Times of Sheriff Woody: Benjamin, Baudrillard and some 'Theoretical Toys'

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Introduction

Mr Potatohead (his facial features in disarray): Hey, look Hamm, I'm Picasso.

Hamm: N' I don't get it.

Mr Potatohead: You uncultured swine.

(*Toy Story 1*)

In his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' Walter Benjamin notes: "The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film" (Benjamin 2002: 116).

It may be stretching things too far to claim that the makers of *Toy Story* (1995), the first full-length animation film using exclusively computer-generated images, had this quotation from Benjamin in mind when conceiving this, one of the film's opening jokes, but perhaps one should hesitate to rule this out completely. It would be a mistake to underestimate the sophistication and wit of Pixar Animation Studios. Indeed, as I want to suggest, the two *Toy Story* films, and in particular *Toy Story 2* (1999), are pioneering animated productions which continually reference and give comic and dramatic form to a plethora of motifs drawn from critical cultural theory and film analysis, and the writings of both Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard in particular. The possibilities and problems posed by new technologies of mass production and reproduction; the increasingly blurred boundaries between the human and the non-human; the material and immaterial; the very histories and techniques of mass media, animation and film-making themselves – these all find expression in the two comedies. It is, then, little wonder that, tellingly, the recent exhibition marking the twentieth anniversary of the formation of Pixar studios and the tenth anniversary of the first *Toy Story* film was staged firstly at the New York Museum of Modern Art and then subsequently at the Science Museum in London, a choice of venues that would doubtless have brought a wry smile to Benjamin's face.

It is with some trepidation that I embark on an exploration of *Toy Story 2*. What needs to be explained, one might ask, when understanding such a film is itself child's play? After all, any six-year old child can follow the plot without difficulty, laugh at its jokes, get the message. Yet, as Jeffrey Mehlman has convincingly argued, mass media productions for children are far from childish and should not be deemed and dismissed as trivial, unworthy of scholarly interest and attention (Mehlman 1993). His exemplary analysis of Benjamin's own radio broadcasts for young listeners in the early 1930s emphasizes the rich complexity of these texts, ones which cunningly contain in compressed or allegorical form many of Benjamin's key concepts and themes. Toys, Benjamin observes in his 1928 review 'The Cultural History of Toys', were once the by-products of skilled workers, craftsmen and women made as prototype models for, or as humorous miniaturizations of, adult objects (Benjamin 1999b: 114). Before the days of industrial manufacturing, carpenters, woodcarvers, pewterers, candlemakers and others all tested their dexterity, skills and inventiveness by fashioning Lilliputian versions of everyday or exotic artefacts. Similarly, Mehlman argues, Benjamin's numerous radio broadcasts are nothing less than "toy-texts" (Mehlman 1993: 5), theoretical or philosophical playthings, stories and narratives which permit the most erudite linguistic, metaphysical and theological ideas to be toyed with: the relation of word and thing in Adamic naming; messianic and materialist history; revolution and redemption. The *Toy Stories* are also ludic experiments in which certain complex ideas are set in play. Exploring them will not, I am sorry to say, make the films any funnier, but it will hopefully allow for an appreciation of their subtlety and ingenuity. Indeed, perhaps my trepidation is less to do with the ease of these films than with their elusiveness: six-year olds may grasp them, but I am more tentative.

But grapple with them one must if only to counter the kind of crude yet convoluted ideology critique proffered by Byrne and McQuillan in their study *Deconstructing Disney*. While rightly recognizing that *Toy Story* is, as a Pixar film, "technically not within the remit of our book," Byrne and McQuillan nevertheless deem that it "would be churlish to ignore it" (Byrne and McQuillan 1999: 126). Churlish, indeed, if they had anything positive to say about it, but instead they view the film as simply yet another example of Disney's neoconservative, patriarchal, militaristic, American imperialistic, consumerist ideology. For example: making

much of the character of Sid Phillips (not ‘Eric’ as Byrne and McQuillan [1999: 127] erroneously suppose), the sadistic boy next door who “tortures toys” – pulling off their heads, dismembering and then recomposing them in grotesque forms, blowing them up with fireworks – our ideology critics laud such anarchic/surrealistic impulses as “interference with the commodity and its use value,” as “a challenge to the chain of production,” as “imagination”, as “play as a space of non-productive expenditure” (Byrne and McQuillan 1999: 127). This is why Sid must be stigmatized in the film as a kind of junior Dr Frankenstein. Yet one of the film’s animators unknowingly undoes such criticism when he innocently points out that Sid is not “a psychotic child” (Byrne and McQuillan 1999: 127), or rather, that in as much as he is psychologically troubled, he will almost certainly grow up to be an animator in later life. Vicious Sid, not virtuous Andy, is Pixar’s avowed protégée. In ruling out *a priori* any possibility that a film produced by, for or with Disney might contain radical, subversive, utopian, critical or even contradictory elements (as critical theorists like Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer once appreciated), our would-be ideological whistleblowers miss anything and everything of interest. At the very least, before deconstructing Disney, Byrne and McQuillan should differentiate and distinguish it from Pixar, and allow for a little more churlishness.

In my view, the *Toy Stories* invite and confound ideology-critique; they tease and toy with deconstructive readings. Concepts and categories are knowingly played with: originality, authenticity and the ‘precession of simulacra’; the ‘real’ and ‘hyperreal’; cinematic parody and self-referentiality; the implosion of media; unstable subjectivities/objectivities; the uncertain boundaries of the human/inhuman and the material/immaterial; collecting, consumption and commodity culture. In so doing, Woody the cowboy doll, Buzz Lightyear and company disarm and deconstruct deconstruction; they are, as Melhman puts it, “theoretical toys” (Mehlman 1993: 4). And they are highly reflexive ones, too. Revolutionary in terms of their technology, these films look back to and reflect upon the earliest possibilities and promises of film animation as a medium: of giving the illusion of an independent life to inanimate things; of presenting the ‘unreal’ as the really real; of breaking with the limits and laws of the physical / natural world; and, of the transcendence of the limits of the human *physis*. Esther Leslie notes of the earliest cartoons: “Whether they were for adults or children was indeterminate. They were simply for anarchists of any age.

Cartoons, for all their slapstick playing, seemed to appeal to intellect and imagination” (Leslie 2002: 30) – and for me this is the most apt summation of the *Toy Story* films, too.

Toy Stories, Toy Storytellers

Toy Story I opens with an everyday scene drawn from white American suburbia: Andy, a boy aged between, say, six and nine, is playing in his room with a disparate assortment of toys, spinning as he does so a narrative adventure encompassing and binding together the heterogeneous playthings. No sooner is he out of the room, though, than the hitherto inert toys themselves come to ‘life’, moving independently, indignantly pulling themselves together after rough handling, emerging from hiding places, conversing, cracking jokes and then hurriedly, dutifully resuming their places when Andy returns. In the absence of humans, the toys become themselves and interact to form a living world in miniature, a social microcosm. From the start, the film presents one of the central themes of film animation to which I will return: the relationship between humans and objects, the living and the inanimate, and, in particular, different forms of anthropomorphism, how non-human things come to take on human characteristics. As Esther Leslie stresses, from its humblest beginnings: “Animation was a world of life without humans. Objects came to life on their own accord. Animals spoke or re-created the social community that humans thought was reserved for them alone. Without humans, but full of life it could only remind audiences of their superfluity, of their death perhaps” (Leslie 2002: 25).

But on with the story: it is Andy’s birthday and the toys – especially Andy’s favourite, Woody – are anxious about new arrivals in the bedroom. Will any of them fall out of favour? Will anyone be replaced in Andy’s affections? Andy’s main present turns out to be the ‘must-have’ toy of the time, a Buzz Lightyear Space Ranger, an action figure who mistakenly thinks he is a ‘real’ Space Ranger. The toys are no fools – they are aware of themselves as toys. All except Buzz, that is, whose insistence that he is ‘real’ provides numerous jokes. Woody, exasperated, barks at him: “YOU ARE A TOY! YOU AREN’T THE REAL BUZZ LIGHTYEAR. YOU’RE AN ACTION FIGURE. YOU ARE A CHILD’S PLAYTHING” but to no avail.

“Strange things,” as the song puts it, start happening. It seems as if Buzz is displacing Woody in Andy’s affections, and, indeed, in the affections of the other toys. Woody’s jealousy leads to malevolent thoughts and an attempt to ‘lose’ Buzz down the back of a cupboard. But things go awry and Buzz and Woody are suddenly catapulted into a comic ‘ill-matched buddies’ odyssey taking them into the dangerous world of the kid next door, the malevolent Sid. It is at Sid’s that Buzz discovers who/what he really is when, in a parody of the Lacanian mirror-stage, he catches sight of a television advert for Buzz Lightyears. Woody rouses the disenchanted, disillusioned Buzz to action and the pair escape from Sid, with the assistance of the grotesquely mangled and ‘tortured’ toys in the Phillip’s household, and by bending a few rules along the way: parodying the horror film genre, and the infamous head spinning scene from *The Exorcist*, in particular, the toys ‘come alive’ in his presence and pursue a terrified Sid, who flees the scene (the profoundly uncanny nature here of toys, and especially dolls, being played for laughs – Sid is scared, we are not).

Buzz’s traumatic self-discovery, his realization of his industrial seriality rather than individual singularity, stands in contrast to the fate of Woody in *Toy Story 2*. Instead of being taken to ‘cowboy camp’ by Andy, an accidentally damaged Woody is ‘toynapped’ by sneaky, slovenly Al, owner of Al’s Toy Barn (a kind of Toys ‘R’ Us ... itself a not insignificant name!). Avaricious Al is the villain of the piece, a toy collector, or rather an opportunist who recognizes the value of Woody as a collector’s item, one for which he has searched high and low. At Al’s downtown apartment, while a lucrative deal is being struck with Mr Konichi of the Konichi Toy Museum in Tokyo, Woody experiences an epiphanic moment (with full Coplandesque musical score) when, welcomed as a returning “prodigal son” by the rest of his ‘round-up gang’ (Jessie the cowgirl, Bullseye the horse and Stinky Pete the prospector), Woody discovers who he really is. Surrounded by kitschy merchandising, Woody learns that he is a Sheriff Woody Doll, the eponymous figure of a 1950s children’s string-puppet TV series: *Woody’s Round-Up* (to which the launch of Sputnik in 1957 brings a premature end). In another quasi-Lacanian ‘screen stage’, Woody (the CGI Woody, the real Woody, Andy’s Woody, our Woody) watches in wonder at ‘himself’ as a (CGI-generated, lest we forget) marionette on his own TV show.

Here *Toy Story 2* deftly reverses the scheme of *Toy Story 1*: Buzz's realization that he is merely an industrially-produced toy, one of countless other identical artefacts, one term of a series, finds its counterpart in Woody's discovery that he is actually an item of television merchandising, that although he was once just a toy, like Buzz, times have changed. He is now no longer a simple plaything, but a rarity, an antique, a collector's piece, a reminder of, and remainder from, a bygone era. Woody has become unique, 'aestheticised' (Benjamin), 'mythologised' (Baudrillard). If only he weren't damaged, marked, inscribed with 'ANDY' in marker pen on his sole, worn and torn ... but expert assistance is on hand. Al summons the Cleaner who sets to work polishing, sewing, painting, carefully restoring Woody to pristine condition, erasing the traces of his use, ensuring that our hero is fit for exhibition: "He's for display only."

Restoration as the eradication of the traces of use leads us to consider some ambiguities in Benjamin's reading of the artwork. On the one hand, in his act of restoration, the Cleaner erases the marks accrued as part of the enduring life of the object, its tradition so to speak. These are a part of, and attest to, the object's singularity and authenticity. Hence, for Benjamin, they are a part of its 'aura':

If we think of the associations which ... seek to cluster around an object of a perception, and if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura attaching to the object of a perception corresponds precisely to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice (Benjamin 2003: 337).

The painstaking work of restoration here involves the recovery of a pristine condition, a process of de-auraticization. However, on the other hand, painting over the marks of use conceals the life of the object and, in particular, its origins. The elimination of traces contributes to a forgetting of the production, circulation, consumption and deterioration (ruination) of the object. As I have argued elsewhere, this amnesia is, for Benjamin, the basis of the fetishization of the commodity (Gilloch 1996: 119). Indeed, in Convolute M of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* one finds the following entry counterpoising the concepts of trace and aura:

The trace is the appearance of nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us (Benjamin 1999a: 447, M16a, 4).

This notion of proximity and possession is fundamental. For Benjamin, as in *Toy Story 2*, it is precisely the (originally cultic) mimetic play of the child that is privileged vis-à-vis the fetishistic and purely visual consumption of the museum exhibit. Yet, interestingly, in the ‘Work of Art’ essay Benjamin specifically identifies the displacement of the “cult value” of the auratic artwork by the “exhibition value” of the photograph as one of the progressive consequences of the new media of reproducibility. We will return to this but my purpose here is to highlight, not to resolve, such apparent tensions in Benjamin’s usage and evaluation of the notoriously elusive term ‘aura’, and to note above all how these films proffer and play with such contradictions.

Let us rejoin the toys and their stories. Newly restored, newly reunited with his roundup-gang, Woody’s delight is suddenly cut short when he discovers what is in store. Now that the set is complete at last, it’s off to Japan with the lot of them. But Woody has other ideas: he wants to get back to Andy and his friends, something Jessie regards as an act of betrayal. Distraught, refusing to go back into storage, she finally gets to tell her tale to Woody (and to us) by way of a song of touching pathos (or teeth-clenching sentimentality): a sad history of being adored by her erstwhile owner Emily, of falling out of favour as horses and cowgirl games make way for make-up, friends and phone calls, of being left lying – for months, for years perhaps – under the girl’s bed, of finally being rediscovered by the now adolescent girl, who packs her into a box and leaves her as a donation for a charity collection. Adored, outgrown, abandoned – Jessie’s tearful biography, a toy’s story, is, of course, nothing other than the life cycle of the toy, indeed, of the commodity-form itself.¹ But there is a final possibility for the once-loved, now-obsolete object: to outlive the others of the series, to survive, to become rare, an antique, a collectable. The museum is, Jessie reasons, now her only chance of seeing the sun again. For Stinky Pete, it is even more than this: it is not simply a chance to live again, but the opportunity to live forever, to become immortal. In escaping the careless and clumsy clutches of a particular child, Woody is promised enduring life as museum exhibit for generations of children to

¹ Interestingly, tellingly, we never see, though there are some allusions to, the production of the toy. This was to have been an element of the proposed and now scrapped *Toy Story 3*, in which Buzz Lightyear was to be subject to product recall by the manufacturers in Taiwan.

come, a life which might appear to us (and later to Buzz) as a kind of living death behind glass,² but a fate which certainly appeals to the old prospector, who has always been entombed in his own box anyway. His loyalties torn, daunted by the prospect of a “dangerous world out there” (Stinky Pete), Woody reluctantly agrees to stay with the rest of the round-up gang.

Jessie’s joy is infectious. The round-up gang indulge in some high jinx, playacting imaginary scenes from the television series ... Woody, of course, plays at being ‘Sheriff Woody’, Jessie at being ‘Jessie’. In scene 25 of the film we are treated to the spectacle of mimesis as a practice of imitation, with terms in industrial series (Woody, Jessie) performing as if they were ‘originals,’ the on-screen marionettes. We see copies doing what copies do best: copying. Woody and Jessie faithfully act out the parts of Woody and Jessie. It is as if they were made for these roles!

But events are moving quickly. A rescue party led by Buzz (actually at this point, another Buzz Lightyear action figure suffering the same delusions to which Andy’s Buzz, our Buzz, was prey in *Toy Story I*) has tracked Woody down after some death-defying exploits, ingenious stratagems and miraculous good fortune. Reunited at last, now it is Woody who is spurred into action by Buzz, who echoes Woody’s refrain from *Toy Story I*: “YOU’RE’ NOT A COLLECTOR’S ITEM, YOU’RE A CHILD’S PLAYTHING. YOU ARE A TOY.” But it’s too late. The whole round-up gang are safely packed away and Al heads off with them to the Tri-County Airport with Buzz and company in hot pursuit. Despite the treacherous Stinky Pete’s best efforts, Woody and Bullseye are set free amidst the airport’s labyrinthine baggage-handling system. Jessie is not so lucky and is ferried out to the plane. In a stirring finale with full ‘western’ score as accompaniment, Woody and Bullseye ride like the wind and rescue Jessie from the taxiing aircraft bound for the Far East. All’s well that ends well: Jessie and Bullseye are welcomed by the rest of Andy’s toys and are restored to their rightful place. As children’s playthings once more, they are given a new lease of life and love.

² One is reminded here of Snow White encased in a glass coffin.

How might one begin to unfold the complications and convolutions of *Toy Story 2*? For me, a clue is to be found left lying around in Al's apartment: in Woody's moment of self-discovery, we glimpse three magazine covers featuring Sheriff Woody: *Life* magazine, *Time* magazine and an antiquated TV listings guide.

The Life ...

Life: from the very outset, even before Buzz Lightyear 'crash lands' on Andy's bed and wonders whether there are any intelligent life forms on this 'unstable' planetary surface, these early CGI films are, appropriately, interrogations of, and disquisitions upon, the relationship between the living and the non-living. *Toy Story 2*, in particular, presents us with contrasting ways in which objects may come 'alive', in which 'life' may be breathed into things, that is to say, in which 'animation' occurs. Most obviously, the film dramatically counterpoises the playful mimesis and animism of the child with another kind of cultic involvement with things, the commodity fetishism of the adult-as-collector.

In his enigmatic 1933 fragment 'On the Mimetic Faculty', Benjamin traces the onto- and phylogenetic histories of mimesis, the once profound human "capacity for producing similarities" (Benjamin 1999b: 720) that today finds lingering residues and reminders only in children's play. "Play," Benjamin notes, "is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or a teacher, but also a windmill and a train" (Benjamin 1999b: 720).

As a form of magical practice, mimetic play involves a two-way transgression of the boundaries between and thresholds of human and non-human realms: on the one hand, in a process of self-reification, the child willingly takes on the attributes of the thing; and, on the other, the child engages in a form of animistic practice in transforming the inanimate object, be it of 'first' or 'second' nature, into something that is 'alive'. Lifeless things, here industrial products/commodities, are subject to anthropomorphosis, that is to say, are imbued with human characteristics, attributes and capacities. In the *Toy Stories*, this is clearly not limited to toys in the image of humans, dolls, but extended to a motley array of playthings: animal figures, vehicles,

wind-up walking binoculars, even an etch-a-sketch set. This investment of agency, this ‘animation’ of things is conceived in interesting and rather ambiguous ways in the films. The toys themselves seem clear on the matter. They come ‘alive’ when they are being played with. Interrupting Woody, Jessie snaps: “Let me guess, when Andy plays with you, even though you’re not moving, you feel like you’re alive, because that’s how he sees you.” But this is curious: the toys feel ‘alive’ when they are being played with (which is paradoxically when they are seemingly lifeless to the viewer of the film) and, correspondingly, one can assume, feel ‘dead’ in the absence of the child, that is, precisely when they as toys are actually moving, talking, etc. independently among themselves. Does this mean that, for most of the film, we watch the trials and tribulations of the toys when they are not really ‘alive’?

Curiouser and curiouser: for “that’s how he sees you” is not exactly right either: it is, importantly, not the child’s vision that brings the toys to life, but rather his/her actual handling of the toy, his/her haptic, tactile experience of the object. In the ‘Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin stresses the importance and value of the physical, manual experience of the object, as opposed to its mere visual contemplation as a model of the new collective proximity and distracted expertise engendered by, ironically, the new imagistic media of film and photography.³ Individual spectatorship is all we are allowed of the encased museum piece, and such a fate is, as Buzz contemptuously puts it, “some life” for a toy. Being handled – this physical contact is the “true meaning of playtime” (Woody) that all the toys long for and remember. And this is precisely what horrifies the boxed-up prospector, the prospect of actually being played with: “Idiots,” he cries, “Children destroy toys! You’ll all be ruined, forgotten, spending eternity rotting in some landfill.”

Of course, the prospector is not wrong here: this is the destiny of most toys. Stinky Pete is a ‘prospector’, literally one who looks forward, foresees the shape of things to come, and here becomes a kind of Klondike Cassandra. These dire warnings are not insignificant. Play, for the toys, involves confronting risk in various forms: the risk of accidental or deliberate damage, the risk of obsolescence, the risk of falling out of favour, the risk of ending up discarded and buried. But such risks are worth taking

³ Benjamin’s exemplary medium is not toys but, curiously, architecture (Benjamin 2002: 119-20).

because they are life itself, because, as Buzz observes: “Life is only worth living if you’re being loved by a kid.” And at the end of *Toy Story 2*, what Woody chooses is the uncertainty and transience of life with Andy rather than the living death of museumified, mummified immortality, “infinity and beyond.”

Two points emerge here. Firstly, in their death-defying embrace of life, our intrepid and inventive toys are true to what Benjamin sees as the “liberating magic” (Benjamin 2002: 157) and fundamental lesson of the fairy-story: to confront, outwit and overcome the forces of myth with “high spirits and cunning” (Benjamin 2002: 157). And if, indeed, one can understand and appreciate the *Toy Stories* as contemporary fairy-tales (and I think this is precisely what they are), then an intriguing parallel can perhaps be found with Benjamin’s own radio broadcasts. Woody’s kidnap by, and eventual rescue from, the malevolent clutches of the collector is reminiscent, above all, of the fairy-tale of Schwester Tintchen related by Benjamin as part of his two radio programmes about toys – the *Berliner Spielzeugwanderung* I and II. In this tale, a brave young girl sets out to free her captive brothers abducted by an evil wizard, an adventure during which she, like Buzz and the rescue party, enters a ‘wonderland’ of toys sent as forms of distraction and delay. Benjamin sees in this ‘*Zauberland*’ a parallel with contemporary Berlin department stores, a comparison which Mehlman (1993: 69) draws upon to the full: for him, the story of Tintchen is that ‘dialectical fairy-tale’ which stands at the heart of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. Might we interpret *Toy Story 2*’s burlesque *Spielzeugwanderung* similarly?⁴ Again, I hesitate to rule this out.

Secondly, in their resolution and resilience, their readiness to risk annihilation for the sake of winning through, the toys not only take possession of life but they also demonstrate what Benjamin refers in a 1919 fragment to as ‘character’. Whereas ‘fate’ involves the inextricable and morally instructive ensnarement of the human individual in transgression, guilt, atonement and sacrifice, ‘character’ eludes, or enables the individual to evade and / or transcend, tragic fate. ‘Character’ ensures human autonomy and is constitutive of the comic. Benjamin writes:

⁴ In the film, though, it is the toys themselves that do the walking.

While fate brings to light the immense complexity of the guilty person, the complications and bonds of his guilt, character gives this mystical enslavement of the person to the guilt context the answer of genius. Complication becomes simplicity, fate freedom. For the character of the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist; it is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his actions become visible (Benjamin 1996: 205-6).

As courageous ‘characters,’ the toys are not only ‘alive,’ they are also ‘free’ – they are not the mortal playthings of the gods or of ominous fate. This depends further upon a particular conception of a benevolent nature and an innocent trust in providence, an optimism of the spirit that is at the heart of the concept of slapstick comedy. As Siegfried Kracauer intriguingly argues in his 1960 *Theory of Film*, the slapstick humour of early American silent comedies displays a cheerful confidence in good fortune and a happy-go-lucky attitude to happenstance. Kracauer observes:

film comedy did not highlight the performer’s proficiency in braving death and surmounting impossible difficulties; rather it minimized his accomplishments in a constant effort to present successful rescues as the outcome of sheer chance. Accidents superseded destiny; unpredictable circumstances now foreshadowed doom, now jelled into propitious constellations for no visible reason. Take Harold Lloyd on the skyscraper: what protected him from falling to death was not his prowess but a random combination of external and completely incoherent events which, without being intended to come to his help, dovetailed so perfectly that he could not have fallen even if he had wanted to. Accidents were the very soul of slapstick (Kracauer 1960: 62).

Slapstick comedy involves absent-mindedly avoiding catastrophe by the merest spatial-temporal fraction: in scene 16 of the film we laugh as Mr Potatohead, undeterred by the danger of becoming “mashed potato,” toddles across the road, loses a leg stuck in chewing gum, struggles, re-members himself, and continues on his way, oblivious of the chaos that is left behind: “Ah...,” he reflects catching up with the others, “that went well.” This scene is, for me, an acknowledgement of an earlier, indeed archaic, comic form and a revitalization of its spirit of life, liberty and (good) luck.

In the *Toy Stories*, the use-value of the toy, its play-value, is realized in the mimetic activity or magical ludic handling of the child, however careless or capricious s/he may be (when Woody’s arm is first torn, Andy leaves him behind and

goes off to cowboy camp ‘alone’). The playing child imbues the toys with life even when s/he is a ‘destructive character’ like Sid. And this tactile engagement is privileged in opposition to the fetishistic attentions of the collector, for whom the toy is simply “valuable property,” as Jessie puts it, deserving of gentle treatment but for all the wrong reasons: to maximize its exhibition- and thereby exchange-value.

Interestingly, this antithesis between child and collector runs counter to Benjamin’s understanding of the continuity between the activities of play and collecting. For him, the child is the prototypical collector, and the adult collector shares with the child a privileged intimacy with things: “Collectors are beings with tactile instincts” (Benjamin 1999a: 206, H2, 5). The key to this positive understanding of the collector is, according to Benjamin, the twin actions of removing the object from its original context and of inserting it into a new configuration or constellation, one which fundamentally breaks with utility and exchange altogether. He writes:

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this ‘completeness’? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopaedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle (Benjamin 1999a: 204-5, H1a, 2).

In detaching “the object from its functional relations” (Benjamin 1999a: 207, H2, 7, H2a, 1), the collector both “liberates the object from the drudgery of being useful” (Benjamin 1999a: 209, H3a, 1) and recovers in some way the traces which reveal the history of the object, those clues which remind us that the commodity is a human product, a part of second, not first, nature. As the object enters the “magic circle” of the collector, its fetishistic quality is both illuminated and eradicated. The commodity is disenchanted through enchantment.

The figure of the collector in *Toy Story 2* owes much more to Jean Baudrillard’s scornful critique than Benjamin’s utopian vision. For Baudrillard, collecting never gets beyond “poverty and infantilism” and collectors themselves

“invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them” (Baudrillard 1996:106), which, though a fair summary of Al, is ironic given that he is actually the principal ‘human’ character in the film. Instead of recalling the object’s obliterated history and thereby disclosing its truth, the collector’s preoccupation with “the traces of creation” (Baudrillard 1996: 76) is not to be understood positively – interestingly, Al is the only figure in the film to allude to the production of the toys when he refers to the precise materials and designs employed in Woody’s manufacture. Al’s concern is, however, bound up with “two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object”: “the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity” (ibid.). For Baudrillard, the collector’s “passion” for the “anachronistic” is propelled by “narcissistic regression” (Baudrillard 1996: 80, 76) and emphasizes orderliness, completion and control. The collector does not liberate the object, but rather seeks an “imaginary mastery” over the object world and thereby, Baudrillard claims, over cycles of “birth and death” (Baudrillard 1996: 76). Rather than an enchanted “magic circle,” the collection itself is nothing other than a “closed circle” (Baudrillard 1996: 80) whose perfection indulges the collector’s childish fantasies and fetishistic cravings.

.... and Times ...

Baudrillard’s references to the “antique” and “anachronistic” are especially significant here. Just as the issue of ‘life’ is central to the films, so too is that of ‘time’. *Toy Story 2* emphasizes a disjunction or discrepancy between the temporalities (the ‘lifetimes’) of the toy and the human (child): on the one hand, the child *outgrows* the toys which remain unchanging – in Benjaminian terms, they are the always-the-same amid the ever-new. The toys become age-inappropriate, obsolete, forgotten. This disjuncture is the basis of Jessie’s autobiographical narrative, of course, and of Stinky Pete’s haunting question: “How long will it last, Woody? ... Andy’s growing up and there’s nothing you can do about it.” On the other hand, the toy may *outlast* childhood to become something else: the rare and precious antique, an object which has the blemishes of time covered over so that, though aged, it looks like new once more. This is precisely what happens to Woody (and presumably Jessie too) through recognition by the collector and restoration. Woody, a 1950s cowboy doll, aged but not grown old, is an anachronism, an object *of* its time which now has in some way

stepped *out* of time. Woody may hope to, or choose to, remain a toy but this does not alter what he has now become: a collectable, an antique. And as such, he becomes not so much a haptic object of everyday handling, but an aestheticized object inviting the gaze and wonder of onlookers, an auratic object, an object of memories which might “last forever”.

Baudrillard writes:

In the last reckoning, every antique is beautiful *merely because it has survived, and thus become the sign of an earlier life*. It is our fraught curiosity about our origins that prompts us to place such mythological objects, the signs of a previous order of things, alongside the functional objects which, for their part, are the signs of our current mastery (Baudrillard 1996: 83).

Woody is a memorial object, a sign of an earlier time (the 1950s); of an earlier life (one’s own childhood); and, importantly, of an earlier time and technology of media and animation (the puppetry of *Woody’s Round-Up*).

And this brings us to my final point: there is, appropriately, a third dimension to the practice of investing life in mute, life-less things: the practice of cinematic animation itself.⁵ At the exact moment when a whole new technological form of animation comes into being, the *Toy Stories* fundamentally beg the question: what is animation? In so doing, these films return us to the origins of animation itself, not despite but because of their supposedly postmodern features. The comic referencing of other popular films⁶ was, as Leslie points out, a feature of *Felix the Cat* cartoons from the 1920s: in the 1923 *Felix in Hollywood*, our feline imitator is upbraided by a cartoon Charlie Chaplin for copying his moves and antics; a 1925 film about a fridge bears the title *Felix the Cat in the Cold Rush*. Felix also pioneered the leap from animated figure into actual toy, from image to merchandise, back in the 1930s. And if Mr Potatohead represents the postmodern body of endless permutations and possibilities, of destruction and reconstruction, the contemporary medical body of

⁵ Indeed, as the ‘bloopers’/‘out-takes’ shown as the end credits roll suggest, the toys, like any other actors, have a life outside of the animation studios.

⁶ In the case of the *Toy Stories*, the main films referenced/parodied are *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

prosthetics, replacements, trans- and implants, this too is no more than the innumerable experiments with corporeality undertaken by the earliest animators. Indeed, the fragmentation of the actor's body, exemplified by Mr Potatohead, is central to Benjamin's understanding of the cinematic medium itself and the loss of aura of the performer.⁷ And above all, ironic self-referentiality has always been part of the cartoonists' repertoire: Max Fleischer's 1915 *Inkwell* cartoons featuring Ko-Ko the clown always began with this figure emerging from an inkwell. Animation has always reflected upon animation. The *Toy Stories* are part of this tradition. From the very first, Leslie notes, "philosophy and animation unearth each other" (Leslie 2002: 30). Theoretical toys are nothing new.

The *Toy Stories* are/were simultaneously the most technologically innovative and *therefore* most traditional of films. Buzz and Woody: the *Toy Stories* are Janus-faced. Indeed, Woody, a name redolent of the folk origins of toy production,⁸ is fundamental in understanding this sense of retrospection: he is a figure from a previous age of animation, a marionette, one who, like Pinocchio before him, seems a real living human in miniature, fashioned from wood. Woody has no strings to hold him down, to make him fret, to make him frown. There are no strings on Woody – except for the pullstring which activates his voice, another outmoded technology that confirms him as an anachronism.

Fairy-tale stories, slapstick comedy, folk toys and materials, cowboy marionettes wobbling on small monochrome televisions, merchandising from a bygone age, the lush Coplandesque scoring – these all hark back to earlier times. "To infinity and beyond" – Buzz's oft repeated catchphrase may appear optimistic and prospective, but it may instead be understood as a fond or forlorn peering back into what Benjamin, writing on Proust, perceives as the infinite involutions of memory and things past, the lost times of our own childhoods: "a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it" (Benjamin 1999: 238). But the *Toy Stories* are more than just exercises in dewy-eyed nostalgia.

⁷ For Benjamin's discussion of the fragmentation of the film actor's performance and body by the 'testing' camera, see Benjamin 2003: 110-13.

⁸ For a discussion of the virtues and significance of the wood as material for toys, see Roland Barthes's famous discussion in *Mythologies* (1973).

These films dramatize nostalgia: 'nostalgia' as 'a longing for home or family, homesickness,' nostalgia as *Heimweh*, from the Greek '*nostos*', 'a return home.' In that the *Toy Stories* present us with joyful images of homecoming, of the spirited overcoming of our modern 'spiritual homelessness' (Kracauer 1998), of the transcendence of our own 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukàcs 1974), they present us at the same time with images of separation, trauma, estrangement, dislocation, bodily appropriation. Just as, as Leslie argues, "cartoons are object lessons in the actuality of alienation" (Leslie 2002: 83), so the *Toy Stories* involve the animation of alienation. This is not to dismiss them as forms of ideological consolation, far from it. It is to see in them the same utopian, critical energies that were at work in the earliest cartoons, Mickey Mouse included. This is not nostalgia, it is redemption of forgotten possibilities.

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