

To Infinity and Beyond:
How Animation in *Toy Story* Helps Redefine The Future of Children's Films
Rebecca Ben-David
FILM 4260

In their 1969 manifesto "Cinema, Ideology, Criticism," Comolli and Narboni identify film as a commodity, and suggest that films are often ideologically conservative and reactionary even when they may seem liberal and progressive (p. 125). In other words, films must be manufactured from within a historically specific mode of production, thus operating as "a visual expression (commodity) of that which they render invisible (commodity production) (p. 127). Contextualizing this within the realm of children's films, Wojcik-Andrews argues that "the degree to which corporate children's films function generally within capitalism...is reflected most obviously in how commodities function within specific films both as advertisements for capitalism and narrative devices that legitimate the alliance of patriarchy, capitalism, and democracy" (p. 127). The focus of this paper will be to analyze the different modes of construction in *Toy Story*, i.e. conscious construction of a narrative/storyworld and its characters in order to both promote a particular message while also aiming for commercial success, constructions of the self and of masculinity, and the construction of a new narrative space via animation techniques from which to expand storytelling processes.

The question of how movies as a part of mass media affect American children is one that has been asked many times throughout the course of film history. A prominent example and instrumental to the establishment of the infamous Production Code is the Payne Fund Studies in 1933, which remains to date the most extensive evaluation of the role of motion pictures in childhood development, (Fuller et al, p. 17). Though the research was met with much controversy and by more recent standards appears primitive in methodology and theoretically less profound, it is important to recognize their influence on both public consciousness and

modes of production for long-standing companies like Disney, which has also come under fire through the years for various material, most significantly, poor representations of ethnicity and gender, to phrase it delicately. Fast forward to the end of the century and the question becomes something more along the lines of: how, if at all, has Disney's influence over Pixar affected the films produced before and after the buyout? *Toy Story* was the first of three films produced in a distribution deal with Disney, and of course not only the film that saved Pixar as a company, but the one that launched the relationship between CGI animation and children's films now so prevalent today. Such a question comes loaded with the language of consumerism not just sociology and, like *Toy Story*, demonstrates the intricate relationship we have come to see in postmodern evaluations of the two. Because it is rooted in consumer culture both within its narrative and beyond, a film like *Toy Story* provides a perfect case study from which to continue such a train of thought.

The words "To infinity and beyond!" ironically possess a substantial amount of gravity for a spaceman's catchphrase which through repetition may shed its significance over time. Yet the message of *Toy Story*, now approaching its twentieth anniversary, remains relevant to this day, perhaps even more so as postmodern discussions of the intersections of media and culture continue to evolve. *Toy Story* depicts that very relationship in a way that is palatable to audiences of all ages. The microcosmic world of a child's playthings shrinks the would-be vast and multi-layered framework for such a complicated issue into a setting of literal backyard capitalism where issues of identity/personhood are displaced onto anthropomorphized toys, whose nature and function automatically contextualize notions of identity within capitalist/consumer culture. Because of the decision to make the toys self-aware, this contextualization is dually reinforced as a purposeful element of the story construction as well as by the implications of the film's then-

unprecedented feat in animation. Combining spectacle and substance, the film captures an early representation while simultaneously existing as a byproduct of American consumer culture transforming at an increasingly rapid pace thanks to developments and subsequent reliance on technological innovations.

Released by Pixar in 1995 whose CEO at the time was the late Steve Jobs of Apple Inc. fame as well as near the cusp of many technological breakthroughs (DVDs in 1995, Google in '96, Microsoft Office the following year, etc.), *Toy Story* thematically reflects both the excitement and anxiety of the period regarding the influence of technology. Narratively, it pits Woody, a cowboy pull-string toy, against Buzz Lightyear, the latest and greatest intergalactic space ranger action figure, depicting the clash but ultimate coexistence between the Western and Sci-Fi genres and the values they often typify. Woody represents the comfort but fear of obsolescence of old-world charm, where Buzz embodies the height of imagination and curiosity for a romanticized future but the fear of disruptive forces of the unknown/the Other. Within these two characters we see a complex interweaving of issues of masculinity and the desire for acceptance in combination with the aforementioned principles and manifestations of genre.

As with many Pixar films, *Toy Story* depicts characters with adult-like problems who are often psychologically more mature than the film's target audience, which on one level works to widen appeal and create a story more true to the definition of a "family film" (as opposed to simply throwing in a few gags for older viewers and hoping to satisfy). From this, one could argue that part of Pixar's success – as *Toy Story*'s semi-meta approach indicated early on – stems from the fact that perhaps the choice to respect child audiences as potentially intelligent, discerning individuals capable of critical thinking not only makes for better storytelling but allows for a richer and more honest weigh-in on contemporary social commentary. On another

level more pertinent to the narrative itself, the displacement of adult personalities and, albeit universal, problems onto a) inanimate objects and b) objects specifically associated with childhood, nostalgia, innocence, etc. creates a unique platform from which to examine said social issues in a way that both adults and their kids can understand from their respective frames of reference.

So how is this understanding constructed, and more specifically, what role does animation play in the formal construction of the film? The nature of CGI animation implies an awareness from both the production and consumer perspectives that the visuals on screen are entirely fabricated. Always in the minds of the filmmakers and viewers is the constant reminder that what is happening on screen is a simulation of reality. Of course, all film technically exists to imitate reality on some level and thus reveal and connect us to our humanity, but with CGI this notion is ever-present and exponentially heightened with every advance in technology. Placing *Toy Story* at the beginning of the historical spectrum for CGI animated features, it ushers in what Gurevitch terms as an “aesthetic of continuity: the condition in digital imaging whereby the physics of space, time, gravity, force, movement and more are held in a new balance by the digital algorithms that govern them” (p. 134) In contrast to live-action film or even cel animation where the notions of artifice are present but much more subtle, CGI technology implies a change in the way we watch and think about movies, requiring a deeper understanding of our world in order to either replicate it on screen or suspend our belief in what we know is entirely “artificial” as capable of simulating and even going beyond the limits of our reality. This extends beyond the “if you can dream it do it” mentality by contextualizing the storytelling process more firmly within consumer/capitalist culture rather than merely allowing it to exist in a vacuum that otherwise does not factor in imagination/film style as part of the media industry, instead

evaluating them concurrently. From here, we can view the characters of the Pixar universe as a “function of the consumer process” (p. 135) as more than just images, but industrial simulations, with subsequent merchandizing as a real-world extension of this in-story process. In excerpts from statements released by director John Lasseter, Gurevitch’s discussion is based around the revelation that the consumer process was and is the foundation for character designs both on a physical and psycho-emotional level in addition to the physical and social environments they inhabit (p. 140).

Lasseter created five key animation principles in 1987 that have since been regularly employed in Pixar films: “squash and stretch” to convey mass and flexibility, “timing” to convey body characteristics and make ideas readable, “anticipation” to ensure understanding of the actions portrayed through the timing, “staging” in conjunction with camera, lighting, and other mise-en-scene elements, and “exaggeration” for the sake of any of the other four in order to subtly enhance mood or emotional reactions to a character/event/motion (Porter & Susman, p. 28). What is interesting to note here is that along with the RenderMan and other software used, these guidelines highlight the necessity for a departure from realism in order to create environments and characters that will read as unmistakably lifelike on screen, not only to avoid the “uncanny valley” effect but also to create a sense of authenticity, fluidity, and “realness.” characters’ physical forms and movements reflect their personality and three dimensional space evokes a realism separate though sometimes influenced by exaggerated cartoon-like environments/physics.

The ability of CGI to blend art and science together to approximate human perception is both as confusing a process as it is a fascinating one. What a film like *Toy Story* does is remind us that the inanimate is just as much a part of our culture as abstract theoretical aspects of

psychology and sociology are, both through the toy characters in the film and the computers used to bring them to life. While *Toy Story* also deals with the purely materialist aspect of consumerism, it more heavily emphasizes the idea and emotional significance of ownership from both a capitalist and a human perspective. What this translates to is a film aimed at children with a rather somber foundation – the question of determining self-worth in a world where the characters innately accept and even enjoy their status as not just objects, but copies, alluding to the consumerist notion of manufactured happiness and the implicated loss of one's individuality, a pinnacle defining factor in Western cultures and mentality. In this way, Pixar demonstrates its own cynicism by critiquing throw-away culture and mega-corporations as a mega-corporation that plays a part in the very same throw-away culture through merchandizing (Borthaiser 2012).

This is especially evident when Buzz learns that he is just *a* Buzz Lightyear, not *the* Buzz Lightyear. Initially deluded into thinking himself a savior/hero-figure sent on a mission to Earth, he becomes stripped of his sense of individuality when he is forced to realize the truth. Woody's exasperated "YOU ARE A TOY!" in attempts to bring Buzz down to his level does little to convince Buzz until a commercial on TV reveals the truth in a cutthroat manner true to capitalist form. Woody is anything but over the moon about Buzz landing into his life and setting up red flags as a threat to his manhood, his place in the group and in Andy's life. Their relationship operates on three different levels: the recognition of artifice, physical and psychological depictions of masculinity, and the search for belonging. Until the scene where Woody admits the truth to Buzz, Buzz is primarily oblivious of his effect on Woody. His naiveté about the world around him and his general gullibility allow the more cynical Woody to manipulate him in power plays that are largely one sided thanks to Buzz' idealism.

The depiction of masculinity is made more interesting in how their characterization is affected by how they are animated. Woody has a big head, literally and figuratively, but his facial features are more three dimensional than Buzz's, which are comparatively somewhat more flattened, especially noticeable when the characters must play possum while in the presence of humans. Woody is stitched together and ironically appears more seamless than Buzz who very obviously exists as the sum of shiny manufactured parts and plastic sockets, emphasized when his arm detaches in his literal fall from oblivion and is subsequently used as a prop. Yet even after both characters are clearly aware of their artificiality, they still experience the fear of mortality having been captured by the cruel next-door neighbor Sid, a problem child to foil the comparatively wholesome Andy, who tries to burn Woody "alive" and blow up Buzz.

Compound this with other characterization and narrative elements and we see Pixar present a very complex but arguably progressive alternative message for children and adults about gender performance. *Toy Story* does not address why or how the toys understand how to behave according to traditional gender models or even how or when they gained sentience and developed personalities at all, but it does nonetheless offer a critique about gendered marketing of children's toys and movies in general through its animation and narrative choices. With *Toy Story* as its prototype, Gillam & Wooden argue that Pixar ultimately challenges traditional depictions of heteronormativity even as it seems to conform to them. Characters who may initially present as alpha males are often emasculated by the narrative, not in a way that necessarily makes them the punchline of a cheap joke (though there are a few of these that pepper the dialogue) but rather in an effort to show gender on a more fluid spectrum less associated with shame, promoting a new model of masculinity (p. 2). In the case of *Toy Story*, Buzz loses one of his arms, a source of power enabling him to "communicate" with the fictional

entity Star Command, and at one point wears a frilly apron. As a stockier character made of hard plastic compared to the lanky Woody made of stitches and soft stuffing, the threat to Woody's masculinity is made clear. However, where Woody's cynicism and jealousy might characterize him further as "less of a man" than the hotshot would-be hero Buzz, it is Buzz's lack of recognition of his artificiality for much of the film that becomes the main point of emasculation for his character in a way that to an extent makes Woody appear psychologically superior despite his sarcasm and scorn.

Both characters are in different ways all-American "men," but as all-American *toys* the notion of ownership and the desire to be wanted, needed, and loved complicates how the film depicts masculinity. Audiences can identify with both Woody and Buzz as the incumbent and the "new guy," and the idea of disruption of the status quo. Where Woody fights to maintain his title as "Andy's favorite toy" and the favorite among his friends, Buzz fights to gain acceptance from Woody and the group, to not be seen as "the Other" as he and Woody initially view Sid's mangled toy experiments. Woody's goal is to overcome a crisis in masculinity while Buzz tries to recover from a crisis in identity. But with masculine behaviors so wrapped up in male identity, their struggles overlap, benefitting the characters and leading to their eventual friendship as well as Pixar's message. Their transformation from masculine-charged rivals for the owner Andy and the other toys' affections to allies who can admit to their "design flaws" and reliance on another and become more intimate and trusting seems to represent a new model of masculinity. This model recognizes the importance of vulnerability, cooperation, and respect for others as sources of power and strength as opposed to only showing aggression/anger/fear (which must be conquered or suppressed) and trying to maintain a façade of self-sufficiency and indifference towards others needs or opinions.

The interplay here echoes the Comolli and Narboni argument referenced in Wojcik-Andrew's analysis, with Pixar using conservative values about masculinity and American capitalist values about identity to comment in a more progressive manner on how the two relate so intrinsically to the perpetuation of patriarchy by media. It would appear that Pixar understood from the get-go the "problem with a film that celebrates the lovability of toys [aka] consumerism," (Booker, p. 80), the paradox in displacing the very human fear of obsolescence, of becoming unwanted/unloved onto characters that physically exist as a direct result of consumerism, which made possible the animation technology used to create the film and provided the basis for the choice to animate sentient toys specifically in order to comment on the subject from within and beyond the narrative. With *Toy Story*, Pixar seems to ask whether or not media as a business and as a creative process has a responsibility to change how we construct the aforementioned ideas for child consumption.

Bibliography

- Booker, K. (2010). *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*. ABC-CLIO, LLC. Santa Barbara, California.
- Borthaiser, N. (2012). Blinded by the Desk Lamp: Object Values and Consumerism in Pixar Animations. *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, 8(1).
- Fuller et al. (1996), *Children and the Movies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gillam, K., & Wooden, S.R. (2008). Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar. *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 36(1), 2-8.
- Gurevitch, L. (2012). Computer Generated Animation as Product Design Engineered Culture, or Buzz Lightyear to the Sales Floor, to the Checkout and Beyond!. *Animation – An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7(2), 131-149.
- Porter, T., & Susman, G. (2000). Creating Lifelike Characters in Pixar Movies. *Communications of the ACM*, 43(1), 25-29.
- Wojcik-Andrews, I. (2000). *Children's Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy, Theory*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, NY.