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Toy Story and Consumer Culture

While we can look back into animation's past and mark its character and progress by highlighting a series of "firsts" -- new technologies, new techniques, new modes of expression -- we should not lose sight of the present. We are in a time of great transformation, a time marked by its own array of "firsts" no less significant than those of a century ago. Animation is coming alive with the birth and proliferation of new digital technologies. More challenging mainstream animation can find new audiences through cable and the Internet. The boundary between animation and special effects is rapidly blurring, opening up the relationship between film and animation for radical reconsideration. The rise of the digital studio, as adept at producing CGI character animation as it is at sinking the Titanic or engineering astronomical catastrophes, marks a watershed for animation and for how we as scholars must think about it.

My focus today is on the film *Toy Story* -- a first in its own right, as the first full-length feature film composed entirely of computer animation. And a bold first it is: it nearly single-handedly opened up dramatic new possibilities for computer animation and set the terms with which those possibilities will be explored. On the heels of *Toy Story*, Pixar has become emblematic of the new digital studio -- in part because it has promoted itself that way, in part because critics and journalists are in search of a face to attach to the so-called "new Hollywood". Ironically, perhaps, Pixar was only able to pose such a challenge to Disney's hegemony by dealing with the mouse itself. Disney distributed *Toy Story* and took a lion's share of the profits.

But as new as *Toy Story* may seem, it is very much a part of the tradition of animation. Not only does it share with other forms of animation its aesthetic and narrative strategies; it also involves itself in some of the most central concerns that have weighed upon animation since its inception. I want to focus on two of these concerns for the moment -- liveness and authorship.

"Show some life!" (Max Fleischer to Koko in "Modeling")

Animation has always been about liveness. This is likely a product of the technique by which animation is created: rather than asking live actors to perform in front of a camera, animation tricks the human eye into seeing drawings as alive. It is no surprise that animators, if they were charmed by such a technique, would be drawn to narratives that explore this boundary, the boundary between what is live and what isn't, what is animate and inanimate. Cartoons typically indulge a fantasy where that boundary is troubled or crossed -- animals exhibit human behaviors and consciousness, objects spring to life like the drawings by which they are made. CGI special effects are also often put in the service of wondering what might suddenly come alive; aliens, dinosaurs, giant lizards, or natural disasters that seem to have minds and wills of their

own -- moving not according to natural principles, but with purpose, forethought, and will.

This fascination is not unique to animation; our culture spends much of its energies deciding where to attribute liveness and with what implications. Ancient cultures saw gods in animals and plants and wondered if the natural world around them was inhabited by spirits -- spirits either they created, or that created them. Modern culture has similar obsessions, more often focused on the things it makes. Surrounded as we are by simulations and semblances, images and artifacts -- that exhibit qualities that used to prove liveness -- our notions of what it means to be alive, what it means to be human, are challenged. It is the flipside anxiety to what Benjamin describes as "the desire of contemporary masses... to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." (223) What if we draw things so close that they consume us, or become us?

One example of this is the work of Alan Turing. He proposed that the computer would be the machine to finally simulate human thought most effectively -- and aimed to prove it by devising tests where human subjects would attempt to tell the difference between a man and a computer, both answering questions through teletype machines. Turing's fascination with what seems human and how we tell is also our culture's nightmare -- robots replacing laborers, computers attaining consciousness, machines going haywire and terrorizing their human agents. These are the obsessions of science fiction, and increasingly of popular entertainment.

Animation continues to have an affinity for the mythological, likely because our culture continues to populate childhood with myths and fairy tales. The idea of animals acting human is still its central conceit. But it has also turned its fascination for liveness to the question of objects: Pinocchio, a puppet brought magically to life and wishing he were a real boy; Fantasia, where the sorcerer's apprentice turns his broom into a battalion of water-bearers he cannot control; Toy Story, where toys are alive, only when they are out of sight of the children who play with them. Each of these examples finds its fascination in the very logic of animation itself -- that what we expect to be inanimate can spring to life and run wild.

It is telling that the first animated feature to be generated purely by technological means, rather than by hand, is particularly interested in the question of liveness in technological objects. And like the anxieties generated by Turing's test, Toy Story explores both the fantasy and the danger of this liveness, questioning and then staging the rules and boundaries for what is alive and in what ways.

"Awwright, who's in charge here?!?" (Daffy in "Duck Amuck")

This fantasy of liveness, which so often fuels animated narratives, has a matching concern that also seems to motivate the cartoon text -- the question of authorship. As Donald Crafton has pointed out, early animators often framed their cartooning with a vision of themselves as creators of that animation, what he calls "self-figuration". More than just bravado, the hand of the animator was an organizing principle for cartoons, explaining this magical liveness and ascribing authorial intent. Of course, Crafton is describing a time when moving pictures were still a disconcerting novelty. But it was

more than just a means to reassure and impress audiences – the animator was "presenting himself in the role of life giver" (12). In a medium obsessed with the idea of liveness, it was necessarily also obsessed with authorship. Who created this liveness? What control does that author have over the liveness he conjures up?

The presence of the animator as author was most visible in the early silent films. "Gertie the Dinosaur" begins with Windsor McKay betting his friends that he can conjure up a dinosaur that talks -- the cartoon is his proof. McKay becomes trainer to Gertie, who sometimes performs according to his directives, while other times he rebels out of shyness, hunger, or a sense of play. Max Fleischer's Koko the Clown cartoons typically began with the animator at his drawing table sketching his creation, who develops right from the ink and takes off, running amok over the animator's room or downtown Manhattan. As animation and its audiences became more sophisticated, the conceit of the animator drawing his character grew stale, and the animator drifted out of the scene, returning occasionally as a disembodied hand and omnipotent pen.

Often in these cartoons the relationship between character and animator is a power struggle. The animated character challenges the notion that an author has power over his creation. In Chuck Jones' "Duck Amuck," Daffy is riled by the seemingly malevolent actions of the animator, who paints him in garish colors, sketches him into the wrong scenery, and leads him repeatedly into harm's way. The "animator" turns out to be Bugs Bunny, chuckling at the abuse he has doled out to his rival. It is a telling ending; Jones sees himself as the creator and tormentor of his creation, and as Bugs, rival to Daffy but always coming out on top in their competitions. Other Warner Brothers shorts show characters acknowledging the studio system that surrounds them, speaking to the camera and threatening to tear up their contracts. This concept is further developed in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," where the "toons" live on the other side of Los Angeles and work as hired performers in Hollywood, and in "Animaniacs," where the characters live on the studio lot after being banned from Warner Brothers cartoons for being too zany to control.

Even when the animator's hand does not appear, the question of authorship is nevertheless being worked through. Norman Klein points out that the cartoon protagonist often has some control over the laws by which the animated world works – whether it is Felix using his tail as a sword, or the Road Runner running into and through a painting of a tunnel. This control over the animated world -- especially over the transformation of explicitly graphical elements into purposeful, naturalistic objects -- suggests that these protagonists are stand-ins for the animator himself, drawing the world around him to suit his own purposes.

In each of these cartoons, and in others more implicitly, part of the exploration of liveness means searching for a resolution to it; the cartoon character can run amok, challenging what we presume about liveness, but it must eventually be contained by some organizing principle that re-establishes the boundaries of liveness. Most often that organizing principle has been the re-enactment of the notion of authorship: the lively cartoon is always, in the end, under the animator's control.

"You're not a space ranger... you're a toy!" (Woody to Buzz in "Toy Story")

The fantasy of liveness and the anxiety of authorship continue to prevail in modern animation, and are visible in Toy Story. Perhaps, as a new form of the medium arrives, these questions must be renewed and worked out again. The central conceit of the film provides an ideal vehicle for working out issues of liveness -- when out of sight of their human owners, toys are alive; they have human consciousness and free will, but recognize themselves as toys and consider themselves in the service of the children that play with them. But, here notions of authorship are a bit more complicated. If these toys are alive, then who gave them life? What is the source of their animation? There is no actual animator visible, and no stand-in character meant to represent the animator -- no Geppetto, no Sorcerer, no Sorcerer's apprentice. The film never explains how these toys became alive; it presumes that they always have been. Toy Story works out two new candidates for authorship -- children, through their imagination and play, and consumer culture, through its promotion and display.

The film begins with Andy, the child who owns the toys, playing with Woody, a pull-string cowboy and his current favorite. Woody is limp as Andy puts him through a scene of cowboy sheriff and evil bank robber, imaginatively complicating the storyline by incorporating his dinosaurs and other toy characters. It is Andy's imagination that brings Woody to life. But it is not until Andy puts Woody aside and leaves that we are allowed to indulge the fantasy of liveness the film promises us -- as Woody raises his head, checks if the coast is clear, calls out the other toys, and takes his place as the de facto leader of this toy community.

Even though their liveness can only appear when children are gone, it is the absent child that "animates" these toys and their community. Woody is the leader because he is Andy's favorite; his status is ensured by the "brand" on his foot -- Andy's name scrawled in permanent marker. The toys understand that their role in life is to be Andy's toys. Their anxieties about being displaced, discarded or lost are all fueled by the possibility that they will lose meaning, if they slip away from Andy. It is the child, and his imagination, that animates these characters, even though Andy can never experience them as such.

This community is disrupted when Andy receives a new toy for his birthday -- Buzz Lightyear, a space explorer action hero with laser lights, pop-out wings, and kung-fu action moves. To their surprise, he actually believes that he is "the" Buzz Lightyear, that he is not only human, but that he has been sent to this planet to save the galaxy from total annihilation. He experiences himself as alive but not as a toy -- he has confused the fantasy for the reality. Buzz jeopardizes the precarious balance between man and plaything that is protected by the toys every time they conceal their liveness from humans.

Buzz's sense of himself as a "real" person is a liveness constructed by the consumer culture that created him. Buzz spouts information about his origins and his mission that come directly off the box he came in. He manages to explain away all the clues that might prove him wrong: his radio transmission to "Star Command" fails because of the atmosphere; Woody's claims that he is a toy are the ravings of an envious lunatic; the "box" he arrived in is a spaceship -- indeed, it is designed as such -- damaged on impact. His consumer-generated fantasies are self-justifying. Here liveness is the product of a consumer culture eager to make its products seem alive, to seem as if

meaning erupts naturally from within them -- and does so by surrounding the product with narratives, backstories, and fancy features that dazzle the eye.

"...a record of consumer rituals..." (Norman Klein, p. 1)

It is curious that Toy Story explores the nature of consumer goods, being such an ideal consumer good itself. On the surface, Toy Story is a consumerist hallucination: shiny and glittering, made from the newest techniques in the newest style, it's a ninety-minute advertisement for the products that arrived in stores alongside it. It is the perfect ad, providing a compelling and uplifting narrative, multiple characters, and playful concepts to support the merchandise. Toy Story doesn't just provide a narrative that will sell toy likenesses of its characters, it sells the characters themselves -- urging children to indulge the very ambiguity between toy and real that plagues Buzz. It is also a vivid sales pitch for toys in general, even promoting the potential resurrection of older, forgotten toys. And, with technology developed by Pixar, it works from a digital storehouse of characters, settings, and objects that can be saved and recycled easily for CD-ROMs, animated storybooks, and sequels. Disney couldn't have been happier.

There is a deep structural link between animation and consumerism that is being negotiated here, a link that has organized animation since its modern inception. Animation has developed as a medium in the context of modern, industrial, consumer capitalism -- in a culture organized by goods and advertising, attentive to the logics of display and desire, skilled at making copies that challenge their originals. At the turn of the century, when pioneer animators were promising colleagues that they could make drawings dance, America and Europe were experiencing dramatic changes in their industrial economies, including the increased availability of leisure activities to the general public. The cinema and the amusement park joined the nickelodeon and the dancehall. Within this new context animation found its voice, as what Klein calls "folklore about the rituals of daily life, in our case about consumer life." (39)

But animation did not serve only as a commentary on a lifestyle increasingly organized around consumer activity; it was a consumer good itself. As a film short, it celebrated and enhanced the pleasure of the film experience, but it also quickly found its way into the language of advertising, first as advertisements for the theaters themselves but soon selling other durable goods. And as early as 1929, when Walt Disney found his vision of animation's potential curtailed by its limited profitability, he licensed the image of Mickey Mouse and initiated animation's commercial lifeblood, the marketing of animated characters.

Modern animation matured as consumer culture found new and more effective ways to define childhood as a consumer category, recontextualizing within market imperatives a category seen before as physiological, social, and especially moral (and therefore not commercial). As the medium and its audience found each other, producers found more intricate ways to link the pleasure of the cartoon to the desire to buy -- providing the backstories to flesh out, to "enliven," to animate, an unending array of consumer goods. Computer animation arrives, not as some unprecedented new invention, but as one element in an array that includes video games and consumer graphics, not to mention military surveillance and simulation. Its connection to

consumer culture has been thoroughly constructed since its inception, certainly before its appearance as a popular entertainment technology.

Animation and consumer culture have worked together, with animation tending to be in the service of commercial imperatives -- but not always in perfect allegiance to it. Like Koko spilling from Fleischer's pen but eluding his directives, consumer culture has always been animation's animator -- giving it life and organizing its purpose, but never able to quite contain its exuberant liveness.

This synergy should not come as a surprise, since animation and consumer culture labor under the same desires. The fantasy of liveness that animation so regularly explore(s) is a fantasy shared by the logic of consumption. In advertisements, we are often asked to pretend that products have a life of their own, characters speak to us, or consumer goods have a kind of aura about them. In fact, many commercials use animation to render the inanimate animate. Consumer culture provides, or hopes to convince us of, a liveness we might experience in the world around us. And on the surface, Toy Story seems a willing and quite able participant in this culture, bringing this fantasy of liveness to life in rich color and dazzling style.

"Not a flying toy." (Buzz Lightyear commercial in "Toy Story")

But a closer look at the intricate narrative of Toy Story suggests that things are not so pristine. With Toy Story's need to grapple with issues of liveness and authorship, it cannot serve the consumerist fantasy that it appears to indulge. The fact that these toys cannot be alive in front of children suggests that the consumerist fantasy will not be taken to its logical extreme. But the most striking scene of this film's surprising rejection of the consumerist fantasy is the moment when Buzz Lightyear realizes that he is only a toy.

[-+- show clip -+-]

While animation has traditionally explored the idea of liveness, it has not indulged that fantasy innocently. Cartoon characters, once brought to life, have been let loose from the control of their animators or circumstances, and the narrative has imagined the consequences, good and bad, of this untamed and unexpected liveness. Buzz's realization is a moment of profound existential crisis for the little toy -- a crisis of selfhood, a crisis of liveness, induced by the very animating force that gave him these mistaken illusions.

As the commercial begins, and a child's voice responds to the calls from Star Command as him, Buzz begins to realize that he is peripheral to the meaningful exchange between consumer culture and children that is being orchestrated. It becomes increasingly clear that his liveness is really only the liveness of the child's play and of the consumer culture catering to it, embodied in an otherwise lifeless action figure. His liveness is not his own.

The voice-over narration proclaims, "the world's greatest superhero is now the world's greatest toy!" With this he realizes that he is a simulation, a copy -- apparently of the world's greatest superhero, which we must also presume is a fictional construct -- but most importantly a copy among many copies, as the haunting image of the toy

store spills out before him, aisles lined with thousands of Buzz figures in identical spaceship boxes.

The consumer culture that made him admits that they made millions like him, that his liveness, his sense that he is unique and meaningful, was a useful fiction. Buzz instinctively reaches for his radio only to find the inscription "made in Taiwan." The imprint signals that he was "made" -- not a creature of his own liveness but a mere product. In this moment authorship is re-instated; his liveness is contained by the organizational structure of consumer culture that conjured up the fictional superhero, produced the hero's likeness as an easily-reproducible action figure, and generated the meanings that would travel with him with every purchase.

The commercial ends with the warning "Not a Flying Toy." Buzz's destruction is complete, as the feature he used to mark his liveness, the feature that he used to distinguish himself from the rest of the toys, proves also to be a consumer fantasy conjured up by his makers.

"Too bad... this would have made a great commercial" (Pres. of Globotech Industries, in "Small Soldiers")

Toy Story ends with Buzz and Woody racing back to the moving truck, winding through the unexpectedly treacherous streets of modern suburbia, back to the domestic tranquility of Andy's bedroom. One way to interpret the film's conclusion is that the issue of liveness is resolved through a return to the child. Buzz is able to reconcile himself to his limited liveness, and can accept the life the other toys already knew, as Andy's toys. His new outlook includes a reconciliation with Woody, both of whom learn to put teamwork and companionship above competition and jealousy. The liveness that is produced by the imagination of the child seems to be enough for them, and the film seems to be handing the power of authorship back to the child. Ideally, it is the fantasies of the child, in play and in spirit, that endows toys with meaning.

But the commercial proves who is really the author, and how consumer culture "animates" its products -- but must retain control over them by defending the tailor-made fantasies it produces. This sequence destabilizes the suggested authorship of the child and, I believe, exposes the real power of authorship at work here. The anxiety of the toys, and of the film, is that consumer culture is the real provider of liveness, the "animator" -- creating narratives out of thin air and liveness out of plastic and fabric, orchestrating the rules of the world we live in. And its power is precisely in the way it obscures its own authorship, not only creating fantasies where products are alive (in its commercials), but also fantasies where the child is positioned as the author of that liveness (in texts like Toy Story). The film, like an animated character itself, plumbs the good and bad implications of this authorship at work and exposes the way it exerts its control from its position at the drawing table, culturally powerful precisely because it is invisible and inaccessible. And by having Buzz, the empathetic hero of the film, experience the pain of this truth inflicted on his very identity, the film makes this interpretation available to the children watching. Their liveness is put into question when they see that their fantasies are also possibly the product of a consumer culture too quick to reassure them that they are the authors of their own play.

"...designed for reproducibility." (Benjamin, p. 224)

As I mentioned, it is only slightly ironic that Pixar was able to make this film only with the distribution power of Disney behind it. Perhaps it is no surprise at all; computer animation needed to be introduced to the nexus of entertainment and commerce at which animation resides, and there is no one better to make that introduction than Disney. In some ways, this parable of liveness and authorship is a fitting tale to be told by Pixar, through computer animation. Computer animation as a form is dancing carefully among the same meanings as Buzz is – desperately in search of a lively identity within a consumer culture that animates with its fantasies but disavows its authorship.

Another way to look at this is to return to Benjamin. Animation, since its modern inception, has negotiated being an art form produced in the age of mechanical reproduction. As Benjamin puts it, once art becomes mechanically reproducible, not only does it lose its "aura," it starts to be produced with an eye towards being easily reproducible. At the same time, with the loss of aura there is a subsequent disintegration of authorship. How can the "author" exert control over the work if a million copies can be made with the touch of a button? Who is the author in this context? The artist? The machine? The producer? The culture that surrounds it? Buzz Lightyear is reeling from these questions, believing in his aura until the commercial reveals his own reproducibility. Toy Story is working through these same issues, looking for the remnants of authorship in a medium that has always been the product of a culture rather than an artist. The appearance of McKay and Fleischer in those early cartoons may have been an attempt to lend the aura of an artist to the product, but it was futile at best. And now Pixar, using a technology dramatically more efficient at reproducing the work of art, must grapple with these same questions. Animation, in the face of a consumer culture eager to indulge the same fantasy of liveness it performs so skillfully, must grapple with the way consumer culture exerts its authorship over fantasies that the child may believe are his own. But, as Toy Story indicates, though animation and commercial interests are so often intertwined, the fascinations of animation do not necessarily fit neatly with the fantasies of consumer culture.

Epilogue

A last thought before I go. My analysis of this film, with its suggestion that the authorial position is occupied partially by the child and partially by the promotional mechanisms of consumer culture, seems to imply that the animator, so visible in early hand-drawn animation, has somehow vanished. But clearly the film did not make itself. Where is the animator? And why is his role overwhelmed by the imposed authorship of child audience and commercial producers? We might argue that the commercial producers and the animators are one and the same, but the complexity of this narrative suggests otherwise.

Notions of who is the "animator" are complicated by the nature of computer animation. The actual labor on a big-budget film such as Toy Story tends to be performed by committee, such that there is no single person who "draws" the film. When the movie was released, journalists wanted to elevate Lasseter to author, and they did to a certain extent. In some sense the computer is the animator, both

technically and by all appearances. When coverage of this film was not positioning Lasseter as author, it was enamored with the technology and what it could do. Again, a machine comes alive, seeming to make art on its own.

But there are places where the animator does inject himself, or themselves, in this film. The style is one obvious place to point to; there is quite an emphasis on movement in *Toy Story*, movement of characters and of our "point-of-view", movement that in its fluidity stands as an emblem of the achievements of the CGI technology. Some of those swooping shots of Buzz flying had a tint of bravado, the faint whiff of, if not authorship, then showmanship. More obviously were some sly nudges slipped in as inside jokes for those paying enough attention. In an early scene, Andy carries Woody past a landscape painting of a Western horizon -- the painting, in the boy's hallway, looks sketchy and amateur, like the drawing of a child, behind the gleaming precision of the crisply animated Woody. The scene could be read as a subtle jab at hand-drawn animation. But the most obvious is the real estate sign outside Andy's house, which reads "Virtual Realty" -- an element completely unnecessary except to announce the animators' awareness of the medium in which they work, including all the hype and promises that surround it.

Still, these moments are few and far between. It may be pleasing to the attentive viewer to see such idiosyncratic, such human, such lively elements, amidst this carefully constructed animated world. But as an organizing principle, a force of authorship to counter the threat of uncontained liveness, the animators are simply dwarfed by the mechanisms of consumer culture and the imagination of children -- or perhaps they find these notions of authorship most troubling, compelling, or satisfying.