Rejecting the Stereotypes Built into Material Culture: Disability in Toy Story

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By presenting the imagined lives of the toys alongside traditional depictions of child-toy relationships, Pixar’s Toy Story films offer an in-depth examination of how material culture affects developing children. They show how cultural rhetoric and the material form and function of toys themselves can produce societal anxieties and reinscribe stereotypes. Critical essays on the films have looked at the ways the toys comment on gender. However, no one thus far has written about how disability, omnipresent throughout the three films, interacts with the material culture in the Toy Story franchise. Though my analysis will largely focus on the first, I will examine all three films both individually and as a collective unit. The first Toy Story (1994), which scrutinizes perceptions of disability in the most depth, utilizes the horror genre to critique assumptions about monstrosity and combat the learned anxiety about those who are different. Toy Story 2 (1999) shows how adults create and sustain an ideology about the perfect body, which they pass on to their children through their rhetoric about toys. Toy Story 3 (2010), in turn, offers the comprehensive message that while material culture may have stereotypes sewn into its seams, young children still possess the potential to thwart those negative assumptions. I will argue that the franchise uses Woody’s experiences with broken toys (disabled in the toy world) to subvert the stereotypes built into society through
material culture and to suggest that children are the ones who have the potential to break down demeaning cultural assumptions about the disabled.

*Toy Story* is not the first story to bring toys to life. In Lois Kuznet’s 1994 book, written while *Toy Story* was in production, she writes extensively about the previous century of literary representations of toys, where she identifies a number of revealing trends. Though toys tend to come alive in fantastical narratives that minimize any appearance of reality, the mimetic value of these stories exists in what the toys come to represent. Kunzets writes that the living toys symbolize “not only human hopes, needs, and desires but human anxieties and terrors as well” (p. 1). For Kuznets, there are two key embodiments. First, she notes:

Toys, when they are shown as inanimate objects developing into live beings, embody human anxiety about what it means to be ‘real’ – an independent subject or self rather than an object or other submitting to the gaze of more powerfully real and potentially rejecting live beings. (p. 2)

Toys, upon coming to life, embody the anxiety about what it means to be “real” and autonomous. Second, toys also can “embody all the temptations and responsibilities of power,” she adds, “[suggesting] the relatively powerless relationship of human beings to known or unseen forces: their dreadful vulnerability” (p. 2). They reveal the anxieties felt as a result of human powerlessness. Bringing toys to life in literature, or in film, creates a reflexive platform for toys to reveal the ideology and fears of the society that plays with them.

The original *Toy Story* interacts with both of those theoretical embodiments, demonstrating a self-awareness of the film’s relation to toy theory by commenting on both reality and power. The societal anxiety of not feeling “real” anchors much of the film, as Buzz Lightyear must accept the limits of his existence as a toy (Lasseter, 1994). What I want to focus on, however, is the other embodiment, the one in which the artistic representations reveal human anxieties through the power dynamics of the toy-child and toy-toy relationships. The obvious anxiety on display comes in the form of Woody’s jealousy of the shiny, new Buzz Lightyear as a rival for toy
owner Andy’s attention. The jealousy that precludes their teamwork must make way for unity before they can achieve their final goal. In that arc rests the film’s primary power struggle, that of Woody with his peers. However, an equally present power struggle that also reveals troubling human anxieties happens next door, at Sid’s house. There, Sid tyrannically reigns over his toys, regularly maiming and destroying them and causing them to be broken, or, disabled. The first scene inside the house involves Sid stealing his sister’s doll and removing the head, after telling her in a sinister tone, “She’s sick. I need to take her for an operation” (Lasseter, 1994). He asserts his power by claiming control over the disabled toy, partaking in the medicalization of disability by demanding she be operated on for his pleasure.

Later in her book, in a chapter about dolls, Kuznets explains that the doll, more so than any other toy, is “the most capable of arousing a child’s violent longing or loathing” (p. 95). She cites work done by Levin and Wardwell in the 1970’s that confirms the tendency of children to become violent with their dolls. Her hypothesis is that the power to abuse becomes irresistible. Certain children like Sid cannot resist utilizing power over a helpless toy. Sid’s perverse thrill of harming toys expose the temptations associated with power. By giving the toys life, and telling their story, the film allows viewers to examine the life of the disabled toys that he leaves behind, mauled and neglected. Moreover, giving those toys life ironically shows the perceived powerlessness and lifelessness of disabled people as a result of that oppressive behavior. Stories involving dolls coming to life have tended to use a revenge motif, with the abused toy seeking revenge on their abuser, paralleling the common motif of the disabled seeking revenge. They want to regain the power taken away from them. Toy Story has its disabled toys fight back against oppression, but does so in a more productive fashion than in many previous stories by having its toys fight for more than just revenge.

Through his appalling actions, Sid unknowingly creates a community of disabled toys. Viewers of the film see this community through the eyes of Woody, a character who like many in the real world seems afraid of those who are different than him. At the
first appearance of the many toys which have been physically broken and disabled by Sid, Woody says to Buzz, “we are going to die” (Lasseter, 1994). Buzz, who still believes he is a space ranger at this point, adds, “they’re cannibals” (Lasster, 1994). As the characters shift into the light, their stunted, mechanical movements evoke tropes of freakery. They do not walk, but instead, crawl, slither and hop. Physically too, they resemble the traditional depiction of freaks, with limbs and heads in usual places, on the wrong bodies even. One toy has the head of a baby, enfreaked further by unsightly hair and a black eye, with the body of a spider. Woody becomes so scared by the mere appearance of disabled toys that he starts shaking uncontrollably. Although he has reason to be traumatized by what he has just seen Sid do to the doll, his actions reveal an immediate prejudice against the disabled toys. The assumptions that these toys are conspirators in the maiming rather than the victims seem entirely driven by stereotypes against those with mechanical movements and non-normative bodies. Additionally, Woody’s fear of cannibalism – “they’re going to eat us” – reveals a deeper anxiety about their potential to harm him (Lasseter, 1994). He is not merely uncomfortable with their disability, but also afraid that their disability signifies impending bodily harm for himself.

The film further emphasizes the freakery of the disabled toys by utilizing tropes from the horror film genre. Whenever the toys appear, they slowly come out of cracks and corners of the scene to encircle Woody and Buzz. The collective movement, as if in formation, evokes images of possessed creatures, especially with the non-normative movement qualities. Music from the horror genre with many minor, dissonant chords couples the eerie movement. Given that the disabled toys cannot speak, this music serves as the only audible representation of their character. When the toys later surround Buzz, after he himself has been dismembered by Sid, losing an arm, a wind chime noise becomes audible. This sound, meant again to invoke the horror genre, crescendos along with the music as Woody tries to break Buzz away from their grasp, shouting, “go away you disgusting freaks! Back you cannibals! He is still alive and you’re not going to get him, you monsters” (Lasseter, 1994). The
horror genre’s tendency to enfrack non-normative bodies causes viewers, much like Woody, to make assumptions about these toys’ capacity to harm. If the anxieties about the character of the disabled toys were not clear before, the terms Woody uses in this moment are unavoidably charged with prejudice.

Monsters have long been associated with disability, especially in the horror genre, where the disabled characters have tended to become the monsters. *The Encyclopedia of Disability* (2006) explains that two ideas lie at the center of the understanding of monsters: “spectacle and threat” (Park, p. 1114). Within that threat once rested a deeper fear of divine wrath. Recently, however, monsters “are now interpreted in terms of pathology, dependent on the doctor’s power to both harm and heal” (p. 116). These monsters, whose doctor would be Sid, become monstrous as a result of the doctor’s overuse of his power. They pose a threat despite their lack of agency, and create fear in their otherness and in their capacity to harm. Paul Longmore (2003) adds that, “The depiction of the disabled person as ‘monster’ and the criminal characterization both express to varying degrees the notion that disability involves the loss of an essential part of one’s humanity” (p. 135). The horror genre, through its use of the disabled characters as monsters, has propagated a notion that a disabled life is not one worth living. Woody, who as the central living toy embodies the anxieties of society, demonstrates the pervading fear of the disabled in his use of the term “monster,” seemingly having been indoctrinated by the material culture that has taught him, as it has taught many of the viewers of the film, that disabled equals monstrous.

However, after Woody’s anxieties have been revealed, the film repackages the horror genre to demonstrate the invalidity of those stereotypes. Ian Olney (2006) is one of the first to allow horror to be subversive, believing “horror might serve as a site of resistance to the ideological status quo” (p. 295). He develops an approach where viewers of horror can “resist or recast the ‘dominant’ or intended meaning of these texts” (p. 295). A film can utilize the horror tropes to allow a viewer to recognize the potential error of the assumed monstrosity of the disabled, revenge-seeking characters. “Although
it has often been a critically ignored or maligned genre, seen simply as the province of revolting bodies,” he writes, “horror has the capacity to become the home of bodies in revolt” (p. 302). When the film centers its point of view entirely through Woody, horror serves its typical purpose. But when *Toy Story* gives its disabled characters significant screen time, letting Woody have a chance to view them as social beings like any others, the genre fulfils its rare subversive role.

Woody’s realization that the disabled exist in a social community comes slowly. Even after he sees they have reattached Buzz’s arm, helping Buzz instead of harming him, he says to the space ranger, “But they’re cannibals. We saw them eat the other toys” (Lasseter, 1994). However, his incredulous response changes when he sees them also reattach the original head on the doll Sid had maimed earlier. At this point, the point of view changes away from the first person perspective common in horror films. A slow left to right pan, accompanied by softer music, reveals the disabled toys standing together in unison, this time in light rather than in shadows. This shift finally lets viewers see the bodies of the disabled toys as something other than freaks by decoupling their existence from the horror genre. Just as Woody understands his mistake and begins to apologize, the disabled toys run off as Sid returns. The child’s arrival to reclaim Buzz comes with the return of the chimes and horror music. But because by this time Sid’s horror has been dissociated from the toys, the return of the horror music affirms that Woody had wrongly assigned the horror genre to the disabled characters when it should have gone with Sid all along. Armed now with the understanding that the toys want to rescue Buzz, who has just been taken by Sid, Woody gives the characters names – “Pump Boy,” “Legs,” “Ducky” etc – and begins to see how the unique bodies of each toy can serve a useful purpose in saving Buzz.

In the subsequent saving of Buzz, the film echoes Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), an infamous film where the disabled performers in a travelling carnival revolt against the non-disabled and invert the power structures. The toys, with Woody as their leader, hide in the mud and sand around Sid’s yard, utilizing their place on the physical margins, where they know they will be invisible to Sid. Just
as Browning’s characters emerge from the mud to surround their oppressors, so too do the disabled toys. In the climactic scene, the mechanical, staggering movements of the toys that walk towards Sid serve a useful purpose. Where the nails driven through the heads of toy soldiers once signaled brokenness, here they induce fear. When Woody breaks the toy code to speak directly to Sid, he speaks in a “one of us” style designed to scare him. These toys seize the power that has been denied them. After Sid runs away, Woody turns to the toys and says, “Coming out of the ground? Nice touch. That was a stroke of genius” (Lasseter, 1994). Toy Story’s conscious reference of Freaks shows how the reclaiming of disability and freakery as a form of power terrifies someone like Sid who has previously not afforded the disabled toys respect. The trope of the revenge-seeking toys becoming violent towards their oppressor presents problems for disability studies, in part because it propagates unwanted ideas about the disabled being obsessed with the able-bodied. However, Toy Story has its disabled toys fight back in a largely nonviolent fashion, letting Sid go untouched once they achieve their goal of rescuing Buzz and finding safety. Woody, a non-disabled toy, universalizes the anger the toys feel about Sid, saying, “From now on, you must take good care of your toys. Because if you don’t, we’ll find out, Sid. We toys can see everything” (Lasseter, 1994). He highlights that all toys, disabled or not, have a stake in keeping each other safe. Not only does the first film demonstrate and combat stereotypes about disability, but it also emphasizes that fighting for disability rights should be an endeavor for everyone.

However, despite the positive messages about accepting the disability community to that point, Woody, and the film, abandon the disabled toys abruptly. After a brief celebration of their freedom, Woody and Buzz hear the moving truck next door. They run off, barely turning around to say, “We got to run. Thanks guys!” (Lasseter, 1994). The disabled toys do not appear again in the film’s final twenty minutes, leaving viewers to wonder about their eventual fate. Did Woody forget about them? That departure seems an obvious example of Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of narrative prosthesis (2013), in which a narrative arc about disability is used as the means
to reach the end of a completely different story. It begs the question whether the storyline about the disabled toys claiming their power and Woody learning to combat his own learned fear of being powerless and disabled is merely “an opportunist metaphorical device” to alleviate the jealousy between Woody and Buzz (Mitchell & Snyder, p. 222). Although one could argue there are two distinct plots in Toy Story, the one with Andy and the one with Sid, and that the disabled toys were present to the conclusion of their plot, ultimately the film leaves those characters without resolution. So while Woody affirms that the disabled toys should be treated just like other toys, and sees that each toy has a use, he does not go so far as to invite them into his gang. There remains a binary between the disabled and non-disabled toys.

Unlike the films that bookend it, Toy Story 2 does not involve Woody needing to accept disabled toys. Rather, he needs to accept his own future mortality, for which Woody’s ripped arm, a temporary disability, serves as a metaphor. In this storyline, the film examines the fear of deteriorating able-bodiedness. When Woody’s arm first rips, Andy’s mom reminds her child that, “toys don’t last forever” (Lasseter, 1999). Woody’s dream soon after, in which Andy no longer wants to play with him and drops him in a trash can, demonstrates his immediate fear of mortality after becoming disabled. When Al, who steals Woody from a yard sale, hires someone to fix Woody’s arm, the cleaner tells Al, “He’s for display only. If you handle him too much, he’s not going to last” (Lasseter, 1999). He wants Woody in perfect condition for his future in the museum. These instances speak to how material culture demands its objects in prime condition. A museum would not want to put a well-worn doll in its window, despite the object having become worn from its intended use. Instead, museums seek the toys as collector’s items, in perfect bodily form. Alan Ackerman (2005) writes that, “Woody’s value [to the museum] is not use-value but rather a mystical quality that is a reflection of the social conditions in which the commodities find themselves and which dictate their relations to each other” (p. 903). Al wants Woody to be a material “icon” rather than a toy (p. 907). However, that iconization can only happen if the toy looks
untouched. When Woody and other toys become “for display only,” they lose their purpose for existing, that of bringing joy to children through that use. They become mere props. Unknowingly this material culture outwardly affects disabled people, projecting a message that a body which appears touched or marked, or has lost its function, inherently has less value. This societal anxiety about losing able-bodiedness is one that assumes a life with disability is a life lost.

Inside the toy world, the Prospector shares the opinions of Al and his cleaner, believing toys are better off in boxes, and behind display cases. Through much of the movie, he attempts to brainwash Woody for his own benefit. “One more rip and Andy’s done with me. What do I do then?” asks Woody, who has bought into the rhetoric by the time his rescuers appear. “This is my only chance” (Lasseter, 1999). “To do what, Woody?” Buzz replies, “Watch kid’s from behind glass and never be loved again. Some life” (Lasseter, 1999). Buzz implores Woody to live actively rather than passively, even if disability might someday be in his future. He recognizes that the fear of losing physical ability and function later in life can preclude living in the present. That fear also devalues the life of someone who is disabled, as it suggests many would halt living a life of joy to ensure that they do not lose their pristine bodily form. In having Woody choose a shorter life of joy with Andy and his friends instead of a permanent life in a museum, the film posits that the perfectionist ideas in material culture strip humanity of its joys.

Moving beyond the world of toys, the perfectionists – especially ones who fear physical deterioration – miss out on living by spending so much time focused on keeping their body in perfect physical shape. Just as the Prospector cannot live when kept clean in his box, neither can a recluse human being who wraps him or herself in Styrofoam, afraid of the physical pain that could happen in the real world. The film critiques the non-disabled people for seeking permanence in their body, criticizing those unwilling to accept the inevitable turn towards disability at the end of life. Woody’s disability comes as a result of love – of his seams being worn out from years of use; and a well-lived life, the film suggests, involves love. The fear of becoming disabled at the end of a long life and losing bodily perfec-
tion should never inhibit someone from choosing the life of love. In having Woody save Jessie at the end, even with a tear in his arm, the film shows that disability does not equate death.

In the final film to date, *Toy Story 3*, Woody encounters a similar situation to the first movie, and seems to have learned from his earlier experiences with disability. Once again, he must escape a location ruled by a tyrant. A new character, Baby, whose body is marked and scratched, and who has one eye that does not work, starts on the side of the evil teddy bear Lotso at SunnySide, the day care where Woody and his gang are being held hostage. Where Lotso refers to the disabled doll as “trash waiting to be thrown away,” Woody instead appeals to the humanity within Baby to get the toy to turn sides at the crucial moment (Urkich, 2010). His recognition that a disabled toy can still have physical and emotional agency stands in stark contrast to the villain, who denies the disabled toy that legitimacy by calling Baby “trash.” Where in the original film Woody leaves behind the disabled toys who have helped him, in the third, the credits reveal Woody checking in on Baby and the toys at Sunnyside by sending letters. By the end of the three-story arc, Woody, and the filmmakers who fell into the trap of Narrative Prosthesis originally, have demonstrated a much greater appreciation for the disabled toys in their story.

Roland Barthes (1972) has theorized that “toys literally pre-figure the world of adult functions” (p. 53). He believes they constitute for the child “the alibi of a Nature” (53). His argument is that toys contain the ideology of the adult world in their construction and existence. With the research showing a child’s construction of the social world comes in part through their understanding of the messages communicated by their toys, therein lies the vital intersection of disability studies and material culture in the three *Toy Story* films. Beyond teaching children messages about loyalty and kindness, the films subtly comment on the ways material culture allows for the passing down of stereotypes about disability. They show that ableism is not born but taught - that the very ideas Woody learns to thwart are practically bred into the sinews of the dolls and toys by the culture that creates them.
The most straightforward example demonstrating the pervasive ablesism bred into material culture comes when the evil toys switch Buzz to demo-mode at Sunnyside in the third film. When the switch is flipped, he loses his learned experiences as he reverts back to his just-out-of-the-box state. With no knowledge but that which has been programmed into him by his creators, the toy is as purely indoctrinated by material culture as possible. Yet untouched by human experience, his worldview can come from nowhere but the creators of the toy. Notably, one of the first phrases he uses after this transformation expresses a concerning sentiment. He says, “prisoners disabled” once he has locked up the toys (Urkich, 2010). The choice of words points to a manufacturer-based indoctrination that being disabled is unwanted and inherently bad. He assumes those incarcerated should be associated with disability. The film shows that in material culture, albeism has been set as the default.

As the humans in the film do not know the toys are living, their discussion surrounding the toys mimics that of human beings in the real world. Though the adults play a minimal part in the stories, their limited remarks still paint a vivid picture of how parents too can subtly affect their child’s developing ideology even if they encourage prosocial play. In Toy Story 2, one of the children at the yard sale finds Woody and becomes extremely excited about the toy despite a small rip on the arm. However, her mother tells her daughter, “Oh honey. You don’t want that. It’s broken,” taking Woody out of her daughter’s hands and dropping him on the table (Lasseter, 1999). Though the child would seemingly have treasured Woody, she learns instead not to desire material goods with minor blemishes. Small moments like this one with unnamed characters show how parents can unknowingly instill anti-disability ideology in their children just as material culture can.

Those who can avoid ableism and other societally-produced stereotypes seem to be the children who are the most imaginative; those who have not yet learned to accept the anxieties bred into the material culture. They do not accept their material toys at face value, and instead give them life, although not lives based on the pre-attached values. Bonnie, the child who eventually ends up inheriting
all of Andy’s toys, demonstrates extraordinary imagination in her brief time on screen. She gives the characters roles in her play not dependent on the toys’ obvious contexts. A hedgehog, a dinosaur and a cowboy seamlessly fit together somehow. This imagination lets her not dwell on Woody missing his hat – she still recognizes him as a cowboy. Even there, she demonstrates an understanding that someone must not be fully “real” or “whole” to be both human and worthy of care. Nor does she accept the societal anxiety about the disabled. Chuckles, a clown, also tells Woody that when he was broken at Sunnyside, Bonnie still took him home to play with and welcomed him as a legitimate, new toy. She appreciates the toys like Chuckles for being toys, no matter their form or functioning. Largely because of her kindness for everyone, the toys, even Woody, choose to be Bonnie’s toys at the end.

Playing with toys creates a space for children like Bonnie to build their model for the social world apart from the stereotypes. Though the toys they are given, and the rhetoric adults use to discuss the toys, begin to indoctrinate the children with those societal assumptions and anxieties, the children can still resist accepting the harmful anxieties and stereotypes built into society. The toys in the film that are given a human quality learn from their children, as seen by the development in the attitudes and emotions Woody goes through over the course of the films. Though affected by the learned stereotypes, shown by the use of the horror genre in the first film, and affected by the material appearance of the toys around them in the second, the toys learn by the third to value someone’s character more than this instilled culture of ableism. They come to resist the indoctrinated fears. Just as the toys can learn from the how children like Andy and Bonnie act, so too can the young viewers of the film learn from Woody and Buzz. In exploring these toy-child relationships, the films ask the essential questions about reality and power, the two concepts embodied by toys throughout literary history. They offer questions about disability: why do these anxieties about disability exist and why do many consider a disabled life anything less than “real?” In their clever positioning between toy theory and material culture, the Toy Story films create a platform where children
can begin to learn that the answers to those questions begin with accepting disability as a part of the complete human experience.

References


Author Bio

Ethan Faust graduated from Davidson College with a degree in English in May of 2017. Hailing from Wellesley, Massachusetts, Ethan has written critically about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Incredibles, and other Disney and Pixar films, following a lifelong interest in the popular motion pictures. He also has written extensively on sports, covering the NCAA Tournament for The Davidsonian & the Carolina Panthers for Black and Blue Review in recent years.