

TOYING WITH THE POSTMODERN 'TO INFINITY AND BEYOND'

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As part of the ongoing struggle with the peculiar logic of the 'post-' this essay aims to defend Lyotard's philosophical and aesthetic notion of the postmodern against mainly sociological understandings of postmodernism and late or postmodernity. It argues that a psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of major forms of contemporary cultural representations, as for example Disney/Pixar's *Toy Story* (I and II), constitutes a more effective approach to understanding the postmodern, namely as a symptom of the repressed which prevents 'traumatic' modernity from coming into its 'own'. The paradoxical logic of modernity's 'To Infinity and Beyond' is constantly being undermined by an undialectisable and unrepresentable otherness which compels it to repeat itself in increasingly parodic forms. The *Toy Story* series can be read as symptomatic of this ongoing process that generates ('Baudrillardian') apocalyptic visions of 'hyperreality'. The development from *Toy Story I*, which concentrates on the problem of subjectivity in typical Hollywood terms of moral self-realisation and freedom, to *Toy Story II*, which is more concerned with 'posthumanist' threats, posed by advanced techno-science and virtualization, also mirrors the development from 'Theory' to 'Post-Theory'. The way in which 'Post-theory' is often characterized, however, is that it simply dismisses 'earlier' issues raised in relation to (anti-humanist) subjectivity, ideology and power and instead tries to move 'beyond' these problems seemingly too much entangled in textuality and representation. Instead it supposedly favours 'posthumanist' forms of 'post-subjectivity' that accelerate the breakdown of the remaining boundaries between human and machine, culture and technology, reality and virtuality. This essay thus proposes a 'double' reading – of filmic texts 'through' theory, and theory through films – with a particular focus on the question of childhood: the childhood in, of and as (post-)theory.

The Discourse of Childhood

Let us call it *infantia*, that which is unsayable. Childhood not understood as a period in life and as something that passes. It haunts language [*le discours*], which never ceases to keep childhood at a distance; it is its separation. But through this separation language obstinately persists in constituting childhood as lost. Thus, unknowingly, it keeps accommodating it. Childhood is its remainder. If childhood remains in its place [*demeure chez elle*], it is not despite but because it lives within the adult [*elle loge chez l'adulte*]. (Lyotard: 1991a: 9; my translation)

Children are supposed to live in a world of their own, which is clearly confined and marked out as the space and time for play, and in which toys are the main objects and controlling devices of socialisation. This miniature world, at once infinitely remote and utterly inseparable from the 'real' and 'serious' world of adults, in which play is a mere pastime and toys are mere consumables, has always served as a kind of significant 'other' space and time which, through certain discursive practices, exists only to guarantee the precarious order of social organization as a whole.

Childhood is a fairly recent invention, as Chris Jenks's study points out (Jenks 1996; see also Ariès 1973). Given the double significance of the child as the guarantor of society's future and the bearer of social projections of the past, the ubiquity of power relations within the social discourses that create 'childhood' as their object and propagate their knowledge about it through social institutions like the family, the school, the media (which all contribute to the fundamentally 'educational' condition of the child) is not surprising. Neither is the fact, that childhood, like those other discourses of containment, analysed by Foucault (madness, sexuality and surveillance), is an invention of the period we usually call 'modernity', with its double foundation in enlightenment and capitalism. Furthermore, a discourse always invents ways of mastering an otherwise uncontrollable 'other' which nevertheless, as the Archimedean point or the transcendental signified of this discourse – which is at once located inside and outside the discourse while policing its boundaries – continues to haunt every 'system' of signification constructed around it. Discourse, as defined by Derrida, is "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (Derrida 1978: 280). It is this continual process of (re)capturing and transforming of a 'strange' other within a system of

differences as a radically different and absent 'object' that extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.

Jenks's historical analysis of childhood has two main objectives: it analyses the conceptual processes that "serve to patrol the boundaries marked out around childhood as a social status" (Jenks 1996: 12), with their material effects for 'real' children; and it puts forward the claim that the modern discourse of childhood is being or already has been transformed within a 'postmodern' society, a process Jenks calls "the strange death of childhood" (Jenks 1996: 116-139; in a critical echo of Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* 1985). While modernity's main understanding of childhood was that of "futuraity" or promise, the child, in postmodernity, is characterised by a "new liminality", and is predominantly seen with "nostalgia" (Jenks 1996: 98-99). As the modern nuclear family with its "ideology of care" breaks up and stops being the main instrument of childhood control, this postmodern liminality emphasises the inherently contradictory nature of the child. Jenks uses the Nietzschean categories of the Dionysian and the Apollinian to refer to the two fundamentally opposed notions of the child – the child either as subject to an initial corruption of evil which has to be contained through socialisation, or the child as the innocent and primitive other (in analogy with Rousseau's 'noble savage') who is gradually compromised by social experience.¹

Both notions, however, merely serve as reassuring reflections of adulthood. Like so many other modern narratives of legitimisation, childhood discourse as a central element within ideologies of progress, freedom and emancipation in (late- or) postmodernity is subjected to increased 'incredulity' and gradual delegitimation, a process which contributes to a general perception of 'loss of control' and disorientation. The apparent modern triumph of finitude over infinity gives way to a "constant, reflexive re-presentation of the self" (Jenks 1996: 104). The loss of a coherent sense of progressive time, human control and the idea of organic historical (re)generation, according to Jenks, has led to a disenchantment in the face of a now global and selfsufficient, autonomous process of acceleration: "Rather than a life spent in pursuit of utopias the late-modern condition is one of the avoidance, or minimization, of dystopias" (105). As a result of this disenchantment, the "postmodern" child, within its own attributed and

¹ For the relation between childhood and primitivism and colonialism see Wallace (1995).

socially staked-out educational realm, and as a cultural and political target, ironically, has gained rather than lost in importance:

Late-modern society has re-adopted the child. The child in the setting of what are now conceptualized as post-modern cultural configurations, has become the site or the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and the social bond. The child is now envisioned as a form of 'nostalgia', a longing for times past, not as 'futuraity'. (Jenks 1996: 106-7)

This nostalgia, which is often taken to be one of the main ways of theoretically understanding the postmodern today, is a sign for the current attempt to resolve the inevitably conflictual creation of cultural meaning, self-representation and regeneration. Jenks's far-reaching conclusion is that: "What is being so jealously preserved through the new, 'nostalgic' vision of the child is the meta-narrative of society itself" (109).²

Postmodern Play

Thus, toying with the postmodern is serious. This statement implies taking the either widely acclaimed or condemned playfulness of theoretical postmodernism literally. In any theoretically and culturally informed analysis, therefore, the postmodern, in the Lyotardian sense, should be clearly differentiated from the theoretical discourse on postmodernism, on the one hand, and from the sociological discourse of postmodernity (or late-modernity), on the other. Instead, Lyotard, in his 'didactic' of the postmodern (explained to children) sees an essential connection between theory (philosophy, thought, etc.) and 'returning to childhood', in the form of a necessary "renewing ties with the season of childhood, the season of the mind's possibilities" (Lyotard 1998: blurb). For Lyotard, and maybe for theory in general, the rather biblical concept of childhood as the state of possibility, as the absence of prejudice or preconception, idealism and faith, plays an important role in the 'generation game' of breaking out of a tradition and breaking away from modernity.

Postmodernist thought historically situates itself after or in (temporal and logical) contradiction to certain presupposed

² The resulting effect of "child panic", according to Jo-Ann Wallace, mediates larger social anxieties (Wallace 1995: 288). One reason for the 'aporia' of childhood, as nostalgic 'ideal' and as irretrievably lost, excluded 'other', is of course that childhood necessarily takes place 'outside' or 'prior to' (adult) language (see Wallace: 296).

modern(ist) positions. These positions themselves may be of pro-modern, anti-modern, ultra-modern, hyper-modern, etc., representation in relation to the modern and modernity (and various more or less critical twentieth-century modernisms). The differentiation between postmodernity and postmodernism is therefore judged according to the position one assumes in relation to all three: the modern, modernity and modernism. Postmodernism as historical manifestation cannot be (entirely) separated either from modernity or modernism. The postmodern as a tendency (equivalent to 'modern'), on the other hand, refers to a transhistorical attitude (as defined against the modern which is also transhistorical); the postmodern in the sense of belonging to an epoch, or historical period called 'postmodernity' (used as a terminological variable for a 'fourth age' after Antiquity, the Middle Ages and modernity), however, would imply an *epokhè*, a clear caesura that marks the end of modernity and a conscious beginning of something other than what the modern stands for (i.e. an *Epochenbewusstsein*; see Welsch 1991: *passim*).

Modernity, however, is not just any epoch that may end at will, after its complete conceptualisation and full historical realisation. The project of modernity is, according to its own definition, interminable (or can only be 'terminated' at the cost of its apocalyptic (self-)eradication). Per definition, modernity is *ad infinitum*. The modern always appropriates and incorporates the new (to infinity, and beyond), because anything that is perceived as new is assimilated according to the category of the modern (even though it may want to call itself 'postmodern'). Strictly speaking, the term 'postmodern' is thus an oxymoron: it is self-contradictory in that it cannot possibly hold what it promises. The premodifier 'post-' testifies to this circularity in the ways it qualifies modernism, modern and modernity by introducing nontinear and acausal temporal and spatial relations into the performance of the modern. In order to avoid being appropriated by the modern dialectic of the 'same' (i.e. the 'new' which can only be experienced after the event and therefore never as new in a radical sense), postmodernity, understood as the arrival of the radically 'new' or the 'Event' (i.e. that which would be even too modern to be appropriatable by and reducible to the modern) must remain an alterity or absence that exists only in the uncertainty of an uncanny implication.

It is not surprising therefore that the 'postmodern' should be linked to the sentiment of living somehow after the end, after surviving the worst, in postapocalyptic limbo or *survivance* (see

Derrida 1986: 117-218 and 1979: 75-176). This time of survival, or mean-time [*Zwischenzeit*], as Peter Sloterdijk calls it, could be described as the time spent waiting for the Event, for the birth of (the other) History (“*Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Geist des Aufschubs*” – the birth of history from the spirit of deferral; see Sloterdijk 1989: 277). Postmodernism is therefore mainly concerned with alterity in history, with an other history, or an other (of) time.

The temporal undecidability of strictly speaking coming neither before nor after the modern is inscribed into the very paradox of the ‘post’ as coming before *and* after:

The ‘generations’ flash by at an astonishing rate. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent. (Lyotard 1992: 22)

How does the prefix post qualify modern, modernism and modernity? What does the postmodern feeling of ‘untimeliness’ indicate? Something comes after the modern, modernism and modernity (logically and historically), but it is not (only) postmodern. The postmodern comes ‘after’ the modern, that is after the event, only by implication. It is not periodisable with regard to the modern, for there is no position of the ‘here and now’ – this elusive presence of the modern from which a ‘pre’ or a ‘post’ may be established beyond doubt:

[I]t is impossible to determine the difference between what has taken place (the *proteron*, the anterior) and what comes along (the *husteron*, the ulterior) without situating the flux of events with respect to a now. But it is no less impossible to grasp any such ‘now’ since, because it is dragged away by what we call the flow of consciousness, the course of life, of things, of events, whatever – it never stops fading away. So that it is always both too soon and too late to grasp anything like a ‘now’ in an identifiable way. (Lyotard 1991b: 24-25)

This untimeliness makes the postmodern appear to arrive either always too late or too soon with regard to an un(re)presentable modern ‘now’, articulated in the trope of *husteron proteron*, which is inscribed into the literal paradox of the prefix *post* as the ‘after’ which comes ‘before’. The postmodern cannot be separated from the modern because it is always already contained in and thus anticipated by it:

[T]he postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way,

but to revolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation. *Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.* (Lyotard 1991b: 25; my emphasis)

The relation between the modern and the postmodern is therefore not chronological, but it relies on a particular understanding of repetition as anamnesis (or an ‘initial’ forgetting, or trauma, that simply remains undialectisable). It is in this sense that postmodernism is a re-writing of modernity, neither a break nor a simple succession, but a working through (*perlaboration, Durcharbeitung*) that occurs at once forwards and backwards “without finality” (Lyotard 1991b: 24, 30). This movement of back and forth within the process of ‘mourning’ the initial forgetting of the un(re)presentable (modern) is what Lyotard refers to as a process in “ana-”:

[T]he ‘post-’ of ‘postmodern’ does not signify a movement of *comeback, flashback or feedback*, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in ‘ana-’: a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an ‘initial forgetting’. (Lyotard 1998: 93).

The initial forgetting is the unrecoverable, absent origin of the modern and the illusion (or delusion) on which modernism and its avant-gardes, however critical of modernity they may be, ground their ‘discourse of originality’ (see Krauss 1991: 73). Against the modern ideology of the (relatively) new, postmodernism sets its feeling of belatedness and parodic repetition (of the sequel [see Garber 1999], and the supplement) in order to achieve a ‘stalling’ of the continual process of anticipating and appropriating the new by the modern, or to reach a ‘beyond’ of the modern infinity but without dialectic. The postmodern thus inscribes itself within the un(re)presentable of the modern,³ and through the opening of this unsayable and unexpressible ‘sublime’, invokes the radical otherness of the Event. The possibility of the Event in its radical futurity without any anticipation comes before any interpellation, any question and destination; it rather forms the possibility of the question itself:

The event happens as a question mark ‘before’ happening as a question. *It happens* is rather ‘in the first place’ *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?* Only ‘then’ is any mark determined by the questioning: is this or that

³ Cf. Lyotard 1998: 24: “The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself...”

happening, is it this or something else, is it possible that this or that? (Lyotard 1991b: 90)

From a postmodern point of view, one can say that the 'Ereignis character of Being' remains unthought in the metaphysical tradition of modernity (see Vattimo 1991: 137). But the event is not to be confused with the process of commodification in modern innovation; the possibility of an event is open at any time – this is the meaning of the future as radical alterity. The postmodern seeks to suspend the modern pre-empting of events, which is a foreclosure of eventuality leading to the eternal pastness of the modern 'present'. It represents this paradox in its use of the future perfect [*futur antérieur*] which:

expresses a past event that one somehow transposes into the future either to mark a supposition – or to attenuate – or else to underline the exceptional character of an accomplished event [*fait accompli*] seen from a future point where one posits oneself in imagination to increase one's ability to judge the contours/depth [*relief*] this event may have. (Grevisse 1986: 1299; see also McKenna 1988)

Coming at once too late and too soon – the phrase 'this will have been new' reflects the temporal contradiction within the postmodern as a process of anamnesis: the future as already contained in the past and vice versa. It is only in the performativity of (re-)writing (which invents its own rules as it progresses) that an opening towards the future event can be created (cf. Wood 1990: 1ff):

The [postmodern] artist and the writer therefore work without rules, and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author or, in what amounts to the same thing, why their creation would always begin too soon. *Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*). (Lyotard 1998: 24)

Although the future perfect "translates the present in its *difference*" (McKenna 1988: 232), it is not so much concerned with the futurity (in its prophetic anticipation) as such but in conjunction with a (psycho)analytic understanding of the cure with the undoing, 'unwriting' or erasing of a predetermined) future (see Forrester 1990: 104). What is beyond the edge of the postmodern future perfect

remains the unnamable absence of the future to come [*avenir/à venir*].⁴

The postmodern waiting for the absolute arrival of the *Ereignis* is to be understood as time gained for history to occur before the end of history (and thus of modernity). How far this strategy of postmodernist theoretical discourse can serve as a universal value, is another question entirely.⁵ But it may be time used for negotiation and for the affirmation of radical plurality set free within and through postmodernism (in a ‘time of ethics’).

Lyotard’s postmodern which implies much more than a historical and cultural demarcation, temporal caesura or epoch represents the critique or even the deconstruction of this very ‘modern(ist)’ desire (or delusion) of leaving behind, starting afresh, breaking with the previous, going beyond, which has always taken the form of pre-empting the radically new by reconnecting it with a selection from the past. While postmodernist theories or theories of postmodernism somehow seek to oppose this dialectical process of the modern by evoking ‘non-modern’ conceptions of time, the postmodern is also that which guarantees the very possibility of play. It is, in a word, the playfulness of play, the possibility of the playful, the gratuitous, the non-utilitarian, or as Lyotard would also say: the sublime.

Toying with the postmodern therefore – apart from an analysis of the postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity above – means at once showing what is at play and ensuring the future possibility of playfulness. But how can one represent ‘the playful’ as possibility? Are not all representations of playful elusiveness necessarily foreclosed misconceptions that necessarily always say more about the process of misconceiving than about the misconceived? ‘After’ the modern, is there anything left to do apart from interminable skepticism towards representation, or, following Jean Baudrillard, is the simulacrum ‘our’ destiny?

⁴ Which according to Derrida can only be imagined as “monstrosity”; see for example Derrida (1976: 5):

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.

On the ‘normal monstrosity’ of ‘postisms’ (including postmodernism) as opposed to “monstrous monstrosities” see Derrida (1990: 79).

⁵ Cf. Lyotard 1998: 69: “[Gaining] time. Is this a universally valid end?”

Toying

But if this playfulness is so ‘serious’ why insist on using the word ‘toying’ in combination with the postmodern? Nothing is more representative of the playful than the idea of a ‘toy’. Toys are those ‘things’ that represent everything culturally associated at once with the gratuitous *and* the necessary, at once the guarantee of a future that resembles the past, of growing up to become a ‘useful’ and responsible adult member of society, and the reassurance of absolute difference, the unrepresentable present of mere playfulness, of being a child.

In 1957 – i.e. in what may be called the ‘early childhood’ days of what would later grow up and be translated as ‘theory’ – Roland Barthes complained about the lack of imaginative space within the world of toys: “All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size” (Barthes 1993: 53). In their representational mimeticism toys always ‘mean’ something. As such they are therefore a fundamental way of teaching and learning the social process of ‘mythologisation’. The toy may be *the* myth or secondary signification *par excellence* – hiding its ideological construction in a process of naturalisation – that ensures the survival of modern capitalism.⁶

Faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy. (54)

Barthes regrets the functionality of representational toys and attacks the increasing use of artificial materials (and the “gradual disappearance of wood”) and the ‘consumability’ (the short life span) of modern toys. His nostalgia leads him to a quite unexpected outburst of romantic idealism, similar, in fact, to Lyotard’s idealized notion of childhood:

The merest set of blocks, provided it is not too refined, implies a very different learning of the world: then, the child does not in any way create meaningful objects, it matters little to him whether they have an adult name;

⁶ See Dan Fleming (1996: 8): “toys are a wonderful place to look at the complex interactions between the desiring individual and the massified demand.”

the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge.
(Barthes 1993: 54)

Thus in the beginning of theory's history, before it entered the institutionalized adult world, one could say, "a child was being killed" (Leclaire 1975). But maybe it is precisely this myth of the freedom of imagination (the loss of which Barthes deplures), lost through modern socialization processes, which has become 'incredible' in late modernity and thus has become 'post-theory's' main concern (i.e. theory in its current state of 'adulthood', of lost innocence, of institutionalization and professionalisation). The crisis of representation and representability in pre-1968 France, had obviously not yet rendered absurd the dream of a 'demiurgic' (i.e. transformative) capacity of the subject, nor the idealist faith in the object for that matter. For Barthes, the child using non-mimetic toys may create "forms which walk, which roll, he creates life, not property: objects now act by themselves, they are no longer inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand" (Barthes 1993: 54). In Baudrillard this object world has gained absolute autonomy.

It could be shown quite easily, however, that it is the nostalgic idealism of childhood innocence and (primitive) imagination itself that today provides a convenient marketing strategy for a whole range of toys which, thus, at the same time, guarantee the survival of modern capitalist society and the nuclear family Barthes so forcefully sought to 'defamiliarize'. If, instead, postmodern (or late-modern) society is as 'hyperreal' as Jean Baudrillard (and his postmodern and 'post-theoretical' followers) would have it; if images have become more real than the real, if the sign can no longer refer, Barthes's notion of myth has also lost its critical foothold. Ideological critique in the age of 'pure simulacrum' seems deluded precisely because "illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (Baudrillard 1993: 197).

This is of course a major problem especially for the film industry (and Hollywood and Disney in particular) for whom the commodification of 'illusion' is crucial. When simulation replaces representation as the main symbolic structure, ideology is at once omnipresent but always merely another 'simulation'. It is, therefore, no wonder, that postmodernism is compared to the psychotic condition of facing "the threat of vanishing in the play of signs" (Baudrillard 1993: 199). But one should not forget, however, that the idea of reference in signification became problematic long before Saussure; the sign lost its mythical 'transparency' a long time ago.

Toy Story I

There is indeed nothing more closely associated with ‘narrative’ than a toy. Toys always ‘tell stories’. They are like little story machines, narrative catalysers, objects that help make sense of the world. There is something utterly ‘realist’ even about the fanciest of toys. Toys always refer to reality even if they are of the order of complete fantasy and thus completely unrealistic. But they are capable of perfectly hiding reality by doubling it, reassembling it, representing it, and ‘overdetermining’ it with ‘signification’. In this sense, the ‘postmodern condition’ seems to have a close affinity with the nature of the toy in general. Even ‘modern’ toys have always toyed, so to speak, with the postmodern, and instead of being mere playthings, they have always foreclosed any radical idea of gratuitous play. Toys have always been concerned with the ‘crisis of reality’ or its fundamental ‘lack’ which has become the obsession of so many postmodernist theories. If there is a common denominator to postmodernism it is probably this psychotic sense of reality as being alien, hence the obsession with realism and the anxiety of and/or desire for the hyperreal. But could it not be said that ‘fictional’ objects like toys have always anticipated the Baudrillardian ‘hyperreal’? Is ‘disneyfication’ (of which the ‘events’ of ‘September 11 [2001]’ can be seen as merely the logical continuation) not precisely the logical outcome of modernity? (see Bryman 1999)

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, probably no cultural institution has had more influence on children, and maybe also adults, than Walt Disney’s motion pictures. Disney has become an essential part of American ‘cultural imperialism’ with its global capitalist base and what might be called its hegemonic superstructure of ‘liberal humanism’. Nothing may indeed be a better representation of Fredric Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (1992). In *The Twilight of the Real*, Neville Wakefield (1990) speaks of Disney’s empire as a “second world” that perfectly matches the postmodern “depthless logic of the consumer/leisure industry” and epitomizes the “cancerous proliferation of late capitalist symbolic production” (Wakefield 1990 99, 112). Disney culture and its global ambitions – globalization understood as a joint venture between ‘macdonaldisation’ and ‘disneyfication’ – is no longer a misrepresentation but constitutes a radically utopian simulation that by providing copies of reality, by fictionalising and doubling, tries to entirely supersede the distinction

between imaginary and real. This doubling – which is entirely in tune with a popular understanding of the ‘American dream’ as the transformation of a sordid reality into a fairy tale – with its synchronic proliferation prevents the development of a historical identity.⁷ Instead the ‘disneyfied’ depthless subject is placed within a (cryogenised) “space on flat earth” (Wakefield 1990: 98ff). Since, according to Wakefield, Disney is “the model of a postmodern culture in which you have to be buried alive in order to survive” (114), and which is thus truly ghostly, it seems that performing a critical reading of one of its simulations has to show, not how the real is being virtualised, but rather how the unsimulatable is being excluded. Or, in terms of a ‘posthumanist’ reading, the question would be how a simulation process as in *Toy Story* deals with its desire and anxiety for ever more (or ‘truer’) simulation. How does it envisage the production of an environment in which its interests may be preserved, reproduced, expanded, consolidated, etc.?

Simulation – the creation of truly ‘postmodern’ toys so to speak – has been fully implemented in *Toy Story* (1995). *Toy Story* was Disney’s first fully computer animated film produced by the graphics company Pixar. Each and every image, character, action in this film is a digital simulation. There is nothing ‘real’ about this film. However, visiting the various official and unofficial *Toy Story* websites the interested viewer could learn a great many technical details about the production of the film and the scrupulousness with which the 110 people involved in its production managed to achieve the incredibly ‘realistic’ simulation effects. The technical structure used 366 objects (including 76 characters), 25,000 storyboard drawings and 500,000 basic arithmetic operations per pixel. Apparently there are 12,384 hairs on Andy’s and 15,977 on Sid’s head (the two boys who function as the toys’ respective good and evil owners in the film) and 10,000 leaves on a typical tree in Andy’s neighbourhood. The biggest portion of realism was applied to the incredibly complex shaders that represent “human skin with as many as ten separate texture maps applied to each patch of skin to control such detail as freckles, blushing, facial hair, oil and wrinkles” (see [sys.uea.ac.uk/~ah/toystory/...](http://sys.uea.ac.uk/~ah/toystory/)). What one is most compelled to admire,

⁷ This is something of which John Lasseter, director of *Toy Story*, is only too conscious: “If you make sure that the audience knows the world you’re creating doesn’t exist, then you can use this photorealistic technology and make it seem as believable as possible. The magic is that the audience can sit there and say: ‘I know this doesn’t exist, but... it sure looks real!’” (2001).

therefore, is the level of realism the simulated images and their animation attained for both toys (objects) and children (toy-owners, or subjects).⁸

To briefly summarize the plot: the cowboy puppet Woody, Andy's favourite toy and leader of Andy's toy community who, every time they are left on their own i.e. not seen by 'humans', come to life, is replaced, on Andy's birthday, by a new toy, the spaceman action figure Buzz Lightyear. Buzz, greatly admired for his 'modern' gadgets and rational organisational skills, soon becomes the new leader. In their competing for Andy's attention, Woody's jealous plotting leads to both his and Buzz's 'fall': Buzz is pushed out of the window and Woody is expelled from the toy community. They both have to team up to overcome their respective 'delusions'. Woody needs to shake off his jealous self-centredness and Buzz needs to realise his 'true identity' as a toy-object-commodity (he, in fact, thinks that he is on a 'real' mission to save the planet). Both are captured by the evil kid next door, Sid, a cruel toy torturer, who owns a savage pitbull terrier, called Scud. Just when Sid is about to blow Buzz up with a rocket, Woody – whose only hope of reinstatement, reintegration and redemption lies in his rescuing Buzz – teaches the evil child a lesson in how to treat one's possessions. He does so with the help of Sid's disfigured toy victims (monstrous 'hybrids' of reassembled toy parts). He violates the most fundamental rule namely, keeping reality and fiction apart and addresses himself directly to Sid, who, 'haunted' by his toy crimes, runs off and is henceforth scared of toys. Buzz and Woody, now close friends, have to use all their wits, however, to be reunited with their rightful owner, because Andy is moving home. The happy ending shows them both reinstated as Andy's favourite toys and joint leaders, who are anxiously awaiting the unpacking of Andy's Christmas presents. The final twist is that, although no toy is being replaced this time, 'playful' uncertainty is anticipated when Andy receives a puppy (opening up another parallel and possible contrast between the 'good' child as toy and dog owner and the 'evil' Sid). It also prepares the public for 'sequalisation'.

⁸ The technical realism is even greater in *Toy Story 2* (1999) as John Lasseter (2000) explains: "More than 250 artists, animators and technicians including 90 technical directors and 60 animators helped create 1,200 models and 18 sets including a ten-square-block downtown area and an airport. Twice as complex to make as *A Bug's Life* and ten times more advanced than *Toy Story*, the movie was generated on 1,700 computer processors with 122,699 frames used which took between ten minutes and three days to perfect."

Formally the structure of this story resembles very closely that of classical drama (i.e. tragicomedy). It is a 'play' whose action is linearly progressive and dramatic throughout; there is no narrator and there is only one main plot. From the initial equilibrium the conflict begins with the introduction of the stranger/rival Buzz or the internal and external doubling of the hero (Woody). The knot is tied and the action reaches its first climax when the doubled hero finds himself exiled and exposed to death. It is also a double scene of recognition that leads to the untying of the knot and the moment of catharsis: Woody acknowledges his guilt and Buzz realises his delusion in the central scene of the film. Reunited, the hero(es) can avert catastrophe and re-establish the former equilibrium (with the twist of the puppy/gift already mentioned).

Given the context that the toys in this children's movie stand in for 'humanity', or indeed act as playful examples or models of human morality, the story could be taken as a cosmological allegory that re-enacts the dominant ideology of late-modern liberal humanism. It is a fundamentally manichaeic and moralistic worldview, epitomised in the idea of the '(fortunate) Fall' that governs the whole play. Oddly enough, by focussing on the humanity of toys, and thus, strictly speaking, humanising the object, the film places the supposedly 'real' humans in a god-like position. Andy, the 'good boy', if one follows the modern (and ultimately 'gnostic') cosmology, resembles the good but powerless creator, while Sid appears as the evil demiurge who perverts the cause of justice and causes 'human' (toy) suffering. Barthes (and theory) would no doubt side with Sid and his 'demiurgic' transformation of his toy-parts into hybrid collages. The doubling of opposites, of good and bad, as a result reproduces itself on all the structural levels, while the unexplainable ultimate father-figure, just like the actual father of Andy in the film, has to remain absent.⁹ The film trusts its little viewers, after having displayed the drama of the fall and human redemption, to make the right choice, to reject evil and be a good toy owner. But it is of course only through the temporary mixing of categories that the seemingly clear-cut story functions: objects become animated, or infused with human spirituality and play the role of subjects. They perform their play for a

⁹ Rowan Woods (1999: 62-63), points out that in *Toy Story* "[y]ou never get a full view of the parent. You catch glimpses of Andy's mother, leaving us to suppose that she's a single mother and a very industrious single mother at that who has done the right thing in terms of parenting because her son is so well behaved. In Sid's family you hear the mother but you also see only one parent – the fat, bulbous knee of the father who is watching television."

kind of ‘super-subject’ who is (apparently) not a real actor in the play (Andy, who rarely shows his face, and if so, only in a passive and melancholic context; or of course the implied viewer) but rather the ‘addressee’ or destination of the toy action. This god-like position of seeing without being seen is, of course, the ideological position of power *par excellence*. But in the end, after having overcome or refined human nature, toys must become objects again. Ironically the uncertainty that renews the desire and guarantees the continuation of social order, at the end of the story – the always necessarily incomplete moment of closure – is produced by the non-human that escapes both the categories of object and subject, but which, at the same time, allows for the existence of humanism in the first place: the animal, the puppy, which (or who?) is neither completely toy (object) nor human (subject). The appropriation and insertion of the animal, or the non-human other, into the cosmology ensures the continuation or repetition of the drama, and announces another round in the generation game: will it be a good dog (like Slinky, Woody’s ‘well-sprung’ friend, who, like him and Buzz have been commercialized in ‘real life’, as ‘real’ toys for ‘real’ kids, by Mattel) or a bad dog (like Sid’s pitbull Scud)? Will the (hi)story repeat the Fall or enact progress towards moral elevation? As demonstrated by the story itself: it always does both. Its desired end cannot accomplish itself because it cannot imagine anything else than its own repetition.

This is the point where the ‘logic’ of the story rejoins the ‘postmodern’, outlined above. *Toy Story*’s ironic motto of “to infinity and beyond”, is a reflection of the (postmodern) critique of modernity, in the words of Peter Sloterdijk:

On the one hand, modernity can perceive only the worst after itself; on the other hand, the worst lies precisely on its own course, which it prevents itself from leaving, because it holds no alternative to itself as thinkable. (Sloterdijk 1989: 292; my translation)

But how exactly is recognition and thus the distinction between reality and fiction, between true and false identity, between good and bad – in short, the fundamental principles of ‘modern’ liberal humanism – achieved? The answer can be found in the central sequence of *Toy Story*, which also constitutes the turning point and prepares the *dénouement* of the ‘play’, i.e. when the viewer is released from fiction and returned to ‘serious’ reality. It is the most important ‘pedagogic’ moment of the story and the one in which (mediated, disneyfied) ‘society’ reinscribes and relegitimizes itself.

Rowan Woods, giving his “private view” on *Toy Story* in *Sight and Sound* (1999), admires the “reality” and well-roundedness of the toy characters, as opposed to “action toys which can do anything, perform any function”, and declares Buzz’s recognition scene as his favourite moment of the film:

There are many great scenes, but one I particularly enjoy is where Buzz has just realised that he really is a toy (having seen a commercial for himself on television). He’s in a state of terrible despair and then he is grabbed by Sid’s sister, who dresses him up and plays with him in a tea party situation. She leaves and Woody arrives to find Buzz sitting at the party completely drunk on tea. Woody starts to try to persuade Buzz that there really is hope. It’s a beautiful scene. (Woods 1999: 62-63)

What is striking here is the serious passion of the description. Just like Buzz’s dialectical process of recognition that leads to a level of higher consciousness and ‘new hope’, Woods’s reading of the story does precisely the same thing for him, it confirms the sublime moment of losing and finding oneself in fictional reality, in this moment of transition that constitutes the separation between fiction or simulation and reality. How else would one be able to differentiate between the playful and the serious? Why else should Woods state that he loves the idea that “the toy community is a complex hierarchy of groups and sub-groups?” *Toy Story* functions only because it toys with the very idea of the story and story-telling. It is at once a story of toys (a story about *and* acted out, determined by toys) *and* a narrative that toys with the idea of the story as such; it is merely a ‘toy’ (i.e. simulated) story, and therefore has a very complex relation to the ‘real’ indeed. It is a story that plays with the fictionality of stories – a metafictional story. Instead of effacing the boundaries between reality and fiction through simulation, metafiction rather tries to confirm or renew both by redrawing or re-imagining these or other boundaries which have never been absolute but mere constructions or fictions, in the first place.

The recognition theme in *Toy Story I* (and equally in *Toy Story II*) is a very good example of this. There are in fact three instances of recognition in *Toy Story I* and two in *Toy Story II*, which serve as models that allow the viewing subject to construct privileged forms of identity: Woody has to learn that only (male) friendship leads to the brotherhood of man and that a leader or true hero of humanity needs to be the most human of all and act as a moral example (a ‘fiction’ that is being repeated almost every day in ‘adult’ politics); Buzz has to learn that technology without idealism leads to the dehumanisation of the world, in other words, he needs to learn the

meaning of human play. Of course, only humans – and maybe some [domesticated] animals – *can* play; machines definitely do not. In this sense *Toy Story* is re-enacting the logic of many dystopian science fiction films with their attempts at ‘humanizing’ the machine/the robot [see the *Terminator* series in particular]). And, on a different level, Sid needs to learn a lesson in capitalist materialism, or how a subject is to appreciate the value of objects (an idea fundamental to the survival of liberal humanist consumer society). Woody, in conjunction with the idea of the well-rounded free individual self, seems to gain insight entirely by a free act of will, which is internally motivated. Sid, on the other hand, needs a little reminder of ‘magic’ – the strange combination of idealism and materialism which alone can create economic and moral value – in the form of the victims’ appeal to human conscience or charity. But it is Buzz’s transformation that is the most striking. At first, Buzz seems to have a neurotic, ‘adult-like’ attitude towards reality: he takes himself, as the emblem of ultramodern technology, far too seriously and his sense of election to be the saviour of mankind convinces him of his uniqueness and his missionary role – he is undoubtedly part of some space patrol sent out by some ‘empire’ or colonial power. Woody’s exaggerated ‘playfulness’ is thus opposed to Buzz’s humourless rationality and apocalypticism. Woody is a kind of communitarian: he has an organic idea of society, or (toy) community – everyone has a purpose, is there to serve the greater good while Buzz has a techno-scientific vision of perfectibility, rationalisation and progress. It is therefore quite ironic that he is ‘dis-illusioned’, i.e. freed, from his too narrow sense of reality, by the kind of mass media technology that constitutes the most perfect of simulations of reality: the television screen. This scene of recognition is truly ‘hyper-real’ in its complexity: a ‘real’ but absent (or imagined) viewer witnesses how a virtual toy, playing a part in a fictional story, while thinking it is not a toy but real, recognizes its lack of reality or its imaginary being or being imaginary, by seeing a virtual or imaginary television advertisement that makes a statement about ‘true’ reality, and in which the uniqueness and the sense of self of the toy are questioned. These multiple levels of representation and reflection ‘visualize’ the irretrievable origin and the continual process of doubling to which reality is always subject. It illustrates the necessary myth and the constructedness of the ‘one’ reality that leads towards the constitution of consciousness and identity.

The transformations of idealism in *Toy Story* are, indeed, most amazing: while mere chance allows Buzz in the beginning to confirm

his claim that he can ‘really’ fly, his technologically-founded belief in progress ‘towards infinity and beyond’, as well as the realisation of his truly being imaginary, pushes him towards ‘testing’ that reality: for the first time he ‘deliberately’ tries to fly through the open window, back to Andy. He crashes, breaks, loses an arm, and the fact that he cannot actually fly shatters his imaginary identity. This time it is Woody’s turn to instill a new sense of ‘reality’ transformed (through idealism, to be precise) in Buzz until he regains a purified, more realistic and more ‘refined’ sense of self. Only after realising that he is not real is he enough of a realist to be imaginative. In the end, through his belief in the common cause of serving as a good toy, he can, by a sheer act of will, fly, after all. Just when he and Woody are about to lose their owner Andy for good, Buzz ‘takes off’ and safely lands both of them in Andy’s car. Thus imagination (idealism or the refusal of ‘mere’ materialism) is confirmed as being more realistic than reality. Imagination is the necessary process of arriving at an identitarian and communal form of reality. It is nevertheless a process that relies on the transformation of (material) reality, i.e. it must have material effects. What ensures that this process can really take place is the objectiveness of the object, or the peculiar ontology of the toy. This objectiveness is of course guaranteed by nothing other than signification, signifying practices, and language in particular. Playing, in *Toy Story I* and *II*, is playing with signification. It is certainly no coincidence that the first thing Buzz ‘learns’ after his disillusionment is to pun (when Woody says he needs a hand, Buzz throws his broken arm to him). For the other toys, on the other hand, playing with language has been part and parcel of their imaginary community from the very beginning (see the use of names; the competition between Woody and Mr Draw in the opening scene of *Toy Story I*; Mr Potatohead’s sense of humour throughout, etc.).

The playful usage of language which is often (erroneously) attributed to the child exclusively and hence seen as ‘childish’, as opposed to factual and transparent, ‘serious’, use of language in the adult world, is here allegorically employed as a necessary rite of passage, or a mirror of recognition. It is by provisionally accepting the play of language as constitutive of identity that one becomes a ‘real’ toy, and by implication, it is by forgetting or ignoring this playfulness that one becomes a serious adult.

It might be argued that the modern(ist) ‘residue’ in *Toy Story I* lies in the fact that it depends too much on its viewer and his or her competent reading to function. Its appeal to an external, ultimately

unsimulatable or unscreenable (one might say unframable) reality is much more urgent than in a film relying less on techniques of 'simulation'. But there is of course the main 'postmodern(ist)' moment of the sublime, the undecidable 'otherness' in the process of doubling or rather the switch from one side of the screen to the other, as exemplified in Buzz's recognition scene. The hyper-real simulation implies that the 'real' necessarily ex-sists in the unrepresentability of the switching – or, one could say, reality seems to zap. What exactly takes place between channels, what is it that resists simulation? In this respect, the animated 'thingness' of the living toys could be read as sign of a deep anxiety about a loss of control (over reality, over childhood) caused by Disney's animation revolution which now threatens to devour its children. And this is also the point at which a closer look at *Toy Story II* can help to explain the 'crisis' of postmodernism and the question of 'post-theory'.

Toy Story II – Mourning the Postmodern and Post-Theoretical Melancholy

Toy Story I could be said to be toying with the idea that "in postindustrial society things are no longer primary" (Brown 1998: 960). The autonomy of things displayed or rather unleashed in *Toy Story I* can only be recaptured/controlled at the price of moralising and thus contradicting the 'liberal humanist' message of 'believe in yourself and you can fly', because ultimately the film seems to say:

'Take good care of your toys'. In other words, the film instructs its viewers against misuse – against irregular exchange – as though the toy industry should have the final say on the shape of the world and of the world to come. (Brown 1998: 964)¹⁰

What separates *Toy Story I* from *Toy Story II* is mostly a change in tone. While in the first part of the sequel Disney/Pixar seem to exude confidence through their self-referentiality expressed in the simulatory nature and 'photo-realism' of the film, *Toy Story II* displays anxiety. The main theme is that of toys growing obsolete, of being discarded by their owners. There is ample nostalgia or unease in the much darker closure of the second part. The reaffirmation of Buzz's and Woody's friendship despite Andy's inevitable growing up leaves the viewer

¹⁰ This problematic seems to be thematised more directly in *Small Soldiers* (1999) in which the toy industry is clearly part of the industrial-military complex.

rather doubtful about the future. One reason could be the intrusion of a main female character (cowgirl Jessie) obviously affecting the 'male friendship' motor of the story. A feminist reading would, of course, be very important in this context. The other threat, however, ironically, is technology itself. *Toy Story II* opens with a 'story-within-a-story' scene. The viewer in the beginning is not aware that he or she is watching the simulation of a computer game (Buzz against the evil emperor Zurg – a parody of *Star Wars – The Empire Strikes Back*). Only when Buzz is finally defeated by Zurg and the writing "Game over" appears, does the viewer realise that this has been the simulation of a simulation. But the computer game theme informs the entire story: on their search for the kidnapped Woody his friends come to Al's Toy Barn where Buzz's recognition scene is parodied, when he finally stands in front of these shelves filled with his identical twins which he saw on television in *Toy Story I*. This time, the 'real' Buzz is 'replaced' by a copy of himself. The question of identity is again the central focus of the film, but this time it is Buzz who helps Woody overcome his delusion – his temptation with 'museal' fame (i.e. eternity or infinity). Woody wants to gain 'timelessness'; he wants to overcome death by consumption (being the mere plaything, waiting to be used up, replaced, discarded), by becoming the centre piece of a set of 'original Woody toys' to be sold to a Japanese toy museum (presumably the very 'Japanese' who are responsible for producing computerised 'successors' to 'real' toys in the form of video games). In order to enter the museal state, however, Woody has to have his identity erased: Andy's name under the sole of Woody's shoe has to be overpainted. In contrast to this, Woody is only able to distinguish the 'real' Buzz ('his' Buzz) from Buzz's copy thanks to the 'Andy' mark under Buzz's boot – which, in turn, provokes Woody's own recognition scene. He finally understands the value of true friendship, identity and 'belonging' through the question of 'propriety' (ownership).

Toy Story II seems at once more 'conservative' in its affirmative message of liberal humanist consumer morality, *and* more technologically 'advanced'. But the ubiquitous anxiety concerns the threatened survival of the toy-object as such and thus the survival of 'imagination' and childhood itself. Given that the 'anthropologized' toys in this postmodern fable are still merely stand-ins for human beings it becomes clear that what is really at stake is the question of the 'posthuman' – the idea that 'man' will end up in the museum of time. Accelerated technological development has brought back the

uncertainty of the evolutionary process. It becomes again 'imaginable' to think of humanity not as end point but merely one historical stage in a larger (hi)story. Artificial intelligence – represented in the computerisation of toys – may be the 'successor' humanity has already accepted as its own 'inevitability' (cf. e.g. Truong 2001). The crisis of identity the idea of humanity undergoes is articulated in a crisis of representation which threatens the very existence of 'representational' (i.e. film) industries, and Disney in particular: why indeed should machines still be watching movies? (see Cohen 1994: 260-264).

After postmodernism the (after all still very 'humanistic') motto of "to infinity and beyond" becomes the ('posthuman') "beyond (human) infinity". *Toy Story II* can only produce conservative answers to this challenge: a reaffirmation of capitalist consumerism as the only 'inevitability'. Woody and Buzz are resigned to their 'mortality' as consumables as long as they have 'friendship' – idealism overcomes the human condition while preserving its 'essence'. In this reaction against what appears to be the posthuman threat, *Toy Story II* can be seen as 'symptomatically' post-postmodern. Postmodernism, increasingly, seems obsolete. 1989 (the victory of global capitalism), and the aftermath of 9-11 (the promise and threat of a new global political world order), make talk of a return to 'reality' after a 'frivolous' excursion into post-structuralist and postmodernist theoretical excessive playfulness and 'navel-gazing' seem almost inevitable. At least that is what, in more popular terms, 'post-theory' is made to mean. In theoretical terms, however, this highly ideological moment already toys with the idea of re-inventing a second modernity (see e.g. Antony Giddens and Ulrich Beck) or is eager to define the time after the postmodern ('beyond infinity') as the realisation of universal freedom (in the guise of an unleashed global market economy and liberal democracy).

To close the 'gap' (e.g. between theory and practice) therefore, scepticism must now also reach a global scale. Maybe theory has to dissociate itself from its 'postmodern' image, must become 'post-theoretical', but in the sense of critically working through its postmodern beginnings while facing the double nature of its new challenge – posthumanism and globalisation. This does not mean a forgetting of postmodernism but rather a critical return – to the very gesture the postmodern 'invented' with regard to modernity and the modern. In a double move, this could be seen as theory's return to 'childhood' to ensure its 'growing up', as Terry Eagleton writes:

Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural', and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. (...) The true difficulty of theory, however, springs not from (...) sophistication, but from exactly the opposite – from its demand that we return to childhood by rejecting what seems natural and refusing to be fobbed off with shifty answers from well-meaning elders. (Eagleton 1990: 34-35; see also, more insistently, Eagleton 2003)

One lesson from postmodernism, as the discursive expression of a certain anxiety of and desire for the repressed 'other', is a radical historicisation (which of course must include the postmodern 'moment' itself, each and every time). This 'postmodern moment', even though its historical form may change, as an instance of 'deconstruction' is a reminder that systematic social organisation is based on exclusion and ultimately remains impossible. The postmodern needs to be understood as the playful but serious attempt to affirm the 'monstrosity' of the unrepresentable, unrepresentable other of systematic representation. Far from being a surrender to some kind of evil irrationalism, phantasy or nihilism, the challenge is to give attention to the excluded as that which allows representation to 'appear' in the first place. In promoting this as an ethico-political attitude, theory regards towards the future as a possibility, and as such has a special relation to the 'monstrous' idea of the 'child' and 'playfulness'. A radically open and affirmative notion towards 'otherness' has very little to do with a discourse on childhood that tries to make sense of what childhood 'is' and what a child is or is not supposed to 'do'. It is rather concerned with examining that within the child which is deemed 'deviant' (or in need of some form of 'education') but which also necessarily escapes, haunts its moralising representations and which, as Baudrillard foresees, will not fail to take its revenge:

Today, the general acceleration condemns childhood to an accelerated obsolescence... this time, it is precisely time which childhood will lack, and as a result, the evolutionary chain is broken off: the child [i/l] will turn against the adult and become his worst enemy. He will nevertheless become the Other, but as an *Alien* – a monster that springs from the disruption of the symbolic chain of generations. (Baudrillard 1997: 117-119; my translation)

Post-theory, it would seem, is what must mind these (little) monsters.

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