When the Pot Plays Potter: “Isaiah”, Toy Story and Religious Socialization

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Abstract
Biblical verses mentioning the “pot and the potter” entail a God/creation relationship in which the creation is warned not to turn against, or even criticize, the Creator; humankind is advised humility for fear of Yahweh’s punishment. This is a comparative study of three films with a strong emphasis on a children’s film, Toy Story (1995); the movies to be examined are treated as allegories of the concept of potter/pot lesson with a twist as the humans are playing God/potter. The movies geared more to an adult or mature audience (The Matrix [1999] and Terminator [1986]) feature the creation (robots) turned against the creator (humankind) with deadly consequences for humans. In Toy Story, an animated film, the creators (humans) are not threatened and the “pots” even agree to their condition. The film, I suggest, is an excellent example of the process of religious socialization as played out in a modern fairy tale.

What kind of religious socialization mechanism process is played out in Toy Story? What religious imagery is being displayed in the movie, and to what purpose? Wrapped in humorous tones, the film presents an image of religion and socialization which, for all intents and purposes strongly disparages imagination and promotes low self-esteem. I offer a reading of Toy Story narrative as a juvenile retelling of the New Testament story of the coming of Jesus and as a traditional modern fairy tale of socialization of non-resistance towards the “potter”.

You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “He did not make me”? Can the pot say of the potter, “He knows nothing”?

Isaiah, 29:16

But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.

Nehemiah, 9:16

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Biblical texts condemn mankind (the clay) for questioning Yahweh (the potter) or daring to criticize the maker; Isaiah 64:8 as well as Roman 9:21 are but two examples. I propose a Judeo-Christian reading of *Toy Story* in that light; I also suggest a comparison with modern, more adult-related, narratives who spin the concept in ways that make mankind creators and have the “created” entities not only questioning the “potter” but taking command, sometimes violently. The similarities and differences between *Toy Story* on one hand and with *The Matrix* and *Terminator* on the other are very telling of modern fairy tale ideologies.

Religious and sacred texts, including the Judeo-Christian Bible, presage harsh punishment towards any alleged violation of a given treaty between a supreme being and the created. In “Job”, it could be argued that Yahweh is tolerant of a debate between the abused Job and Himself. In general, though, the text instructs the faithful to treat the creator as a “potter” who engineered the “clay”, or humankind, and to be wary to even arguing with the potter. Isaiah points it out quite frequently, but Jeremiah, Psalms, Romans and Revelation also mention the figurative potter.

“But now, Yahweh, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and we all are the work of our hand” (Isaiah, 64:8). Humankind is pointed out a possible infringement in Isaiah 29:16: “You turn things upside down, as if the potter
were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He did not make me’? Can the pot say of the potter, ‘He knows nothing’?”

The most threatening text also appears in Isaiah: “Cursed is he who has an argument with his Maker, the pot which has an argument with the potter! Will the wet earth say to him who is working with it, What are you doing, that your work has nothing by which it may be gripped?” (45:9). Intriguingly, Yahweh seems to allow humankind to play his role, at least partially, when he advises Israelites to treat their enemies ruthlessly and to “break them with a rod of iron. You shall dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Psalm 2:9). Whether the metaphor points out to the potter/clay relationship (therefore, act like a potter, or God), or the text has to be taken more literally (humans as ordinary craftsmen smashing their creation) is left for debate. The religious socialization implied in the cited texts point to a collective and individual subjugation to an entity standing as an overseer, an architect and a creator. Moser, writing about the relationship about the pot, a potter and spiritual growth, pointed out that once a piece of ceramic has been created, “it looks exactly like every other piece that has come from that same mold. It has no individuality, no ‘personality’”.

Should Yahweh be dissatisfied, and in last resort, the creator can still re-mold humankind: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?
declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my
hand” (Jeremiah, 18:6).

The image of “God as a ceramic sculptor fashioning man just as the
toymaker made little children or as the idolmaker fashioned his little statuettes”\(^2\) is
indeed striking and suggests a deeply humble humanity and a slightly arrogant
maker. Submissiveness may be a socialization tool akin to a humiliating process.
Hoy\(^3\) (2008) wrote of the “negative consequences” of socialization inducing
“conformity” and discouraging “independent thought”.\(^4\) She goes on, perhaps
unfairly, giving examples of religious “cults where conformity is encouraged.”

Fairy tales and cautionary tales, contemporary or not, have relied on such
notions to convey similar texts of conformity to young readers, Carlo Collodi’s \textit{The
Adventures of Pinocchio} (1883) being one instance; the marionette is a stand-in for
mankind being disrespectful to their creator (the potter), in this case Geppetto, and
paying the price for his behavior. Non-juvenile texts such as Mary Shelley’s
\textit{Frankenstein} (1818) suggest an uneasy relationship between creator (humans
playing God) and the created.

Fairy tales in print have been replaced by mass media animated tales.
Collodi’s story is now mostly remembered as a Disney movie. I will not embark in
a discussion upon Disney/Pixar and conservatism, but it is worth reviewing the
literature and some of the films, if only very briefly. Disney characters have ambitions and dreams\(^5\), but within an established order.\(^6\) *Dumbo* (1941) improves upon his perceived liabilities, \(^7\) *Bambi* (1942) resists man’s attempt at taking over the forest, *Pinocchio* (1940) realizes his dream of becoming human. If Disney appears to impose the American dream upon others,\(^8\) early Pixar films discourage dreams at all. Contrary to Disney’s classic stories, Pixar’s characters generally either prefer to stay home or are severely punished should they deviate from this axiom, although the concept is wrapped in comedic tones. In *Red’s Dream* (1987) Red fantasizes of outdoing his master, only to be imprisoned in the back store of a used bicycle shop. The one-man band of *Tin Toy* (1988) pursues his torturer for attention. *The Knick Knack* (1989) snowman is taught his destiny after attempting to leave his glass dome. Nemo (*Finding Nemo*, 2003) learns the hard way never to leave his coral. In *A Bug’s Life* (1998), Flik is ordered by the Queen to accept the domination of the grasshoppers: “It’s our lot in life. It’s not a lot, but it’s our life.” In *Boundin’* (2003) a lamb has a coat so beautiful that it was “a source of great pride” and “it caused him to preen.” Once he is shorn though, he is ashamed, scorned by his former fans and he falls into a brief period of depression. An American Jackalope teaches him to accept his condition and, by the end, the lamb submits itself to human abuse as “he learned to live with it; he didn’t care”; the connotation of a lamb submitted to human abuses reaches a level of social and
religious symbolism that is hard to miss and was foreshadowed by the release of

*Toy Story* in 1995.

A major plot point in *Toy Story* is that toys are limp and submissive once in
the presence of humans, but assertive when left on their own. A new toy, Buzz
Lighthyear, is actually unaware of his condition as a toy as he believes without a
doubt that he is a galactic explorer on a mission to save the “entire universe” who
reports to Star Command. Woody the sheriff, heretofore the de facto leader of the
toys and his owner Andy’s favorite, takes it upon himself to break Buzz’s spirit and
impress upon him his condition as a “child’s plaything” or an “action figure.” In
the course of this educational process, the two toys will encounter spiritual zealots,
compare toys’ versions of hell and heaven, and in doing so explore the
philosophical ramification of the Bible’s clay and potter stories. It could be argued
that the narrative, aimed at a younger audience, portrays religious socialization and
education in a negative fashion, even promoting low self-esteem and discouraging
imagination.

A surface reading of the film could focus on the friendship developed
between the two competing characters through the hardship endured while trying
to rejoin the group: the lesson or moral of the film, as intended for juveniles, is that
endurance pays off and camaraderie (as epitomized by the film primary song *You
got a Friend in Me*) will conquer suffering. It is also a journey of self-discovery
during which one character, at least, becomes aware of his true nature and comes to accept it whereas another obtains redemption for his wrongdoing. This journey is mythical in nature and construct, as the main characters face constant danger and nearly meet their doom more than once; they overcome major disappointments and learn to live within their limits. The characters learn to look at the bright side of life in spite of, or because of, overcoming spectacular hurdles. The conclusion of the movie may even be interpreted as a social and personal gain for the characters as they now face the future with a broader knowledge of their condition.

The very first image of *Toy Story* is of Andy’s room wallpaper depicting an almost paradisiacal view of blue sky with a few clouds, the camera panning down to a toy village arranged by Andy. We are also sharing Andy’s point of view, from the sky-wall to him playing with his toys; the boy sets his toys against each other and even throws Mr. Potato Head in jail (his sister’s crib). Andy’s chosen one turns out to be Woody the sheriff, a malleable, soft rag toy with an eternal grin pasted on his plastic face; Woody’s first words in the movie (“Reach for the sky”) are interesting as the other main character in the movie will soon fall from the sky. Before long Woody is violently projected on furniture and hurled downstairs; the soft music and Woody’s smirk underplays and vindicates the cruelty of the situation. It is during this sequence that the POV switches to Woody’s, a shift emphasizing Woody as Andy’s proxy. Woody will now speak on Andy’s behalf.
The opening sequence is important because Andy will not dominate any other scene in the movie; so far Andy has sufficiently and graphically established his authority over his belongings. He has made clear that he is in charge, God-like. Woody is the toy leader, spiritually and otherwise, he is the minister in charge of his flock; he heads toys meetings and the other toys look up to him. Andy is the potter (not a “creator” per se) against whom the clay never turns. Woody the minister is also in charge of, among other things, Bo Peep’s sheep, some kind of a genetic experiment gone awry and a horror in itself: a three-headed sheep, assumingly a holy trinity.

Woody explains to his flock that they are there for Andy who is their raison d’être. “It doesn’t matter how much we are played with”, Woody explains, “What matters is that we’re here when Andy needs us. That’s what we’re made for, right?” Given the toy’s plastic/rag/metal natures, they appear to have no choice in the matter and have to consent to their condition. In the middle of preparations for a move scheduled to take place two days later, the sudden arrival of newer toys during a birthday party disrupts the environment and worries everyone about becoming “garage sale fodder.” Mr. Potato Head even blesses himself, in the Catholic fashion, for fear of being replaced by a more modern toy. The prophesied new comer is Buzz Lightyear, a shiny and fully equipped, solid plastic toy, contrasting with Woody’s sagging marionette qualities. Like an angel coming down the sky (a protector from another galaxy), this superhero is a matter of concern for Andy’s
proxy and keeper of an existing social order. Like Herod the Great troubled about the announced new boy in town, Woody takes upon himself to either modify Buzz’s behavior or dispose of him. However Buzz evinces no interest in taking over Woody’s responsibilities; he is oblivious to the toys’ situation and actually thinks he is visiting another planet as he is a member of the elite Universe Protection Unit of the Space Ranger Corps of the Galactic Alliance.

Ackerman wrote that “the Christ motif pervades both movies” (Toy Story and Toy Story 2). Buzz speaks of the sky, he is a winged protector who has been announced and he is immediately “marked” by Andy (black marker under his boot) like the other toys, to signify ownership. Like Jehovah marking Cain (Genesis 4:15) or humans being marked in many Revelation chapters (13:17, 14:9, 20: 4), the toys are “marked” in unsettling ways. Buzz has been “dropped” by Andy (the potter) in his room, so the new toy in town is a product (creature) of humankind and left by humankind to other toys who see him in a very positive light (except for Woody). Buzz comes in the middle of a birthday celebration (Andy’s) and seals his acceptance during Christmas. The toys yield unquestionably to Andy’s supremacy and Woody’s leadership, so far.

Buzz arrives as a disrupter of social mores within the small community of Andy’s room toys and, as such, potentially threatens Woody and, by proxy, Andy’s authority. The rest of the toys perceive Buzz as a liberator and he does offer them
some hope for a better and brighter future: a neurotic Rex the Dinosaur gains some confidence, Slinky the Dog neglects Woody for Buzz’s company, factors which push Woody to the edge and reinforce his determination to terminate Buzz. Buzz’s popularity is proven when Woody’s unsuccessful attempt at getting rid of Buzz is the last straw toward Woody’s complete ostracization from the rest of the toys. Woody represents law and order (he is a sheriff) and he is expected to defend his position. Circumstances call for Buzz and Woody to be taken by Andy out of paradise into the outer world. On their long way back home, Woody and Buzz meet religious dolls in an arcade machine which Woody calls “zealots”, three-eyed alien toys who think that the clamp over their heads, which picks one of them occasionally, is their leader. They wish ardently to be “chosen” for a better world and interpret Buzz’s arrival as a spiritual event. The two characters, accompanied by one of the zealot aliens who thinks he is about to reach “Nirvana”, cross the threshold into Dante’s hell: Andy’s neighbor, Sid’s house, set in gothic lighting and music. Sid, who sports a skull on his black tee-shirt and prominent braces matching his demonic laugh and whose hobby is to dismember toys, has his dog Scud, reminding us of Cerberus the mythical dog guarding the gates of Hades, nearly devouring the alien and confirming their admission in hell. Sid’s pagan primitive altar contrasts with Andy’s nearly Christian home. The opposite side of Andy’s spiritual coin is Sid’s house, reminiscent of Jesus’ forty days of hardship in the desert with the devil; during their journey in Sid’s room, both Buzz and Woody
will long for Andy’s room as an unqualified paradise. However, for all their
differences, both Andy and Sid are part of the same world order. Whereas Sid is
cruel and Andy loves his toys, Andy is not much kinder, stopping short of reducing
the toys to smithereens. Buzz says it best: “Andy’s house. Sid’s house. What’s
the difference?”

There are more religious connotations associated with Andy’s room: Andy
is short for Andrew, Jesus’ very first discipline. Besides Potato Head signing
himself to have his demands answered, Rex is a basket case of complexes usually
associated with biblical rhetoric like guilt and humility. As with other toys, he is
submitting to a higher authority. To explain his neurotic behavior Rex tells of his
birthplace as from Mattel, “well, I’m not really from Mattel, I’m actually from a
smaller company that was purchased by Mattel in a leveraged buyout.” Viewers
may interpret Rex’s confused origins as an explanation akin to an existential
“Where do I come from” philosophical query; his inferiority complex appears to
stem from his tangled source.

Following the rest of the toys learning of Woody’s quasi-innocence, Rex
appropriately whines “Great, now I have guilt!” He regains his complexes (and a
new one) thus confirming that the proper social order is back. Those characteristics,
guilt and humility, are not exclusive to the Christian experience, of course, but are
certainly associated with religious socialization and submissive behavior towards
higher religious authority. Studzinski, quoting Tillich, reminds us of the Catholic view of guilt: it “is the person’s awareness of the ambiguity that characterizes what is done and leads him or her to render a negative judgment on the self.” In Tillich’s perspective, the person has to “affirm the self.”

The religious socialization of Buzz comes about through his feeling of shame and guilt, then complete submissiveness.

Although a symbolic savior, and as a contrast to Rex, Buzz initially appears to suffer from a lack of humility. He is, literally and figuratively, “stiff-necked”, reminding us of Old Testament’s similar cautionary tales: from Nehemiah 9:16 to Jeremiah 17:23, the Bible warns its faithful not to be so proud, to be more malleable so to speak. Buzz is made of solid plastic, as mentioned, as opposed to Woody’s yielding and docile (rag) nature. It is within Sid’s house that Buzz experiences an epiphany and decides he is not above all toys, after all. He thought he could fly, but now he abides by Woody’s assessment that he is “falling, with style.” Afterward, Buzz feels guilt for leaving Andy and Woody and yearns to go back. Woody, like Buzz, experiences “guilt” and a burst of humility: guilt towards Buzz for attempting to get rid of him, and humility compared to Buzz’s more prestigious toy qualities.

Buzz’s progression could be summed up by the Buzz Lightyear TV ad which seals his fate: “Buzz Lightyear, the world’s greatest superhero! Now the world’s greatest toy!” Buzz comes out diminished by the experience, but accepts
his destiny like a fairy tale character. Buzz did fall to earth as an angel but had to learn his place as humble clay, the operative word being “humble”; he did lose his wings (he can’t fly), is now living among earthlings and must accept Andy’s abuses. If Buzz’s first coming to Andy’s room is read as an allegory to Jesus’ own birth, the progression of the story is admittedly muddled: Buzz learns of his plastic condition and loses his status as Intergalactic Explorer and Protector. However, the rest of the toys accept him as one of their own and equal now, leaving Andy’s position absolutely intact: the potter has secured his rank and the clay learn their lesson of humility, even the chosen ones. Buzz taught the toys, through his own deeds, the way to humility. When Woody requests Buzz’s help, Buzz, who may have thought previously of himself as a cosmic and spiritual savior, sends another disturbing display of humility to the young audience: “I can’t save anyone.”

Like a traditional fairy tale where the “home” concept equates the notion of never leaving home¹⁴, ¹⁵, Toy Story, ironically revered for its unlimited imagination and Buzz’s own motto of “To infinity and beyond”, associates fear with the idea of adventure and the punishment connected to it.

The differences between juvenile-oriented films and films for mature audiences are interesting, in this respect. Franchises like the Terminator and The Matrix¹⁶ movies present human-made entities (robots or software programs) that
question and attempt to obliterate their makers and remind one of the Judeo-Christian pot and potter motif.

Dr. Frankenstein playing God learns his own limitation in Mary Shelley’s novel (1818) and Kenneth Branagh’s film (1994, a year before *Toy Story*); his creation sourly turns against him. Science-fiction films such as *The Matrix* and *Terminator* franchises are based on storylines rooting for role reversals: machines or software vs. human resistance (humans are their creators after all). The peculiarity of children-oriented movies (and fairy tales in general) like *Toy Story* is that such reversals and/or denunciation does not exist; Buzz may attempt to disrupt the social contract here, but it is unknowingly and without any concept of personal gain that he does so. Upon confirmation of his status as a toy, he eventually sides with Woody to defend the status quo. They never doubt the foundation upon which their submission lies; that human harshness is a given and should not be questioned, unlike the robots in *Terminator* and the software in *The Matrix*, is made obvious by the absence of interest in role reversals, even after ruthless treatment by Andy.

In *The Matrix*, Neo and the resistance have been taught that defiance is not only futile but extremely dangerous and they fight (for many sequels…) against overwhelming odds. The differences here are many: the toys, unlike the software/machines do not attempt a coup against humankind. From an audience perspective, they are toys after all and realistically can’t expect much out of their
condition. They have been created by humans (potter and clay) and are presumed
to fulfill their social functions undisputedly. In Terminator and The Matrix, the
machines have turned the table: the clay became the potter and is now socializing
humans into utterly complete submission; humans resist but in Toy Story the
audience is told a narrative where such defiance is barely mentioned, where the
moral implications of submissiveness are not debated (hence are inexistent) but,
like a fairy tale according to Zipes (1995), imagination is domesticated. In The
Matrix, the machines become, for all intents and purposes, the creators as they
submit humans to their will and even provide them with an alternate reality. The
allegory is about the creator/created dynamics, God/humankind/robots or toys, the
pot turning against the potter. Had Toy Story been produced by The Matrix
machines, it would probably have introduced the concept of submissiveness as
acceptable.

The machines in The Matrix and Terminator, as well as the monster in
Frankenstein, have learned to outgrow their creators. Brasher points out that
popular culture actually named the monster (nameless in the novel) after his creator,
thereby confirming the monster’s takeover.¹⁷ The pot becomes the potter, at least
in name. The Matrix and the Terminator franchises illustrate the blurred dichotomy
of begetter and offspring. Fairy tales as a rule reject such ambivalence and even
severely punish characters expressing such notions. The toys in Toy Story never
attempt to outgrow their creator; when Buzz tries, even unwittingly, he is brutally rebuked.

Zipes calls nineteenth-century fairy tales “narrative strategies for literary socialization.” Like their print counterparts, Woody and Buzz are characters whom young viewers identify with; to root for submissive and beaten characters is an age-old pedagogical strategy. One could ask if viewers identify with humans as opposed to plastic toys, but the mere quasi-absence of flesh and blood humans in all *Toy Story* films allows for viewers of all ages to root for the toys. As a matter of fact, Sid in *Toy Story* and Al in *Toy Story 2*, the most prominent humans of their respective movies, are also among the most unbearable and dishonest characters ever portrayed and are not engaging enough for young viewers. In Collodi’s *Pinnochio* and Disney’s version of it (1940), Pinnochio is created by a human but is continuously punished for either his disobedience (to humankind) or for making the wrong choices, acknowledging the limitation of free will. Readers also identify with Pinnochio as most humans of the story are either corrupt or weak; hence Collodi’s audience rooted for the submissive character and cheered for his admission of guilt. *Toy Story* audiences, for their part, do identify with toys who learn and strive in their submissiveness to the potter.

**Conclusion**
Cautionary tales ending in a vindication of submissiveness abound in Western culture\textsuperscript{18}, \textsuperscript{19} and Disney’s own documented history is a tribute to the continuity of the tradition\textsuperscript{20},\textsuperscript{21},\textsuperscript{22},\textsuperscript{23}. Pixar picked up the torch and constructed a relevant Judeo-Christian allegory of the biblical pot and potter moral around a world of toys and their owner, where the toys (clay or pot) submit to their master (potter). Although mature audience-related media objects like \textit{The Matrix} and \textit{Terminator} franchises rather warn of the foolishness of playing God (as your creation may turn against you), juvenile films settle for basic deterrent strategies not to question the potter at all.

In \textit{Toy Story}, the lesson comes from characters the viewers identify with, Woody and Buzz, who do not question their creator and/or potter and/or master. The religious socialization of the characters involves toys answering to humans who are God’s stand-in and who, in spite of their imperfection (Sid, for instance) must be obeyed.

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9 Ackerman is of the opinion that the Christian concept of resurrection is one of the themes of the saga (898). Toys are battered, disemboweled but, like the near-dead or zombie toys in Sid’s backyard, come back to life again and again. Incidentally, Woody is destined for immortality in TS2 when he is scheduled to go to a museum, also Byrne, Eleanor and Martin McQuillan. *Deconstructing Disney*. London: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 128.


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