

You've Got a Friend in Things: Thing Theory and Consumerism in Children's Films

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**Abstract:**

Thing theory has gained traction in recent years after Bill Brown's essay codified the theory. Using his definition of things and their distinction from objects, as well as drawing from Jane Bennett's work with the thing/object divide, in particular examining the flat ontology they seek to create between things and humans, I look at the genre of children's films and how the anthropomorphized characters play into this distinction. After examining two specific films, *The Brave Little Toaster* and the *Toy Story* series, I conclude that they subvert the hierarchy laid out by thing theory, and that things are instead a less desirable form of being compared to objects. These films support objects as a preferred method of being, and from this, estrangement with the world is eliminated but consumerism is supported. After examining another film in that vein, *Beauty and the Beast*, I consider the implications that children's films have in our society, and how this potentially informs the adult lives of my generation and others following. The things in these beloved films that children grow up with perhaps contribute to the consumerist nature that adults find themselves participating in. Rather than alleviating anxieties about consumerism, these movies instead create anxieties alongside dismantling Brown and Bennett's flat ontology.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction: Theory Overview	4
Chapter 1: The Brave Little Thing	12
Chapter 2: You've Got a Friend in Things	19
Chapter 3: Beauty and the Things in Support of Consumerism	29
Conclusion: Teaching Kids About Consumerism	36
Works Cited	39

## Introduction: Theory Overview

A feather duster, wardrobe, piano, footstool, teapot and teacup, coat rack, clock, and candelabra sit on the steps of a castle in the snow. A bunch of objects, nothing more than some furniture and miscellaneous items, nothing to really care about. And yet this shot is perhaps one of the most emotional in the 2017 live-action adaptation of the Disney classic *Beauty and the Beast*. The castle servants, transformed into objects by an evil witch punishing their prince for his shallowness, appear to permanently and fully transform into the objects they have embodied for the entirety of the film, losing their humanity.



*Beauty and the Beast* (2017)

I watched this film in the theater and felt a surprising amount of sadness at a bunch of items just sitting on screen. Why is it that an audience would even care about these objects? Why do we feel any attachment to a bunch of objects that we all have at home and never think twice about? This film is not the only instance of children's films using items to create emotional reactions in an audience. Objects frequently come to life all the time for the entertainment of children. What does the genre as a whole seem to say about things then?

Think of all the things that surround you in this moment. I'm typing this thing on a thing, while I have other things I should be doing. There's that one thing I can't remember the name of.

I've got things piled up around me, things with which I organize my other things, things that belong to other people, things for eating and things for reading. The word is applied liberally, referring to any thing that has a name we can't remember, some thing that we can't refer to with definitiveness. But is there some distinction that can be drawn between the objects that overwhelm our consumerist lives, and the particular things that stand out to us? Thing theory posits that there is. Perhaps then, in thing theory lies the answer to why we care so much about the things in *Beauty and the Beast*.

And yet, can thing theory fully account for what occurs in these children's films? These films do something more than just entertain children. They comment on the distinction between the thing and object that thing theory describes, particularly on the transformation and relationship between these two states and humans. They comment on social hierarchies and consumerism. The way that these texts present the thing can inform how we theoretically view it and what deeper meanings the movies have based on how the film employs the thing. Importantly, they challenge the typical paradigm laid out by thing theory. Things in these movies don't operate in the way we would expect them to, instead subverting hierarchies and disrupting assumptions.

The discussion of things precedes a formal theory about them. But in the 2001 formative essay, "Thing Theory," Bill Brown applies theory to things, instantiating a field to encompass the varied work surrounding this subject and formalizing his definition of a thing. He draws from a long historical and philosophical discussion surrounding objects and subjects and applies the discussion to our contemporary culture, our object-saturated consumerist world. As he says in *Other Things*, "I mean to dislodge the binary [of object and thing] from philosophy...in order to disclose what literature and the visual and plastic arts have been trying to teach us about our

everyday object world” (5). He seeks to shift the conversation of object and subject away from the philosophical “dance” that objects have been participating in and instead focus on things. While sounding quite general, the way Brown defines things describes very specific items in our lives. For him, objects are all the stuff we surround ourselves with but merely exists in the background, and attention isn’t called to them. On the other hand, things call attention to themselves, particularly by existing outside of the way we typically use them. The paradigmatic example Brown uses is a window. A clean window is an object because when we use it we literally see through it, and never really give any mind to what the window is. Conversely, “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (*Things* 4). So, when the window becomes dirty and no longer works for us, it has been removed from its typical cycle of use and we can call it a thing. Things can also be items that we have emotional attachments to, like a family heirloom or something on which we place great sentimental value. If you were to think of what you would grab in a fire if you only had time to grab one item, it would probably be a thing instead of an object.

To look at an example in film, *The Little Mermaid* offers a notable instance of Brown’s delineation of things. Ariel, a mermaid fascinated by the human world above the sea, hoards human objects she finds in shipwrecks. They are objects that humans would look over, a fork or a pipe or other miscellaneous debris. But they catch her eye, and she collects them, and they are things to her. She doesn’t use the fork to eat nor does she smoke the pipe, but she holds onto them anyway. In her song, “Part of Your World,” Ariel sings of “gadgets and gizmos,” “whozits and whatzits,” and “thingamabobs.” She doesn’t even know the names for the things she’s collecting, much less what their intended use would be for the humans they were meant for. But the things mean more to her than anything else in her life.

In line with this, Brown estimates that “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (“Thing Theory” 4). A thing stands in reliance to the way a human uses it, and whether that use is classified as an intended use or not. You can’t make a list of things and a list of objects that will hold in all situations. Rather things exist only when considered in relation to a subject, and Brown clearly notes that any object has the potentiality within it to be a thing (*Other Things* 5). What is a thing to one person will seem like a common everyday object to another person. Any object can be transformed into a thing at any moment depending on who it is in association to. Ariel the mermaid loves her human artifacts, and her relationship with them transforms what would seem like a bunch of useless trash to one person into things in relation to her. When we think of the objects in our lives, the ones we can describe as things are the ones that we are attached to, the ones that mean more to us than just what they are supposed to be used for. They are the broken things we hang onto when others encourage us to throw them away, the random items to which we have assigned sentimental value. Anything to which we designate meaning outside of an ordinary use is a thing.

Brown seeks to establish the distinction between objects and things as it relates to cultural fields and not in the fields of metaphysics or psychoanalysis where this discussion has previously resided (*Other Things* 19). Lesley Stern writes in this vein on film, asking “how do things acquire presence and meaning in the cinema?” (*Things* 397). The quotidian styles that movies follow invoke a sense of gestural attention and this then elicits a quality of thingness (*Things* 404). Just as objects become things to us in our everyday lives, so too does this happen with film. When a movie captures the mundane everyday life, it removes the actions we do every day from banality, places them within a narrative timeline, and lends them visibility. For Stern, while making coffee with the necessary accoutrements may follow an intended use, the banality of

making coffee signals morning to the view, and this signal for Stern is an indication of thingness. The way that humans interact with things on screen causes attention to be paid to things where before we might not have thought twice about them. Stern pays close attention to the cigarette, noting that everyday rote motion imbues the object of a cigarette with gesture, which makes it become a thing. Precisely because they are the kind of objects we would be inclined to overlook they have a great power in films. We see cigarettes in films as things where in our own lives they are overlooked as mere objects that we interact with, and thus Stern illustrates the way film can be a site of transformation between object and thing as Brown defines them.

Additionally, Brown in several instances references the way things and humans seem similar to each other. In *A Sense of Things*, Brown discusses how “things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like” (13), and in *Other Things* observes the feeling that “we can’t at times differentiate ourselves from things” and “things have somehow come to resemble us” (9). Objects remain objects, but humans project a bit of humanity onto the things we cherish, and the things likewise influence us. This kind of connectedness between humans and objects is further explored by Jane Bennett in “The Force of Things: Steps Towards an Ecology of Matter.” Bennett focuses on “vital materialism,” which is her way of viewing things as possessing a vibrancy and power. She defines thing power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (351). She talks about some trash that she saw one morning, but refuses to view it as trash per se. Rather she focuses on the power it had to capture her recognition. To her, things “command attention, exude a kind of dignity, provoke poetry, or inspire fear” (350). Despite the constant cycle of production accelerating obsolescence, things are not debris.

Bennett's work draws from Spinoza, and his conception of the world as merely extensions of the one substance of God/Nature. Since everything is just a mode, or manifestation of that one substance, all things are connected for the Spinozist in a deeper way than we normally conceive of the world. Bennett, drawing from this, looks at how "all bodies are kin in the sense of being inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (*Vibrant Matter* 12). Everything is connected because it is all vibrant, from us as humans to the trash we produce. Importantly for her, this vivacity of matter only occurs as a function of being part of an assemblage ("The Force of Things" 351). Thing power only exists when we look at things as part of a larger system, what Bennett calls the "knotted world of vibrant matter" (*Vibrant Matter* 13). When we consider matter in this way, the connection between humans and things becomes stronger. To Bennett, the differences between humans and objects can be "minimized" if we consider matter as lively (*Vibrant Matter* 12). Since the same animated matter makes up everything, subjects and objects aren't so different as we would like to believe. Thing power gives things in groups the ability to act similar to how a subject does and assert itself as more than just an object.

To continue with the example of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel's collection of human artifacts is just that, a collection. While anyone else would look at any particular item and see trash, Ariel instead sees something worthy of adding to her compilation of human things. She has an entire cavern filled with things she has collected, things that would seem like trash but rather, when located in the groups she curates, contain a vibrancy vitally important to her. The importance she places on things here allows for some sort of emotion to be tied to her things, such that when her father destroys her collection she feels a great amount of sadness, and so do we as an audience. Her collection of things imbues them with a sort of power as Bennett

describes that caused them to present with a great amount of liveliness, that equates them to more than what a random object would.

Brown, Stern, and Bennett all offer up different ways of perceiving the material world that surrounds us. No longer do the objects that mean nothing to us and the things that mean everything to us possess the same valence. Rather under thing theory we see that things carry import in the world. They have a vibrancy that can influence humans and minimizes the differences we like to think we have separating us from objects. In film, this is readily apparent in the way that movement and everyday habits transform objects into things for an audience. In other words, thing theory seeks to create a type of flat ontology, one in which things and humans possess the same amount of subjectivity, or are on the same level, so to speak, while objects are still relegated as lesser.

However, the thing theory paradigm as it now stands ends up not being sufficient to account for what children's films have to say about things and objects. Children's films seem like an exceptionally good medium to get at the implications of thing theory by approaching the discussion narratively, instead of philosophically. Children's films rely on an intense suspension of disbelief, and the items they depict coming to life take on an air of magic. Where adults and their interests in popular art have seemed to suppress the thingness of objects and make everything part of the background, children love and appreciate tales where items don't act in the expected ways.

After examining two specific films, I conclude that they subvert the hierarchy laid out by thing theory, and that things are instead a less desirable form of being compared to objects. These films support objects as a preferred method of being, and from this, estrangement with the world is eliminated but consumerism is supported. After examining another film in that vein, I

consider the implications that children's films have in our society, and how this potentially informs the adult lives of my generation and others following. The things in these beloved films that children grow up with perhaps contribute to the consumerist nature that adults find themselves participating in, and our inability to escape it.

## Chapter 1: The Brave Little Thing

A toaster, lamp, radio, vacuum, and electric blanket don't necessarily seem like the ideal candidates for the protagonists of a movie. But the 1987 movie *The Brave Little Toaster* brings them to life and presents us with an ideal world, one in which things love us back more than we love them. The movie opens with images of each appliance in its "resting" state. The toaster reflects a rising sun, the vacuum sits in the closet, the lamp and radio sit peacefully on the bedside table. You wouldn't know them to be anything other than inanimate objects; they just act as a part of the scene, setting the stage for whatever movie is to come. When they come to life they embark on a wild adventure to get back to their owner who they intensely love, even going so far as to give their lives for him.

Anthropomorphism works to bring these appliances to life. In the first scene a radio clicks on, presumably automatically, an alarm to wake up an empty house with no human. When listening to the morning news the radio spouts, a second voice is added into the mix, even though no human is present into the room. From there the radio talks back, straying from whatever news was being told before, and then a lamp enters the frame, the owner of the disembodied voice heard before. More and more things come to life; the electric blanket, the air conditioner, the vacuum, and finally the toaster all "awaken" from their resting states, embody human traits, and make up the lively characters of the movie. They converse, they dance around, they live their appliance lives. The anthropomorphism gives them agency and makes them seem alive.

The appliances seem even more alive when they are contrasted with a death early in the film. The air conditioner, confined to a window, gets worked up about how the other appliances, "low-watts" as he calls them, are in on a conspiracy. He yells, appears to try to leave the

window, short-circuits and explodes, essentially dying. His lifeless “corpse” remains in the background for the rest of the scene.



*The Brave Little Toaster*, Air conditioner corpse in the background (top left) while appliances have a meeting

Furthermore, there are other incidents where appliances seem to be able to die. A scene in the middle of the film shows an appliance salesman pulling apart a blender in order to sell the motor to a customer. The scene resembles a horror movie, with the dismantling of the blender paralleling the dismemberment of a body.



*The Brave Little Toaster*, Appliance salesman dismantling blender

The parts salesman puts on gloves, aggressively yanks out the cord, and picks up a screwdriver that glints in the light menacingly. Then there is a shot of his shadow that makes it

look like he is stabbing the blender. All of this makes the blender seem like it has a body being violently harmed, like in torture in a horror movie. The appliances seem even more alive and feeling given the somehow gruesome deaths they are contrasted against.

In addition to being lively, the appliances, considering that they are hardly used for their intended purpose, are decidedly things throughout the narrative. The toaster only makes toast at the end of the film, the blanket never warms anyone up, the vacuum cleans things once, but for the rest of the time the items operate in ways which we would not expect. Much of their time isn't even spent in a home where it would make sense to use them. They traverse through a forest, where obviously a toaster wouldn't be useful, or a vacuum for that matter. The film removes objects from their intended use, places them in an entirely new setting, calling attention to them, transforming them to things.

As things, they embody love for their owner, Rob. The appliances reside in a summer cabin, they remember when the boy they love used to visit, and woefully pine for him to return again. Every time they hear a car it is a cause for excitement, a chance for them to see the person they love most. They keep the cabin clean in case he was ever to return. At the vacuum's suggestion that they could have a new master, the blanket says, "I don't want a new master, I want our master," gesturing to the fact that they don't just love being owned, they specifically love their owner. The electric blanket cries about Rob often and carries around a picture of him. All the appliances love him and miss him so much that they decide to leave the cabin and go on a journey to the "City of Light," accompanied by a whole song. And in the ultimate show of love, the toaster commits suicide at the end to save Rob from the crusher at the dump. He analyzes the situation, recognizes that the only way he can save Rob is to throw himself into the gears and jam them, and does so with no thought to his own safety. The things use their agency to

demonstrate their love, to find the child they miss and go back to being loved in return. The film completely embodies a world where things love humans as much as we love them.

Furthermore, they fear being thrown away. This anxiety is a demonstration of love. Just as the toys in *Toy Story* fear being replaced, the toaster and company likewise have fears of modernity. When they finally make it to their master's house, the new and fancy appliances say that they are on the "cutting edge of technology," and sing a song about being fancier and better:

More! More! More!  
 Everything you wanted and more  
 More! More! More!  
 We're the bytes and chips to call  
 You just have yourself a ball  
 It's all hyperactive on the edge  
 From LEDs to CRTs  
 Woofers, tweeters, antenna trees  
 An ultra-nylon life of ease  
 Everything you dreamed of on the edge  
 And more.

The new appliances are more technologically advanced, and sing about the consumerist culture of buying more, always needing something more. The new appliances throw the old out the master's window into the dumpster below, and they are carted off to the dump. The older appliances are classified as trash by the newer appliances who see themselves as better. Being older in their view means being less worthy of use. To them, you are either on the cutting edge or you are useless. The intended use of an item is influenced by age, because if you are older then you are less useful, less able to complete the intended use. When the toaster and company arrive at the dump they have to avoid a malevolent magnet who brings broken cars to their destruction by a crusher. The cars sing a song entitled "Worthless," in which they lament at the fact that they had their experiences in life and then were dumped and deemed worthless as the title suggests.

However, for the appliances, loving Rob is a job. It borders on reverence, to such an extent that being a thing appears to have tied with it some sense of duty. In the beginning of the film, the appliances gather in the cabin they have been abandoned in and look to the toaster for “orders.” The toaster gives them chores to do, cleaning and making sure the cabin is in order should their owner ever return for them. They view being a thing a duty. It is their job to serve their owner. And this is supported by the fact that they refer to Rob as their “master.” They don’t seem to know the owner’s name, nor would they be inclined to use it. They call him master throughout the entire film, constantly reinforcing a deferential dichotomy between the items and the humans. They feel some sort of love born out of a sense of duty.

As a demonstration of this love tied with duty, the appliances never reveal their agency. They act lifeless around the Rob, even when they are trying to be rescued from the dump. They have to lay inert and hope that Rob stumbles upon them and takes them home. They can’t actively seek him out, they can’t let him know that they are serving him. From this, a hierarchical situation is born. The appliances don’t want their agency, they would rather go back to being used for their intended use and abandon their agency. This is reinforced by the happiness they feel at being used for their intended use. At the end of the movie, the toaster is used for the first time to actually make toast. And Rob is so happy that he got a piece of toast, and the toaster is likewise happy that he was able to provide the toast. Rob didn’t need the toaster to be his friend, he just needed it to make him food. In doing so both the toaster and Rob receive the greatest amount of happiness. In another scene, the lamp talks about a time Rob changed his light bulb after it burnt out. The lamp thinks on this as the happiest time in the world for him, because he takes it to be a sign of Rob’s love. And likewise, in this moment Rob is happy because he needs the light from the lamp to read. Ordinary exchanges between objects and humans are coded as

love in this movie. Part of the reason the air conditioner gets worked up to the point of short circuiting and “dying,” is that he didn’t receive this kind of love, saying “I can’t help it if the kid was too short to reach my dials.” Rob’s love would have been demonstrated by him adjusting the temperature, a totally banal act that the air conditioner sorely missed. Making toast or changing a light bulb are intimate acts that share emotions between the animate objects and the human using them. And it is only because the objects are operating within their intended use that this emotion can occur. Therefore, being an object appears to be the preferable state because it is how humans and consumerist items can better share love.

In line with this consumerist thought, the movie overall seems to be in favor of buying new things instead of repairing old things. Since repairing objects comes at the price of killing another, as the horror scene discussed earlier demonstrated, buying new things may instead be the answer. Buying something new allows for the greatest amount of happiness because it allows the human to have a fully functioning item that doesn’t result in the murder of another. Additionally, the song “Cutting Edge” (lyrics above) doesn’t necessarily condemn technological advancements. In some ways, it glorifies the new features that new technology possesses, and instead of warning against consumerism and buying something you don’t need, it makes it seem like a better way for every entity, human and object, to achieve happiness.

What this movie seems to be impressing on children then, is foremost that the world is not so foreign as we might think. Every time we turn around it’s possible that our possessions come to life, and are always striving for the best for us. The best thing for us is them acting as objects, as this results in the greatest amount of happiness overall. The appliances of *The Brave Little Toaster* demonstrate that things don’t necessarily want to be things, but instead would rather give up their agency and be objects that serve us. This ultimately reads in favor of

consumerism: if objects want to serve us, then why not buy as many objects as possible and feed into our consumerist natures?

## Chapter 2: You've Got a Friend in Things:

The opening of the 1995 Pixar film *Toy Story* features a child playing with his toys. A relatively normal beginning, Andy plays with Woody the cowboy and a variety of other toys. Andy voices each toy that he plays with, so that the child's voice gives voice to the characters just as his hand gives them movements. The first indication that we are watching anything other than a tale about a child comes in the form of a point of view shot from the perspective of a toy itself. Andy slides Woody down the banister, and there is a cut to what the toy sees as it slides towards the child waiting for him down below.



*Toy Story*, Andy from Woody's point of view, sliding down a banister

By dedicating a shot to the toy's point of view, the audience has the first indication that this toy is not just a normal toy. Narrative power is bestowed on the toy, and we see the world through his eyes. The toy is not just an object that will fade into the background. Rather, from this very first shot, the audience knows that this toy will have a bigger role. He will not just be a toy that the main character plays with; he will be the main character.

This opening sets the stage for a movie, and later two sequels, that enchant audiences with their use of anthropomorphism. I use this term in the sense that while the toys do resemble humans, they are generally inanimate and as such the vital human characteristic of being alive

and an ability to communicate are attributed to them. These toys, through the power of animation, are given personalities and the ability to speak and act as humans do.

Anthropomorphism gives them agency, and the audience develops an attachment to these characters precisely because they are human-like. As discussed previously, there are basically two ways in which we can understand objects to be transformed into things. They can be something to which we assign sentimental value, or items that have been removed from their intended use. Toys don't quite fit into the established paradigm because to some extent their intended use *is* to be sentimentalized, or have emotions attached to them. Children will play with anything, and can turn even the simplest of objects into a best friend. A toy is made specifically to be used in combination with imagination to provide entertainment or comfort or some other feeling. Objects follow their intended use, and things have emotions tied to them. So, in the case of toys, the distinction between thing and object becomes ambiguous because it embodies aspects of both thingness and objectness. Inevitably anthropomorphism imbues the objects with subjecthood, and in so doing complicates the extent to which we could ever view them as an object. In light of this ambiguity, I propose a third way in which we can view objects being transformed into things. In a situation such as this, I think the extent to which an item can show agency can help define if it is a thing or an object. An item bereft of agency would be classified as an object because it is just being used and can't act on its own. But the items with agency can interact with each other and the world. They seem to be more in line with what Brown thinks of as things because they can assert their thingness. The agency allows them to operate outside the intended use of the toy to be loved.

Anthropomorphism gives things this agency and is used to demonstrate how the toys love Andy. The things interact with each other, and by possessing human qualities we view them to

be equal to humans on an ontological level. Andy and Woody have a reciprocal relationship; each one cares for the other. Take, for instance, the classic song from the film, “You’ve Got a Friend in Me.” This song plays in the beginning during a montage of Andy playing with the toys, especially Woody:

Some other folks might be  
 A little bit smarter than I am  
 Bigger and stronger too, maybe  
 But none of them will ever love you  
 The way I do, it's me and you, boy  
 And as the years go by  
 Our friendship will never die  
 You're gonna see it's our destiny  
 You've got a friend in me

The song is sung by Randy Newman, who has no other role in the film aside from singing this song. Being sung by an impartial third party, the song can thus be read as applying to either Andy or Woody. The persona of the lyrics could either be Andy, singing about Woody, or Woody singing about Andy. This reciprocal nature implies that Andy and Woody are on the same level, so to speak, in that they are similar and contain the same agency and ability to love. Woody possesses something within him that allows him to be a friend to Andy, to be more than just a toy. Woody isn’t just some object lying around that Andy sometimes plays with; he is a fundamental part of Andy’s life, a friend that he constantly turns to. We understand from the beginning, based on how Andy’s room is decorated in a Western style and how Andy dresses with his cowboy hat that Woody the cowboy exerts a huge influence on Andy, so much so that he can be considered a friend. And as the song demonstrates Woody loves Andy just as much. His agency allows him to demonstrate that love to the audience, to show the audience how the world could potentially love us back. He feels intense jealousy when his place is taken by the

new toy Buzz Lightyear, and even conspires to get rid of him in order to spend more time with Andy again.

This love extends through all three movies, and is greatly exemplified by the anxieties the toys hold in regards to them potentially being thrown away. In the second film, the evil Prospector doll Stinky Pete says to the gang of toys “You’ll all be forgotten, rotting forever in some landfill.” And in the last film, the antagonist Lotso, a stuffed bear, says “We’re all just trash, waiting to be thrown away. That’s all a toy is.” The toys constantly walk a fine line between being cherished or being trash. In the second movie Woody’s arm rips, and Andy can’t take him to camp with him. This results in a nightmare scene of Woody’s in which Andy says, “I forgot, you’re broken. I don’t want to play with you anymore” before throwing Woody away. This demonstrates the importance of the intended use for toys, because if they can’t be loved then they are useless to a child. If they can’t play with the toy then it holds no interest, and once a child grows up the toys necessarily become trash. And yet the love that the toys have for the child don’t just melt away, and therefore the anxiety really becomes about unreciprocated love.

These anxieties particularly come to a head in the last film, wherein Andy is grown up and going to college, and there is unrest amongst the toys as to what their fate will be, either being thrown away or stored in the attic, neither of which the toys want. They desperately desire to be played with again, to be used in their intended way, to be able to fulfill their job. And they eventually conspire to be donated to a daycare so that they can fulfill their intended use, instead of just sitting in an attic. They love Andy, but ultimately their duty to him was fulfilled and they needed to move on and be loved by someone else. Andy could no longer see the toys as things in his life anymore, and they become objects that he had to clear out before going to college. The very last scene of *Toy Story 3* encapsulates all the love that they held for Andy. Andy plays with

his toys one last time with a young neighbor girl to whom he gives his toys. And after this, as Andy drives away, Woody comes to life and says “So long partner” to the disappearing car, emotionally summing up three movies worth of love. The word “partner” here, while drawing on Woody’s designation as a cowboy doll, also signifies the reciprocity that was apparent in the initial song of the first film. His love for Andy doesn’t disappear throughout any of the movies, allowing us to believe that the world really would do anything for us, and even when we are done with our objects and have no use for them, they still love us.

But for Woody, caring for Andy is more like a job than anything else, and the role of labor complicates this love that the toys have for Andy. All of the toys view being played with as their role in the world. Woody gathers all of Andy’s toys for a “staff meeting,” indicating that he is acting as the boss of a staff of toys. They discuss a “plastic corrosion awareness” meeting, a testament to the kind of external work they do, almost like a type of career development for the toys. It all sounds very corporate, like what a child would think adults do all day in a big fancy office. It serves to give the toys some adult value, further emphasizing the fact that being a toy is actually very serious work. In the third movie, Woody even explicitly says “This job...is about being there for Andy,” verifying that his occupation of being a toy dictates his entire purpose in life. And perhaps most dramatically, in *Toy Story 2* Buzz quotes Woody, saying that “Life’s only worth living if you’re being loved by a kid.” So not only is it a job, with labor being performed, to love a kid, but wrapped up into that is the entire reason for living for these toys. Their job and their existence is to love the kid that plays with them.

Part of the humor of *Toy Story* is that initially Buzz doesn’t know that he is a toy, instead thinking himself to be an actual space ranger like the toy is meant to emulate. He doesn’t understand his job in the world, and it causes him a great amount of angst and confusion. At one

point he goes so far as to throw himself down the stairs as he's so disturbed when he learns the fact that he is a toy and not actually a space ranger who can communicate with Star Command. He's truly happy once he realizes that his calling in life is to serve Andy, and he does so faithfully throughout the remaining movies. The only way for these toys to achieve any form of happiness is to be loved by a child.

As part of their commitment to this job, the toys cannot betray their agency around Andy, and they act lifeless when he is present. Whenever any human is around they go limp, defaulting to their factory produced smiles, having to be in the same place that the child left them in. They can't betray that they have any life outside of the life that Andy imbues them with by playing with them. And the toys want this; they want to be played with. They don't want to be animate but rather want their actions to be dictated by another being. Therefore, part of the labor of being a toy seems to be giving up agency. As Jessie, a cowgirl doll in *Toy Story 2* says to Woody:

...Andy is a real special kid, and to him you're his buddy, his best friend, and when Andy plays with you it's like even though you're not moving, you feel like you're alive, because that's how he sees you.

Jessie shows that the toys don't want to have any agency and would be perfectly content to be entirely animated only by Andy if that is what would serve their child the best. The moments where they have the least agency are the moments where the toys are the most fulfilled. In the last scene of *Toy Story 3*, when Andy plays with the toys one last time, the audience feels that this is the happiest moment for the toys, to be reliving the glory days of when Andy was young and cherished them. The playtime scenes are by far the happiest across all three films. All the toys want to do is go back to being played with, go back to having no agency, and this gives them happiness.

By giving up agency and being played with, the toys essentially revert back to being objects, albeit a particular kind of objects whose use value is reliant on imagination. They give up the qualities that would define them as a thing by giving up agency and operating specifically within an intended use. *Toy Story* thus challenges the paradigm of thing theory, and changes how we can look at the thing. The toys strive to return to their intended use. The thing strives to return to being an object. It doesn't want to be remain a thing any more than Woody wants to be an animate cowboy. Woody longs to return to Andy and be played with and have his agency ripped from him. A thing appears to want to return to its intended cycle of use. The desire to give up agency has interesting implications, since thing theory as a whole uses language that implies that objects want to be things, and that being things is preferable. Brown describes "objects asserting themselves as things" ("Thing Theory" 4), indicating an aspiration to be a thing, a want for an item to be considered as more than just an object. Bennett uses phrasing examining how the thing "commands attention as vital and alive in its own right" ("The Force of Things" 350). She views things as more important than objects because they contain more vibrancy and thus it is a preferable state for an item to be in. Thing theory on a whole seems to view the ontological difference between things and objects as a hierarchical one. Things are just better than objects. But if things don't want to be things, if all they want to do is return to their cycle of intended use as the film suggests, then thing theory may be a little misguided in this hierarchy. Objecthood may be the preferable state, thereby disrupting the paradigm.

Not only do the *Toy Story* films dismantle the typical thing/object hierarchy, they comment on several aspects of consumerism as well. In *Toy Story 2*, the audience learns that Woody is actually a toy based on a successful TV show, and he is just one item out of a ton of merchandise promoting it. The movie overall touches on aspects of what it means to be a part of

a collection, or to be a collector's item. For example, there is one doll, the evil Prospector Stinky Pete (a part of the Woody collection), who is "mint in the box, never been opened." Precisely because he is a collectable, he never got the chance to be loved and played with, and Woody and the other toys view this as the greatest tragedy that could befall a toy. Indeed it seems that the fact that he wasn't played with caused him to be so cynical about what it means to be a toy. He even almost manages to convince Woody that being loved in a toy museum in Japan would be preferable to watching Andy grow up. Yet in the end, Woody would rather serve his child than be a part of a collection in which he would never be played with. The museum is cast as a site of preservation instead of use, to the point of destruction. So ultimately, collectables are viewed in an unfavorable light. If we want the objects around us to be serving us in the best capacity, we have to use them for their intended use, not sentimentalize them and put them in museums. So once again the thing is relegated to a less favorable position.

Additionally, Buzz is a character from a commercially successful franchise within the movie's world. His story line in the second film comments on mass production. When he ends up in a toy store he looks down an aisle that is filled with Buzz Lightyears who are exactly the same as he is.



*Toy Story 2*, Buzz (bottom right) walking down an aisle full of Buzz Lightyear toys

This causes much confusion in regard to mistaken identity throughout the film, including an argument in which two identical toys contend that “I’m the real Buzz Lightyear.” In the end, it’s settled that each Buzz has their own personality shaped by their individual experiences. The Buzz owned by Andy is different and just as valid as the Buzz that was in the toy store. Therefore, a consumer doesn’t have to feel bad about mechanization and the mass production of products that seem almost the same, because deep down they seem to have something different about them that, while we might not be able to see it, makes them an individual.

Furthermore, the doll Barbie, based on the famous toy of the same name in the real world, plays a role in the last two films as well.



*Toy Story 2, The Barbie aisle*

Barbie is given a whole personality and comes to life in these films just as millions of girls, including myself, imagined their Barbie could growing up. *Toy Story* isn’t just drawing on general toys, but on specific toys that kids would already have. It actively works to make us feel good about buying toys because the toys we buy might be just like the ones in the movies. They might love us just like the ones in the movie love Andy. The first movie came out in 1991 and you can still find tons of merchandise based on the characters. They are a prime way for Disney and Pixar to make even more money, because once you’ve seen the movie, they’ve convinced

you to consume the merchandise too. So not only are the movies making us feel better about the toys we already own, they convince the consumer to go out and buy more.

The movies become almost an elaborate form of marketing, the creation of a franchise to not only entertain and delight once but to spawn a whole line of merchandise to be purchased. *Toy Story* is a movie that makes you feel better about objects in order to convince you to buy more. And while we fall in love with the adorable personalities of all the characters, all parties find the ultimate amount of happiness when their personalities don't exist and they are being played with as intended.

### **Chapter 3: Beauty and the Things in Support of Consumerism**

Taking into account the limitations of the thing theory paradigm given my two readings, I must instead offer something in its place. The paradigm as it stands now does not sufficiently explain what occurs in these films and the interactions they depict between humans and the consumerist world. Thing theory appears to presuppose a world in which we are estranged from the objects around us, and the way that we alleviate that estrangement is to imbue objects with a kind of power, to look at them as more than an object, to sentimentalize, to refuse to throw away because we see them as having some sort of importance. Both Brown and Bennett look at the ways we can connect with the world in spite of those differences. Thing theory describes those connections, by showing how humans have attachments to stuff normally considered useless. Brown thinks that by projecting humanity onto things, humans take on thingness, but things also seem more human like. Bennett in particular stresses that we are all interconnected, and therefore things can assert themselves as agents. Because of a thing's associations with humans, the similarities to humans and the vibrancy they contain the thing becomes a preferable state. Both Bennett and Brown see to establish a flat ontology of things and humans, breaking apart the hierarchy between the two we typically form. But this isn't what we see occurring in the films overall. With the help of anthropomorphism, examining thingness elevates objects to the level of humans, and things are no longer considered inferior. But in the films, as discussed, the whole intended use of the objects is to be inferior. The objects consistently want to return to being objects and abandon agency, therefore striving to be inferior, and as such the typical paradigm breaks down.

These children's films primarily operate to eliminate estrangement. By estrangement I mean the feeling of separation we have from the world, the feeling that perhaps what surrounds

does not quite fit in with our human sensibilities. By giving something inanimate human traits throughout a narrative, the inanimate is made animate, aligned with humanity, and becomes capable of making choices as a human does. Being an intrinsic character allowed to make choices is a defining feature of agency. It is this agency that allows things to demonstrate love for humans. The movies share a world which loves us back as much as we love it. We sentimentalize things around us, and these movies embody the wish that they love us back. And this love makes the world a little friendlier and a little less strange.

However, this love is greatly complicated by the role that labor plays in the films. As seen in both *The Brave Little Toaster* and *Toy Story*, the things view serving their child or their master as their job. Their job is to love us, their work is to make us happy, whatever that takes. They love us as they serve us. The best demonstration of that love for them is to act as an object instead of a thing. In *Toy Story* the toys are happiest when they are being played with, and in *The Brave Little Toaster* the toaster is happiest when he is being used to make toast. They don't want the agency that they happen to have, and are happiest when they don't have it. Therefore, to humans, the most valuable state is objecthood rather than thinghood. This directly contradicts what thing theory overall posits.

Therefore, while thing theory would maintain that being a thing would be preferable to being an object, I must instead argue that this genre of film offers a compelling contradiction, that being an object would be better. And while they work to eliminate estrangement, I believe that this reinforces consumerism overall. Our consumerist world encourages the consumer to acquire more and more goods in large quantities. These films are a small sliver of our typical American culture that greatly reinforces the consumer. Eliminating estrangement and designating objecthood as the preferable state allays any guilt the consumer might feel. It both allows us to

not feel guilty about the excess that surrounds us and to not feel guilty about the desire we have for the newer or better versions of items. We don't have to feel bad about buying even more objects because they love us and they want to serve us. The typical thing theory hierarchy doesn't account for the subtle reinforcement of consumerism that these movies embody.

To turn to an example, Disney's original *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and the recent remake of the same name (2017) really emphasize how love and labor play into the thing/object divide and how this eliminates estrangement while reinforcing consumerism. The narrative describes a Prince, who after turning away a witch disguised as an old hag, is cursed, and turned into a Beast. But more relevantly, all the servants inhabiting the castle are turned into household items approximating the duties they would perform. The characters, including a bouteiller turned candelabra, a majordomo turned clock, an entertainer turned piano, and a cook turned teapot, operate as things throughout the narrative. They are anthropomorphized, act like humans, have a hand in the plot, and act in unexpected ways based on the form they take. For example, Lumiere, the candelabra, does more than just light the castle. He acts like a human, operating outside of his intended use, and therefore he and his comrades who act similarly can be seen as things who are on an equal level with humans.

This anthropomorphism allows the things to demonstrate the love they have for humans. A poignant scene in the newer film shows the objects blaming themselves for their master's behavior and selfishness that caused the regrettable transformation. They watched him be raised into an immoral man and did nothing to stop it, with Mrs. Potts saying that they "made their bed and must lie in it." Being turned into objects was their punishment for not loving the Prince enough to help raise him the right way. Despite the fact that the Beast seems like a totally

reprehensible character, the servants love him more once they are things, and in so doing demonstrate the love that things may have for anyone in our own world.

Furthermore, the things of *Beauty and the Beast* self-consciously work to make humans feel good around them. When Chip the teacup speaks to Maurice, the first visitor to the enchanted castle, he says, “Mom says I wasn’t supposed to move because it might be scary.” He moved in order to offer Maurice a cup of tea and knows that a talking teacup would be scary to a human, so he was supposed to act in a way that would decrease that estrangement. Similarly, Belle screams and tries to beat Lumiere with a chair when he speaks to her for the first time. Lumiere responds with a compliment: “You are very strong. This is a good quality,” and Belle immediately begins to trust him. Both Chip and Lumiere are kind to the humans. They actively work to eliminate estrangement. And Belle particularly, as the heroine, demonstrates how easily we accept any lessening of estrangement. She quickly accepts that the castle is full of walking and talking objects, and is easily persuaded to help them in their plight. She reciprocates their love, and the film truly illustrates a fictional world where things love us as much as we love them.

The reciprocity that exists in the film between humans and things further eliminates estrangement. As Bill Brown writes in *A Sense of Things*, referring to objects in literature, “things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like.” In correlation with objects seeming human-like, thereby making them things, humans also seem thing-like. In *Beauty and the Beast* the things are not strictly in that form for the entire duration of the film, and we see the fluidity and reciprocity between things and humans. One state is not permanent, as the characters shift from human to thing and then back again. Therefore, when we look at the humans in the film, we see them as having the potential to be a thing. It’s almost as if every character has an

item counterpart that it can shift into at any time. And conversely, every object in the movie seems like it could turn into an anthropomorphized figure at any given moment. At one point Belle, our heroine, picks up a hairbrush and asks, “Hello, what’s your name?” at which the rest of the characters laugh because it is in fact just a normal hairbrush. The divide between things and humans breaks down, eliminating our estrangement. Since things could at any moment become a human or at any moment a human could become a thing, the world seems so much less divorced from ourselves. Things really aren’t so strange and different from us in this film, they merely occupy a different physical state.

But however much estrangement is eliminated, labor being tied with love complicates the discussion. *Beauty and the Beast* clearly depicts the kind of labor that was so apparent in *The Brave Little Toaster* and *Toy Story*. Similar to how the things in *The Brave Little Toaster* and *Toy Story* don’t want to be things, so too do the things in *Beauty and the Beast* want to go back to being servants and operating within their “intended use.” The power dynamic between the Beast and his servants becomes readily apparent in the musical number “Be Our Guest.” In the song, the following lyrics are sung by Lumière:

Life is so unnerving  
 For a servant who's not serving  
 He's not whole without a soul to wait upon  
 Ah, those good old days when we were useful (hey Cogsworth)  
 Suddenly those good old days are gone  
 Too long we've been rusting  
 Needing so much more than dusting  
 Needing exercise, a chance to use our skills!

In this song we see that the things desire for nothing more than to return to their intended use. They want to go back to the “good old days when [they] were useful,” indicating that they don’t feel useful in the present. “A servant who’s not serving” is useless, essentially, and doesn’t seem

“whole.” A servant not serving would be said to have some amount of agency, because instead of serving someone else they can do what they want. But because they are only defined in terms of their function, these things once again don’t appear to want that agency. All the things want to return back to their intended cycle of use, to go back to what it is that they were made to be doing. Lumiere wants to go back to serving the beast, to use his skills and not be useless. The things don’t feel like they are useful as they are. Thus, in a way, thinghood is an escape from servitude. The characters no longer have to wait on anyone, but then as a result don’t have an intended use. They feel love for their master, but they can’t adequately serve him, and therefore want to go back to being servants. They are more useful as human servants where agency is eliminated.

This film is violent in its portrayal of how things go back to being objects. In *Toy Story* whenever the toys are being played with they revert back to an object state, just becoming inert and adopting a passive face, and the same goes for the appliances in *The Brave Little Toaster*. But the things of *Beauty and the Beast* have to fight to regain their object status. When the townspeople come to kill the Beast and destroy the castle, the things fight back. The teapot pours scalding water on everyone from above, the piano shoots keys like bullets, the furniture crushes people. They are fighting because they have no other choice, and to give the Beast time to right things with Belle and break the spell. They fight to go back to being servants, to lose their agency.

I previously aligned the lack of agency with objects. When the things in *Beauty and the Beast* give up agency they turn into human servants who oddly end up being more objectified than when they were transformed into household items. Things are subservient to objects, breaking the paradigm. The things work to eliminate estrangement, but in so doing reinforce

consumerism. And so, to turn back to the example from my introduction, the reason we are so sad about the things in the snow becomes apparent. The moment where they have transformed back into objects, no longer holding onto any of their agency is one of the most emotional scenes in the movie. The audience feels sad not only because they were once characters, but because the estrangement was eliminated, and we have felt for them the entire movie. But additionally, the audience feels sad because these objects are no longer as useful as they could be. The whole movie they are striving to go back to being humans so that they can operate within their intended use. They want to give up their agency just so they can go back to serving their master. So when they turn into useless objects just sitting outside in the snow, we feel sad because they can't be useful. As a result of this, consumerism seems to be greatly reinforced. If something isn't useful, that's a regrettable state worth being sad over, something that needs to be rectified. Above all else, usefulness is valued. Therefore, we don't have to feel bad about our habits of consumption. Objects want to serve us as they love us, fading into the background so the subject can become central once again, and ultimately alleviates any shred of guilt in order to promote consumerism.

## Conclusion: Teaching Kids about Consumerism

Outside of just subverting the typical view of thing theory, these movies ask a lot of questions about our culture. They heavily reinforce consumerism, epitomized by their serial nature, as each has had a spin-off, sequels, or re-makes (of questionable quality). I think it is important to consider the effect the consumerist nature has on the children watching all of these movies, and thereby the larger role they play in all of society. The movies discussed here seem symptomatic of the genre of film overall. They are not isolated cases, but are a part of a genre that may seem cursorily subversive but instead introduces consumerist ideals to children. My generation grew up with these movies, and as we enter adulthood I think some important questions need to be asked, analyzing the implications of purporting objects to be hierarchically above things.

To start, I want to assert that it is not just the three movies I've analyzed that demonstrate the phenomena. Take for example *The LEGO Movie*. Based off a successful toy franchise, the movie explores similar themes to that of *Toy Story*, namely in how the child plays with toys, as it is his imagination which fuels the toys and gives them life. Consumerism is aptly reinforced because the LEGO line literally runs the story. The characters believe themselves to be independent, but then learn that a child has been playing with them the whole time. This works to eliminate estrangement, as any child playing with LEGOs can imagine that they enjoy living their own lives, even if they really aren't so independent. Or Disney *Fantasia's Sorcerer's Apprentice* short, in which Mickey Mouse attempts to make a broom carry buckets of water for him, which is not a broom's intended use. The broom is anthropomorphized by magic and because it performs a job other than sweeping can be classified as a thing. This role ends up resulting in catastrophe, and order has to be restored by destroying the broom, the price to pay

for an object trying to stray outside its intended use. These are just two more quick examples of an extensive field of film that children are captivated by and learn from, and many more examples of things abound given the prevalence of anthropomorphism directed at children.

All of these movies deal with some aspect of a transition between spaces, where the humans operate in some sort of liminal space. In both *The Brave Little Toaster* and *Toy Story* the main human characters leave for college, a universally understood transition from childhood into adulthood. In *Beauty and the Beast* Belle too seems to be transitioning from her small town life to the bigger things that she wants, a progression from obedient youth to questioning adult. Especially in the case of going off to college as Rob and Andy do, these characters look to objects to make a sense of the change going on around them. So in some respect, finding a greater appreciation of the objects surrounding us, first befriending them but then insisting that they serve an intended use, is a way to move through these liminal spaces and come out safely on the other side. Growing up and becoming an adult means leaving the realm of childhood behind. It means that these characters get to briefly return to a fantastical world where estrangement is allayed. But in order to become a happy adult, the humans have to recognize the value objects possess in terms of their function, and only that. Thus in some way, adulthood seems to be intrinsically tied with consumerism. Rob and Andy are only happy when they bring objects that can serve them to college, and only those objects, leaving behind the things they have no practical use for.

This unification of adulthood with consumerism is a daunting idea. While of course children are consumers long before they can remember that they were so, these movies seem to be specifically tying in the value of maturity with the object. If we can only become adults by buying more and more objects, or better and better objects, replacing the old ones, then maturity

in our society seems to be easily quantifiable. The commodity ends up being the form in which our social values take place, and she who has the better commodity is the more adult, the more socially acceptable.

Furthermore, I think that these movies dismantle that which could be the very thing that we need to make productive change in our culture. Since they eliminate estrangement, we don't feel the strangeness that should accompany the tying in of social values with consumerism. These movies don't make you feel bad that you own a lot of stuff, and rather encourage it. If we don't feel that estrangement, then nothing is stopping us from having continually buying more and more items, and simultaneously buying into the belief that this new item will make life better. New inventions are constantly coming up, from "as seen on TV" gimmicks to actually useful new technological advances. There are so many more objects out there that we didn't know we needed before, and just as many that get cast aside as a long-forgotten relic (like a typewriter eraser). As long as something has a use, people are going to buy it, and keep using it. The objects of *The Brave Little Toaster* feared becoming outmoded by the new cutting edge appliances, but Rob ended up holding on to them because they could still serve a purpose. Yet if the object no longer has a use we throw it away and replace it with something that has a use. And on the off chance that someone pauses to look around and see the consumerist, and therefore wasteful and trash filled society they live in, how can they feel bad when estrangement has been eliminated?

Finally, it's important to examine the extent to which these movies are containing or creating anxieties. Are these movies a positive outlet for the desire that world to love us, or are they instead creating even more anxieties that then must be resolved in other ways? These movies are extremely complicated in all of their various implications, but one of the most

interesting tensions comes from the sentimentalizing of objects that still perform their intended use, as in *Toy Story*. Andy holds onto his toys far past the age when he would still play with them in the hope that they might become useful to him again. We all have the junk drawer full of stuff we aren't sure we'll ever need, but can't get rid of on the off chance that it has the potential to be useful again. And by eliminating estrangement, when we look in that drawer we don't necessarily see an accumulation of crap, but rather things that have the potential to turn into objects, that are waiting for the chance to serve us. And how can we deny them that chance? So we hold onto things, accumulating them alongside the objects that are actually useful, doubling our consumerism, and I think this is a great cause for anxiety. However much it appears that these movies are alleviating anxieties, they are really just creating more.

While the sole cause of my generation's consumerist nature is definitely not a result of these movies, it would be unwise to dismiss the influence they have. Many of these movies have been cherished, so much so as to warrant an excessive number of sequels (a *Toy Story 4* is in production) and remakes, as in the case of *Beauty and the Beast*. They have entered the collective consciousness of children and will continue to be a part of it for the foreseeable future. The varied implications of these movies and their comments on things and objects extend far past what I have the capacity to discuss here. They most certainly subvert the ontological hierarchy set out by Brown and Bennett. And at the very least, the word "thing" will no longer carry the same valence and children's films may not seem so innocuous as they once appeared.

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