

PIXAR WITH LACAN: THE HYSTERIC'S GUIDE TO ANIMATION

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Lilian Monk Rösing's *Pixar With Lacan*, departs from a perhaps over-theorized realm of psychoanalytic film theory—that “fugitive moment” of capture of live-action cinema—to the repeatable, readily reproducible, and seemingly inconsequential forms of computer animation: a dimensional shift seldom entertained in the tradition of psychoanalysis (27). Rösing's argument is cleverly premised upon the extended allegory between the animated forms and figures in Pixar films and the question of “what animates the human being?” (168); how Pixar offers insight into the ways in which the big Other, *objet a*, the voice and gaze and other foundational concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis function in the psychic economy of the subject, or, as Rösing quotes Žižek from *Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Sophie Fiennes, 2014), “Humanity means: the alien is controlling our human bodies” (17).

Rösing offers an extended analysis of individual Pixar films, including early shorts such as the production company's first *Red's Dream* (John Lasseter, 1987), using them as the cultural material from which to introduce Freud and Lacan. Thus, this volume does a lot of heavy lifting in only 190 pages; the reader will gain insight not only to foundational concepts such as Lacan's notion of fantasy, *objet a*, the name-of-the-father, *das Ding*, and the Real, and as well those perceived by many Lacanians as less foundational (depending on who you ask) but more difficult (though no less important) theoretical insights of Lacan's such as his formulae of sexuation, *lamella* and *sinthome*. What we get in this short volume is a delicate balance of dense theoretical work, streamlined introductory work, and often surprising applications to what are widely considered to be ‘innocent’ childrens' films—if there is one paramount lesson we learn via Rösing's readings Pixar, it is the appropriately Freudian observation that there is *nothing* innocent about animated cinema, just as there is *nothing* innocent about childhood sexuality either.

Composed of eleven chapters, an introduction, and epilogue, Rösing focuses each chapter on one particular Pixar film, reading into the finer narratological and psychoanalytical details thereof; for instance, the first three chapters deal each with the first three films of the *Toy Story* franchise (John Lasseter, 1995;1999; 2010; and now Josh Cooley, 2019, though the latter is not included in the present volume) with special attention to the name-of-the-father, the big Other, and the *lamella* respectively. One particularly noteworthy feature of Chapter

Two is the way in which Rösing addresses the oft-neglected development from the psychoanalysis of the Screen Theory era to the post-Copjec era, acknowledging the shift from the imaginary look to the real gaze, from Mulvey to Copjec, and from the Lacan of the “Mirror Stage” to the Lacan of the “gaze” from his Seminar XI.¹ To discuss this shift, Rösing provides a wonderful explication of the impossible gaze from the point of view from the inside of Woody’s (Tom Hanks) body.

Acknowledgement of this shift in psychoanalytic theory has been scant among film studies scholars; Todd McGowan’s *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* and *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and ‘The Rules of the Game’* and Matthew Flisfeder’s *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* are a couple of notable exceptions. Thus, Rösing’s inclusion of this crucial distinction between the Lacan of the imaginary and the Lacan of the real is certainly refreshing especially to readers familiar with latter day psychoanalytic film theory.²

In Chapter Four, on the film *A Bug’s Life* (John Lasseter, 1998), Rösing is perhaps at her very best, relating the rotund caterpillar Heimlich’s (Joe Ranft) “non-genital sexuality” to Dennis Hopper’s perverse sexual display in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986). Not only is this comparison exceptionally entertaining for the reader, but also illustrates the “seat of the drives” belonging to children and to adults, and the preponderance of the sexual in human life, even in the non-genital perversity of an otherwise innocent, animated creature. Rösing’s analysis of *A Bug’s Life* relies on Jack Halberstam’s notion of “Pixarvolt”: a word coined by Halberstam to encapsulate the idea of animation as a transformative technology uniquely harbored, and uniquely queer, in Pixar’s *œuvre*.

In Chapter Six on *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton, 2003), Rösing reads “the stream as an allegory for the Freudian drive” (75), focusing on the film’s topography and a close reading of father figures in the film with regard to Lacan’s *nom du père*. Rösing, following the concept of the drive, describes Dory (Ellen DeGeneres) as “nothing but momentum” (77), and argues against Halberstam’s reading of the character as released from the tyranny of Oedipal temporality via the “‘queer’ temporality of the ephemeral, the momentary, the surprise” (78). Instead, Rösing reads Dory as “a principle of pure movement forwards: ‘just keep swimming!’” (78), and is in this way perhaps closer to Lacan’s reading of Antigone more than anything else. Rösing’s reading of the drive is worth mention for its sophistication: “Drive is a kind of purified desire, desire at its barest ripped of the words and images that sustain it in the symbolic order. Think of the activity of sex, for instance: ripped of all fantasies and words is it nothing but desire consuming itself in a compulsive-repetitive way” (81). One might detect here a bit of Žižek in Rösing’s definition (just as readers of Žižek may detect an echo of Chesterton: “[T]he most comic things of all are exactly the things that are the most worth doing — such as making love”).³ For Lacanians, this relation between desire

and drive (and specifically Freud's *Wiederholungszwang*) may come across as a bit too perfect, too complete, however to pursue this line of inquiry in this short review would be to do a disservice to both Lacan and Rösing.

Although Rösing's chapters on *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), *Cars* (John Lasseter and Joe Ranft, 2006) and *Cars 2* (John Lasseter, 2011) falter a bit—save perhaps for Rösing's variations on the theme of Freud's *Reizschutz*, or, stimulus-shield, “[t]he car may seem as a materialization of modern man's protective shield, yet is it also a fragile shield, actually exposing man's body to lesions and death” (109), and, following Paul Virilio, reading the body of the car as the body of the woman (110)—the volume picks up in Chapter Nine with *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007) and the “ambivalent character” of *objet a*, the “in-you-more-than-yourself” [*Ce qui est en toi plus que toi*], “excremental and sublime” (115), an “immanent excess” (119). This chapter explores not only the excremental character of the Rat in the film, but as well how it functions as, “...‘the other’ that one can be sure to find in every American product of popular culture today. The rat becomes a metaphor of the social or ethnic ‘other’ as the worker, the Afro-American, the Jew,” asking the question, “what is the effect of staging ‘the other’ (ethnic or social) as a rat?” (123). Rösing answers her own question by way of democracy, ruminating on the phrase, “anyone can cook” as “the outspoken dictum of the film, seemingly a very democratic, inclusive and tolerant dictum, but one that has through the film to be reinterpreted: it is not that anyone can cook, it is that someone with a talent for cooking could come from anywhere, even a family of rats. This is the liberalist version of democracy: it is not that everyone should be recognized, it is that the specially talented should be recognized from wherever he comes” (127).

Chapter Ten details *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) as “... a poetic vision of earth as a post-apocalyptic wasteland, and a dystopian vision of the ultimate consumers' society as a totalitarian state” (129). This chapter takes the reader through subjection and subjectivity in late capitalist society, proposing “love as the antidote to that obscene imperative to enjoy” (129), suggesting a vista of what “kind of life... persists when humanity disappears” (130). One of the major highlights of this chapter, as well as the book itself, comes from Rösing's ambitious decision to include an introductory analysis to Lacan's formulae of sexuation through Wall-E and his feminine counterpart Eva—indeed, even seeing the formulae of sexuation juxtaposed with images of these Pixar characters is a sight to see unto itself. Here, Rösing deftly avoids the rote interpretation of the ‘mystical’ character of Lacan's feminine subject, noting correctly how “Žižek regards this depressive feminine position as the foundation of the subject, as that ‘night of the world’ (Hegel) which is at the core of subjectivity, thus claiming ‘femininity’ to be the model for universal subjectivity, rather than ‘masculinity’ as feminist critics would have it” (143). This primacy of the feminine at the level of the subject is crucial, in the opinion of this reviewer, to understanding Lacan, and as

well, for extracting any political ramifications from his work as a whole.⁴ The only problem with Rösing's reading of the feminine position is that it can at times capitulate just a bit to the conception of the feminine as outside of language, or in "a kind of communion with ...lack, with something that escapes language... the position of being in communion with something exceeding the symbolic order... something beyond words" (144/145). What is so often neglected in Lacan's feminine subject is the Woman's identification with the phallus and with the lack in the position of the big Other simultaneously, as Žižek puts it, "Woman is one of the names of the father."⁵ From this vantage, although the feminine is a different form of sexuation, 'Woman' is actually just another version of the primal father, the symbolically castrated subject's fantasy of an uncastrated position (the femme fatale, the woman devoid of a superego, *l'etre-ange*, etc.).⁶

Rösing closes her volume with an enlightening account of the voice (one of Lacan's partial objects appended to Freud's list — breast, shit, phallus, etc.) through the film *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009). Rösing uses Michel's Chion's notion of the *acousmetre* to detail the ubiquity of the voice in *Up* as a voice without a body paradoxically, and somewhat bathetically, 'housed' in the body of the dog Doug (Bob Peterson).⁷ Rösing asks a pertinent question regarding Lacanian orthodoxy, "... why is it, from a Lacanian point of view, so important to maintain the divide between human and animal?" (161), or, the voice as that which incarnates the human flesh as something exceptional. Rather than simply upending this orthodox stance, Rösing supplements an otherwise anthropocentric interpretation with a corrective, asserting that "[a]ctually, the important thing to maintain is that it makes a difference to be a *parletre*, a being of language, inhabited by and inhabiting in the chain of signifiers" (161). In this way, for Rösing, *Up* provides an instance of the *parletre* staged via the animated body of an animal, one who, just as the human *parletre*, is haunted by the chain of signifiers.

In her Epilogue, Rösing makes mention of Sergei Eisenstein's praise of Disney animation for its "aptness for metamorphosis" and "emancipatory potential" (163). Pixar, for Rösing, accomplishes something similar insofar as the medium of virtual reality harbors "the possibility to bring us closer to the real," emphasizing how "the special quality of computer animation is not to break with reality or media or genres as we know them, but to reflect upon them, and on its own construction of them" (167). What is striking about this description is its insistence that what Pixar offers is not simple entertainment, but rather a contemplative form, which, "reproduce[s] not only reality, but also the media and genres to which" it is heir (167). It is in this way that this book accomplishes both tasks that Žižek identifies about reading Lacan through popular culture, "as an introduction to Lacanian 'dogmatics' (in the theological sense of the term)," and "as an excuse for indulging in the idiotic

enjoyment of popular culture.”⁸ Lastly, *Pixar With Lacan* echoes notable titles from the Lacanian tradition, for instance, “Kant *avec* Sade,” and could just as easily have been (sub)titled “Pixar with Žižek”; Rösing creatively navigates through both well-worn and unbeaten territories alike, opening up certain concepts anew, while providing a stable theoretical firmament for others. For these reasons, this title is recommended for undergraduate through professional-level academics whose desire to read Lacan stubbornly butts up against the task of actually endeavoring to do so. Although Rösing’s book is no substitute for Lacan’s seminars, nor for Žižek’s work thereon, the title provides ample ground upon which to stand should one choose to undertake the latter two figures seriously.

¹ See: Slavoj Žižek, *The Frigate of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute Publishers, 2001); Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2014); and Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2007); Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and ‘The Rules of the Game’* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); and Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

² The shift from imaginary look to real gaze echoes the Lacanian shift from imaginary impotence to real impossibility.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatious Press, 2011), 22.

⁴ As Badiou notes in his seminar on Lacan, “This is why people are still fighting over Lacan’s ‘political’ teaching: it’s transmitted in an essentially metaphorical way.” See: Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-philosophy 3* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 127.

⁵ See: Slavoj Žižek, “Woman is One of the Names-of-the-Father, or How Not to Misread Lacan’s Formulas of Sexuation,” *Lacanian Ink* 10 (1995): <https://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm>.

⁶ In “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” from *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec calls for a development of this position (the feminine superego and a feminine form of sublimation) without resorting to the baggage which so often accompanies this position as being ‘beyond language’, a call which she herself follows up with in her text *Imagine There’s No Woman* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002).

⁷ Even the dog’s name “Doug” exemplifies the incarnated figuration of the character, insofar as we transition from animal to subject (the “u” in Doug providing the minimal difference from “Dog,” from an animal to the proper name of a subject). In this case, the “u” functions as *objet a*, as that which is “in the dog more than himself,” providing the material support for his subjectivity even when the voice is taken away.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), vii-viii.