

Wicked wooden eyes, why do you look at me? Geppetto to Pinocchio.

Make no mistake; a toy can be a dangerous thing.

The first thing the puppet Pinocchio does as his maker Geppetto carves him is to mock his master. As his mouth is carved, he laughs at the puppeteer; when his tongue is made, he pokes it out in defiance; he snatches the wig off Geppetto's head with his just finished hands, kicks his nose and runs out the door on his newly made feet.

Pinocchio's animation and defiance are what we all secretly suspect lies under the inanimate surface of our toys – albeit children often long for this interaction while adults shudder at the thought.

Oh, I am sick of being a puppet!...It is time that I became a man!
Pinocchio to the Blue Fairy.

My own two-year old daughter is quite passionate about her Teddy – I often think she would gladly sacrifice a parent to keep her Teddy with her. He shares meals and bedtime; she lovingly changes his nappy, feeds him tea and sings him to sleep. Lately she has embarked on an ambitious project to teach him to talk – having just acquired this skill herself she sees no reason why the same technique would not have equal success with her bear. So she patiently points things out to him, repeats their names and asks him to say the words back to her. While I go along with it all I have to admit to certain doubts as to the chances of success. I am not quite child-like enough to believe in teddy as she does, but my pessimism is mingled with a degree of interest into what will make her finally give up and accept his muteness.

A child's ability to prescribe feelings, thoughts and intentions to their toys is, Adam Gopnik says,

a way of protecting [the child's] own right to have feelings... the essential condition of youth [is to be] mind-visionary: to see everything as though it might have a mind... small children [imagine] that everything could have a consciousness – fish, dolls, toys and soldiers, even parents – and spend the rest of [their] lives paring down the list.

But what are we to make of the adult to whom toys still project this magic? There is something disturbing, something infantile, something not quite right about the adult bedroom covered in dolls, about the possessive and secretive collector of Matchbox cars, the obsessive builder of toy railways. This is something that cannot be explained away entirely by either a longing for childhood memories or a love of popular culture. While toys may be seen in childhood, as John Brewster says, to perform socializing functions and may stress industry, morality and endeavor (Lego, building blocks and trucks training future developers, dolls instructing in the art of parenting), an adult interest is more socially subversive. It seemingly points towards the anti social, the alienated, indolent, these toys overwhelm life rather than instruct it. At a certain point in life we are all expected to just discard our toys and move on.

Of course a child can also prescribe forbidden emotions to their dolls, stuffing them full of the frustrations, terrors and anxieties of childhood – acting out retribution for the wrongs of the world on Barbie or Teddy, rehearsing death scenarios or exploring plain, unadulterated violence in the privacy and safety of the bedroom. Toys can make great substitutes, obliging partners in forbidden activities. Just ask your local Voodoo practitioner, or one of the many prospectant buyers of ‘lifelike’ sex dolls waiting an impatient six months for delivery of their doll from Us companies despite the five thousand dollar plus price tag, or the disgruntled toddler who, banished from the parental bed seeks solace in the dark with a soft toy (Freud’s ‘transitional object’, that soothes journey to separation from the mother that every child must make).

I will not die! I will not die! Pinocchio to the Puppeteer.

For the adult, toys may always retain a certain quantity of their childhood magic. This is not a good thing. The utopia of the toy filled life of childhood can quickly become a distopia in adulthood.

The toy that threatens to answer back, to come alive, to do its own thing is, inevitably, the toy that will sneak up behind us with the kitchen knife. Is there anything more terrifying than a ventriliquist’s doll –it sits at the crossroads between life and death, that blending the real and unreal - or perhaps between The Symbolic and the Real in Lacanian terms - the embodiment of Freud’s uncanny (Freud’s famous essay on the uncanny

itself originates from Hoffman's opera about the doll Olympia and her human admirer.

Who has not as a child checked furtively, discreetly that their dolls have not moved, that the toy box lid is firmly shut, that the errant toy banished to the garden has not snuck back in to hide under the bed until midnight...

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