

ARTICLE

The Brave Little Toaster from Print to Film: Obsolescent Appliances and Capitalist Allegories

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In *The Brave Little Toaster* (1980), a tale of household appliances confronting and resisting obsolescence, Thomas M. Disch warns audiences against mistaking his anthropomorphic creations for images of themselves. It proves impossible nonetheless for those who read this comic fable or who see the later animated film adapted from it to avoid this temptation, for both works are allegories of the plight of industrial labour under late-twentieth-century capitalism. But while Disch's narrative emphasises the importance of the solidarity among workers, the Disney Studio's cinematic version instead teaches young viewers to trust their 'masters' – a dangerous lesson in passivity.

What do we see, when we look at everyday objects? What do we see, when we look at a work of art? And what do we see, when we look at a work of art about everyday objects – one that renders their familiarity strange to us by transforming them from ordinary use into extraordinary form? It was, as we all know, Shakespeare who had Hamlet propose that the function of drama was 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature' (2003: 165). Oscar Wilde, of course, in his 1889 essay 'The Decay of Lying', delightedly turned around the proposition and asserted that life was merely an imitation of art – a rather poor one at that (1969: 307). But what are we to make of a novella or, for that matter, of an animated Hollywood film about anthropomorphic appliances on a mock-epic journey from country cottage to urban flat, determined to take their fates into their own ... well, into their own cords? We know that we must be

in the presence of comedy and of fantasy, but of what else? As we read or watch the struggles of a toaster with a bright, mirror-like surface, can we say with any certainty what such a tale *reflects*?

In the course of *The Brave Little Toaster* (1980) – a fable by the American writer, Thomas M. Disch (1940–2008), about a radio, an electric blanket, a lamp, a vacuum cleaner, and the eponymous toaster, who set out to rescue themselves and one another from abandonment, disuse, and decay, while they still are capable of working – the author has fun at the audience's expense, even as he slyly addresses just such aesthetic and epistemological questions. When the five appliances travel (by way of a carriage rigged from an old automobile battery and a rolling office chair) through the countryside, they meet with nature in the form of a flower that is enraptured with the polished sides of the toaster. While 'pressing its petaled face close to the toaster's gleaming chrome', it breaks into an impassioned love poem, for as the

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narrator explains, 'Flowers, as botanists well know, can speak only in verse. Daisies, being among the simpler flowers, characteristically employ a rough sort of octosyllabic doggerel' (Disch 1986: 26). But the stimulus for such flowery language, so to speak, is confusion over the issue of mimesis: the daisy 'had genuinely fallen in love with the toaster – or, rather, with its own reflection in the toaster's side. Here was a flower (the daisy reflected) strangely like itself yet utterly unlike itself too' (Disch 1986: 27).

A pair of squirrels named 'Harold' and 'Marjorie', whom the toaster encounters next, are higher on the evolutionary scale and do not commit precisely the same error; yet they, too, misinterpret what they see, projecting gender onto an object that has none. As Harold, one half of the heterosexual squirrel couple, remarks,

'It's strange,' said Harold complacently, while he stroked the toaster's side ... it's more than strange that you should maintain you have no sex, when it's very clear to me you're male.' He studied his own face in the mottled chromium. 'You have a man's whiskers and a man's front teeth.'

'Nonsense, darling,' said his wife, who was lying on the other side of the toaster. 'Now that I look carefully, I can see her whiskers are almost definitely a woman's whiskers and teeth as well.' (Disch 1986: 42)

In both cases, these misguided readings arise from the toaster's ability to act at once as an autonomous object and as a mirror, in which the unsophisticated spectator sees itself (or himself or herself) and fails to apprehend fully the difference between Self and Other. While keeping tongue planted in cheek, Thomas M. Disch nonetheless pointedly warns the audience not to project onto the surface of his work of art its own meanings and, especially, not to mistake his manufactured creations for images of themselves.

Yet how is it possible to avoid the lure of allegory entirely? For even as Disch playfully mocks those who might see in this story of workers and workplaces a representation of something more than the doings of machines alone, he himself conflates household objects with human beings in his subtitle: 'A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances'. If children are 'Small Appliances', defined by their eventual utility in the sphere of labour, then adults are certainly, like the toaster and his companions, large appliances – tools, if you will. The fates of these five hapless workers, who still possess the capacity and the desire to perform their jobs, but who have been left behind, without explanation, to wear out and become scrap, must indeed interest all of us whose livelihoods and identities alike are bound up with being '*useful*' in a capitalist system [emphasis in original].

Disch's *The Brave Little Toaster*, however, has not only a universal, but also a more local set of referents. As a text that, mirror-like, reflects in its dazzling surface the specific realities of the United States economy of the 1970s, a time when its once active manufacturing sector rapidly declined and when the entire industrial region of the nation became known as the 'Rust Belt', Disch's 1980 narrative invites the allegorical reading that it simultaneously disavows. The appliances that have been thrown out of work because their jobs have vanished and that now must move elsewhere or wind up as junk are all American-made. They include the 'steady, dependable' vacuum constructed by Hoover (a firm established in North Canton, Ohio, in 1908), the Tensor lamp (invented in 1959 by Jay Monroe Shapiro, of Brooklyn, New York), and the toaster, which is a 'bright little Sunbeam' (Disch 1986: 9) – meaning that it is both a cheerful labourer and the product of a Chicago-based corporation dating back to 1910.

At the center of these workers' world is the figure whom they have served loyally every summer in his country house, until he closed it up, left for the city, and never

returned. He is the human owner to whom they refer deferentially as 'the master' (Disch 1986: 1), a being as inscrutable and indifferent as Samuel Beckett's Godot. (Indeed, his role throughout is very much like that of the often-talked-about godhead whose absence creates the existential crisis for Beckett's clownish protagonists.¹ See Beckett 1994.) Throughout Disch's narrative, 'the master' is unappreciative of those whose survival depends upon him; he remains, moreover, unaware of their pilgrimage to find him and uninterested in retrieving them. His is a faceless, nameless, distant form of power, and Disch wisely never dramatizes him. The only human whom the audience does meet is a representative of that terrifying breed known to the appliances as 'pirates' – i.e., those who appropriate objects that do not belong to them. (In the word 'pirates', it is tempting to hear an echo of the phrase used for those who took over failing businesses in the United States and then callously fired all the employees: 'corporate raiders'; thus, the term is another reminder of the chaos into which the American industrial economy fell in the 1970s.)

For the toaster and his fellows, the moment of gravest peril and also of greatest existential despair comes when, having been seized and carried away by a 'pirate', who scorns them all as 'Junk' (Disch 1986: 54), they find themselves in the 'city dump', amidst

the most melancholy and fearsome sights the toaster had ever witnessed. Dismembered chassis of once-proud automobiles were heaped one atop the other to form veritable mountains of rusted iron. The asphalt-covered ground was everywhere strewn with twisted beams and blistered sheet metal, with broken and worn-out machine parts of all shapes and sizes – with all the terrible emblems, in short, of its own inevitable obsolescence. An appalling scene to behold – yet one that exercised a strange fascination over the toaster's mind. (Disch 1986: 53)

It is a literal vision of an economically blighted 'Rust Belt' landscape, combined with the visual tropes of Dante's *Inferno*, straight out of a hyperbolically sinister Gustave Doré illustration: a mash-up of industrial reality and religious allegory, bound together with what Theresa M. Kelley, in *Reinventing Allegory*, rightly describes as 'pathos' (1997: 9), as we see it through the eyes of a sensitive machine. To escape this hell takes both ingenuity and the collective efforts of the appliances, which must repeatedly rely on themselves and on one another for their salvation, as there is no other savior.

This cooperative spirit proves vital, particularly when they reach the endpoint of their journey – the city dwelling of their missing 'master', where they are welcomed warmly by the appliances in residence there, and where they learn the dreadful truth from another American-made object, a Singer sewing machine (built by a company with roots that go back to the pre-Civil-War era of the 1850s).

'And our cottage – our lovely cottage in the woods – what is to become of it?' [asks the toaster].

'I believe the master means to sell it.'

'And . . . and us?' the toaster asked.

'I understand there is to be an auction,' said the sewing machine.

The Hoover, which had comported itself with great dignity throughout the visit, could bear no more. With a loud groan it grasped the handle of the buggy as though to steady itself. (Disch 1986: 71, ellipses in original)

In the context of American economic and race history, such an 'auction' evokes horrific echoes of literal slave labour and the selling of workers' bodies as chattel.

But this is not to be the protagonists' grim fate, for they once again rescue themselves, this time with the assistance of the newer appliances in the urban flat, including those that are now performing their same functions for the absent 'master'. Drawing on the

talents of the radio, the five manage to 'swap' themselves (Disch 1986: 75) via a broadcast community forum and to secure a new workplace – not, this time, with a 'master', but with a 'mistress', who is herself the human equivalent of an obsolete object, no longer serviceable or desired: 'She was an elderly, impoverished ballerina who lived all alone in a small room at the back of her ballet studio on Center Street in the oldest part of the city' (Disch 1986: 77). As the concluding sentence of Disch's narrative tells us, 'And so the five appliances lived and worked, happy and fulfilled, serving their dear mistress and enjoying each other's companionship, to the end of their days' (1986: 78). Here, the final image remains a hierarchical one, in which labour is still idealized as selfless service for the benefit of the employer/owner. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the pleasures of camaraderie, on unity among the workers, and on mutual support and care, is equally strong. Disch's message to the 'small appliances' who hear this bedtime story involves workers eschewing competition, looking after their own interests, and relying upon each other for strength and survival – not assuming that their bosses are in any way benevolent or have their welfare at heart.

But Disch's fantasy of five everyday objects avoiding premature obsolescence and determining their conditions of employment did not end here, for it had an afterlife – a very different afterlife – in the world of cinema. By the time Disch's fable was issued by Doubleday and Company in 1986, as a book specifically aimed at the children's market, it had already undergone a passage that took it from one sphere of print to another, having started life as a long story published first in the US and UK in the August 1980 issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, where it was read by adults. Its next pilgrimage, however, into cinema, proved far more arduous, as well as transformative.

The story's further journey began with *The Brave Little Toaster* being optioned by Disney Studios in 1982. It was John Lasseter – later

to become the chief creative officer of Pixar – who saw the novella's potential and who hoped to bring it to the screen as a new sort of animated film, one that would incorporate computer-generated backgrounds (thereby, of course, rendering obsolete traditional hand-drawn animation cells and the artists who produced them). But the executives at Disney Studios regarded this process as too expensive, fired Lasseter, and gave the project to their Hyperion Pictures division, where it was eventually made as a work of conventional animation, directed by Jerry Rees. With a screenplay by Rees, Brian McEntee and Joe Ranft, it was filmed on a tight budget and released in 1987 (see Beck 2005: 40–41, Paik 2007: 30–40 and Price 2009:44–45). Certainly, there is great irony in the fact that one of the financial backers of this work about the imminent demise of American manufactured goods was the TDK Corporation, a Japanese firm whose initials stand for Tokyo Denki Kagaku ('Tokyo Electronics and Chemicals').

At the emotional core of Disch's narrative lay the bond among the appliances themselves, both old and new; at the center of Jerry Rees's film, on the contrary, was the mutual and reciprocal love of the appliances for their human owner – here called not 'the master' (with a small 'm') but 'Master'. M. Keith Booker has suggested that the use of this term 'seems to place' the machines 'in the category of pets' (2009: 44). No longer a faceless and powerful man, the 'Master' is, in the script, an adorable teenager, who has known and appreciated his appliances since childhood. He has never taken their utility for granted, but instead has 'played' with them, a change that endows them with the status of well-loved toys. Even as the machines are making their way to find him in the city, he is driving to the country to retrieve them and restore them to use, as he leaves for university. The likeness and equality between boss and labourers is underlined in the screenplay, when the appliances reach his family's urban flat. There, they find a photograph of him in the academic regalia associated in the

US with high school graduation – an accomplishment that demonstrates, as the vacuum cleaner intones, his identity as one who, like the appliances themselves, ‘works hard’.

If Disch’s fable is a pro-union narrative that teaches ‘small appliances’ solidarity with their own class and instills distrust of the conscienceless capitalist forces that will someday relegate them, too, to the dust heap, the animated Hollywood studio film does precisely the opposite. In the Disney adaptation, ‘Master’ is trustworthy and true; it is the ageing appliances’ fellow workers – the self-described ‘cutting-edge’ machines that now perform the functions of the old ones in ‘Master’s’ flat – who connive murderously to send the toaster and his companions to the junkyard. There, the five appliances face certain doom, thanks to yet another traitorous labourer: an evil magnet attached to a compacting machine – a Darwinian engine obliterating the no-longer-fit-to-survive – that clearly relishes seeing its fellows smashed. So zealous is the magnet in its pursuit, that it scoops up not only all the metal protagonists, except for the toaster, but ‘Master’, who has come for his old and still-treasured possessions. To save the other appliances, as well as his beloved and equally helpless ‘Master’, from death by compacting, the toaster must sacrifice itself by leaping into and thus destroying another machine’s gears.

The new pro-capitalist-employer bias of the screenplay demands a denouement in which all the appliances are once again contentedly serving their original ‘Master’, who has miraculously repaired the toaster and brought it back to working condition, thus rewarding its selfless act with labour of his own. Coming as it did in 1988, at the end of eight years of the conservative, pro-corporate philosophy associated with Ronald Reagan’s term as President of the United States – years that had witnessed rightward political shifts in favor of the interests of big business and successful governmental efforts at union-bashing and union-busting – Disney’s *The Brave Little Toaster* indeed proved a mir-

ror for its times. The cinematic object also became an instruction manual for the young, those ‘Small Appliances’ being trained for future use.

So we are left to ponder the questions with which I began: What realities do these two works, in two different media, reflect in the polished chrome of their eponymous protagonist’s surface? Perhaps more important, what didactic purposes do these texts support and enforce, even as they encourage us, in Sherry Turkle’s words, to ‘think with ... evocative objects’ (2007: 5)?

In a recent study, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films*, M. Keith Booker has suggested that the ‘real significance’ of the cinematic adaptation of Disch’s story is its anti-consumerist philosophy, embodied in its resistance to ‘the way in our contemporary society [that] we put so much stress on objects and want so desperately (under the influence of advertising) to acquire them, then are perfectly happy to toss them aside when something seemingly more desirable comes along’ (2009: 48). To share this somewhat charitable view of the film’s politics, however, young audiences would have to ignore the complicity of the newer and ‘more desirable’ objects themselves, who do the actual ‘toss[ing]’ of the old ones into the dustbin, deliberately ignoring the wishes of the ‘Master’. Jerry Rees’s animated *The Brave Little Toaster* makes a moral distinction between good and bad appliances that translates into a vision of good and bad workers. The virtuous ones are those dedicated, pet-like or toy-like, wholly to serving the ‘Master’s’ interests, regardless of their own welfare. They are the ones both deserving of salvation and found in the end to have been saved, as they accompany him to his new home at university. Thus, the import of the narrative veers far from what Frank Trentmann has described as one of the possible political consequences of ‘greater humility toward things’ in popular culture: ‘a more object-oriented democracy in which subaltern things will be liberated from the humanist rule of subject-centered

discourse' (2009: 284). Rees's film offers not a democracy, but an undisturbed hierarchy of value, both determined by and centered upon a 'Master'.

In this essay, I have clearly failed to heed Thomas M. Disch's warnings. I have not treated the toaster as a mere toaster, but instead as a mirror, for I have read these two fables in different media as political allegories – as two versions of a 'Bedtime Story for Small Appliances' that is also a conduct manual, preparing its audience for the labour force of the future. Both are fantasies that hold out an impossible promise of escape from obsolescence. One, however, defines bravery as blind faith in a loving 'Master', while the other presents it in the context of increased suspicion of authority and necessary reliance on one's own class.

As a large appliance myself, whose 'useful' future grows shorter every day, I know which message strikes a *cord*, electrical or otherwise, with me.

Notes

- 1 The theme of fruitless waiting for the arrival of a higher power runs as an undercurrent throughout the action of the play.

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