

Feature Article: JAF3333

THE WISDOM OF PIXAR AN ANIMATED LOOK AT VIRTUE

by Robert Velarde

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 33, number 03 (2010). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Films by Pixar Animation Studios are not only entertaining, but also filled with practical wisdom that reflects classical Christian virtues. While not overtly Christian, Pixar consistently draws from the well of natural law and human experience in order to communicate timeless truths, offering depth that appeals to adults and fascinates children. Part of the task of being a well-rounded Christian apologist and thinker involves relevant and astute cultural engagement with contemporary trends that can serve as touch-points in communicating truth. To this end, Pixar films offer a multitude of opportunities to dialog with those who may have little or no interest in philosophy or theology, but are interested in discussing popular films.

“To infinity and beyond!” is the catch phrase of *Toy Story* character Buzz Lightyear, but it could also serve as the motto of the company that created him. Pixar Animation Studios has had an unbroken and unprecedented string of box office hits with films such as *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Cars*, and *Up*.¹ The studio’s success has not gone unnoticed. Not only has Pixar won multiple Academy Awards, it also has caught the attention of Disney, which bought Pixar in 2006 for the incredible sum of \$7.4 billion in stock. From the perspectives of theology and apologetics, however, why should we care?

In the case of Pixar, there are three reasons to take notice. First, consider the scope of Pixar’s influence. The average apologetics or theology textbook reaches thousands of individuals a year, while Pixar’s feature films reach multiple millions both in the theater and in the home. Second, while Christians have, in general, done an excellent job of producing traditional books and other resources that address typical and recurring issues in areas such as theology and apologetics, astute interaction with the various forms of popular culture such as film and television remains minimal by comparison. The call to engage culture intelligently, however, is an important one, as vast numbers of individuals live in the world of pop culture. Third, unlike many morally vacuous Hollywood film productions, Pixar offers unique elements of interest beyond simple entertainment. Specifically, its films offer insights into wisdom and virtue, while also offering an almost countercultural hope rather than the meaningless despair found in many other contemporary films.

CHRISTIANS AND CULTURE: ENTRENCH, EMBRACE, OR ENGAGE?

We all share a common culture, dwell in subcultures, and are surrounded by popular culture, which permeates all culture whether we like it or not.² Since the inception of Christianity, its followers have sought, with varying degrees of success, to remain distinct, or, as Scripture suggests, to be in the world but not of it (John 17:14–18). Although a number of approaches to understanding the relationship

between Christians and culture have been posited, three broad trends tend to emerge. First, some *entrench* themselves in the Christian subculture, separating themselves from anything remotely smacking of pop culture, choosing instead a marked separation. Second, some *embrace* culture, uncritically celebrating its seeming wonders and vast positive opportunities to spread the Christian message.

A third approach is preferable. This option seeks to *engage* culture thoughtfully, something that is unfortunately lacking in much contemporary Christian interaction with culture and popular culture. While many Christian thinkers commendably continue to engage culture, they often fail to incorporate a robust evaluation of forms of popular culture such as films. To be sure, they are quick to evaluate and critique controversial motion pictures that touch on worldview matters, but seemingly benign films such as those by Pixar are often overlooked. The well-rounded apologist, however, will seek to become involved in pre-evangelism touchpoints wherever they are found. The remainder of this article will look at three topics of interest as found in the Pixar films *Toy Story* (identity), *A Bug's Life* (justice), and *Up* (love).

TOY STORY: IDENTITY

Identity is not generally considered a virtue, but it is important, particularly in relation to the Christian life. It may be said that knowing our identity precedes behavior that is meaningfully virtuous and, indeed, gives such behavior a foundation. In the 1995 movie *Toy Story*, one of the main characters, Buzz Lightyear, believes he is a real Space Ranger rather than a toy. Woody, a cowboy doll toy, is bothered by Buzz's behavior, asking, "You actually think you're *the* Buzz Lightyear?"

The concept of identity is significant. Who we are shapes what we do, but what we do also shapes who we are. If we lack a healthy understanding of the concept of identity, we will wander through life uncertain about what to do with ourselves. Or, in the case of Buzz Lightyear, the lack of understanding of his identity is really a form of deception. Knowing the truth about who we are and what we were made for is important.

Identity for the Christian is first and foremost found in God. This is so because we are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). The image of God in us, the *imago dei*, is key to understanding our identity and purpose, as well as the restoration of our relationship with God. In the New Testament, Christ is representative of the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), thus providing us with an example of what God's image means. The image of God encompasses the moral realm, which is why we are moral creatures. If our worldview has a proper foundation in God, then so should our identity. Consequently, our moral choices will reflect this fact.

In the case of Buzz Lightyear, it takes an existential shock to awaken him to his true identity. Prior to this shock, Woody tries desperately to convince Buzz of his true identity: "You are a *toy!* You aren't the real Buzz Lightyear...you're an action figure! You are a child's plaything!" It isn't until later, however, that Buzz becomes convinced of his true nature after viewing a television commercial for Buzz Lightyear toys. Although Buzz is initially discouraged by the realization of his true identity, Woody encourages him to be what he was made to be—a great toy that can make a child happy.

Identity also relates to the meaning of life. As Christians, we have a purpose that is rooted in God and His nature, with Christ as our example to follow. In John 8:14, Jesus offered an example of the power of identity in relation to a life filled with purpose: "I know where I came from and where I am going," He said. His purpose and identity were perfectly clear to Him and, as a result, His calling fell into place. Given a firm foundation in Christ, identity helps us grow in relation to other virtues such as justice and love.

A BUG'S LIFE: JUSTICE

Pixar's second feature film, *A Bug's Life* (1998), turned its attention to the world of insects, primarily focusing on an oppressed ant colony forced to gather food for a group of grasshopper thugs. While two key themes related to virtue are present in the film—courage and justice—our focus here is on the latter. As one of the so-called cardinal virtues, justice is an important part of Christian ethics and theology, but it

is a topic that resonates with everyone. From Plato's *Republic* to *A Bug's Life*, justice is a recurring theme in human thought.

When Heimlich the caterpillar is playing the role of Little John in *A Bug's Life*, he menacingly threatens a group of bullying flies with the words, "Justice is my sword and truth shall be my quiver!" The scene is played for laughs, but underlying Heimlich's words is the thread of justice that is woven throughout the film via the plight of the ants and the grasshoppers.

On one level, *A Bug's Life* is an enjoyable family film about self-confidence and doing the right thing, but on another level it addresses questions of justice by telling a story filled with injustice, persecution, and oppression bordering on slavery. The deeper point is that the vice of injustice demands the virtue of justice. And so, a hero is born in Flik, a bungling member of the ant colony and budding inventor, who sets out to find warrior bugs to defend the colony against the oppressive grasshoppers. As he sets out on his adventure, Flik calls out, "Here I go. For the colony, and for oppressed ants everywhere!"

In our day the outcry for justice remains, though the foundations of its reality are more often than not blurred. Justice points to a moral foundation of right and wrong, but what is its source? Because we are human and made in God's image, part of the fabric of our being is morality, which includes justice. Like every true virtue, justice derives from God. Biblically speaking, justice is referenced or exemplified in several instances. The Golden Rule, as Christ shared, has justice as its foundation: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12 ESV).

UP: LOVE

In 2009 Pixar released its first 3D feature film, *Up*, which, at first glance, does not particularly seem like a typical children's film. The first computer-generated animated film to be nominated in the Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Animated Feature Film,³ *Up* tells the story of a cantankerous elderly man, Carl Fredricksen, who seeks to honor the memory of his late wife, Ellie, by traveling to South America. He does so in quite an unconventional manner, by inflating thousands of helium-filled balloons that carry his home to Paradise Falls. Accidentally along for the ride is a young boy, Russell.

Although *Up* contains a great deal of action and adventure, at its heart it is about love. In addition to telling the story of the love between Carl and Ellie, love is the single most driving and motivating factor that spurs Carl's adventure. The humorous talking dog, Dug, who is capable of speaking via a special collar, exemplifies a joyous and unpretentious attitude. Upon first meeting Carl and Russell, Dug enthusiastically proclaims, "I have just met you, and I love you!" But far deeper themes of love are present in *Up*.

Love is a theological virtue. In Christian tradition and in biblical exposition, it is a key virtue: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13 ESV). As such, love is foundational to Christian ethics. Without love it is not an exaggeration to say that Christianity collapses, for without God's love Christianity cannot exist as it is intended to exist. "God is love," reads 1 John 4:8 and 16, meaning that God is not only loving, but that love is inherent in His very nature. If we are to grow in character and virtue, love is an essential part of the process. A key reason for Christianity's profound influence on history is that Christians have repeatedly been moved to benevolent action because of God's love.

We often focus so much on the feelings of love, which are indeed admirable and joyful, but fail to look at love in broader terms. Contemporary pop culture's understanding of love is often shallow, failing to move beyond the feelings love stirs within us. Imitating our consumer-driven culture, some begin to treat relationships like they treat fads—they come and go, they interest us for a while, then we move on to something else and dispose of them when they are no longer convenient. This approach, however, warps love, cheapening it rather than seeking to understand it more deeply.

In an age of consumer-oriented relationships, the heartbreak of divorce, and misunderstandings of the meaning of love, *Up* is inspiring. Two people, Carl and Ellie, have joined together for a lifetime of love. They are wholeheartedly committed to one another and the only thing that ultimately separates them is death. As powerful as love is in a marriage relationship, it is merely a shadow of God's love for

us. As Paul wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 37–39 ESV).

ENGAGING CULTURE: “TO INFINITY AND BEYOND!”

This article has only scratched the surface of the depths of moral content in Pixar films. *WALL-E*, for instance, a story about a quirky robot, has much to say about philosophy of technology, while the superhero-centered tale *The Incredibles* highlights the virtue of courage, and *Ratatouille*, about a rat who likes to cook, offers many insights regarding ambition and the Christian call to contribute positively to culture. For those involved in working with youth, Pixar films provide springboards for discussion of a multitude of virtues, while parents can seek to teach children more about Christian virtues by incorporating relevant Pixar-inspired ideas and insights.

Pixar films aren’t Christian parables, but they tell stories that have the power to wholly engage us—heart, soul, and mind. The characters and plots need not be overtly Christian in order to instruct us in virtue. Christ, for instance, engaged His listeners by telling parables—stories that contain practical and memorable lessons. We remember the tales of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, not because they present material as might be done in a textbook on moral philosophy, but because they resonate with us as human beings on a level that captures our interest.

Pixar films show us stories that vividly come to life and are rooted in human experience and virtue. The fabric of the moral universe contains an understanding of justice, courage, love, and more, and as a result, we resonate with these ideas. Our culture, too, is full of stories. As we live, move, and have our being in God (Acts 17:28), so, too, we live, move, and have our being in culture. By thoughtfully engaging popular culture, our efforts can potentially influence many lives, to infinity and beyond.

Robert Velarde is author of *The Wisdom of Pixar: An Animated Look at Virtue* (InterVarsity Press), *Conversations with C. S. Lewis* (InterVarsity Press), *The Heart of Narnia* (NavPress), and *Inside The Screwtape Letters* (Baker, forthcoming). He received his M.A. from Southern Evangelical Seminary.

NOTES

- 1 Pixar has released eleven feature films, including, most recently, *Toy Story 3*.
- 2 These basic divisions of culture are articulated in more detail in T. M. Moore, *Redeeming Pop Culture: A Kingdom Approach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2003).
- 3 *Up* is only the second animated film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, the other film being Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).