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Stars versus Rainbows: Walt Disney's and Jim Henson's "Philosophies of Childhood"

Brenda McDermott

This presentation examines how the Muppets' visit to Walt Disney World breaks and bends both the expected behaviour of visitors to a Disney park, and the expected pleasure usually garnered from such a visit. Central to this examination is the distinction between the construction of the Disney park and the Muppets' experience there. Disney's theme parks and films focus on the importance of social conformity as a way to protect childhood innocence, which is in opposition to Henson's characters' experimentation and self-discovery. These conflicting notions and satires of classic Disney values may explain why this television special has not been re-released, despite Disney's purchase of the Muppet franchise in 2006.

As an artifact, the television special, *The Muppets Go to Walt Disney World* (1990), provides a unique moment in the history of two children's media franchises. The television special aired on May 6th, 1990 as a segment of *The Magical World of Disney*. It was a product created to celebrate the upcoming merger between Jim Henson's Productions and the Walt Disney Company (WDC). *The Muppets Go to Walt Disney World* features the celebration of their three theme parks in Orlando: Magic Kingdom, Epcot Center, and MGM Studios. The special mirrors Walt Disney's *Disneyland* television series, blending entertaining content with advertisements for the park's attractions. In particular, the film is a narrative explanation and promotion of a new Muppet 3D film located in the MGM Studios, which opened in 1989 (Gomery, 1994, p. 84–85). Jim Henson died on May 16th, ten days after the special was aired, and the merger was cancelled. The long-term result of the failed merger was that the Muppets remained under the control of Jim Henson Productions, with the WDC became the exclusive distributor of all future Muppet products (Gomery, 1994, p. 84–85). It was not until 2005 that the Muppets officially became a Disney property.

This examination is grounded on the wider body of literature which has critically analyzed the construction and experience of Walt Disney theme parks. It suggests that Disney theme parks are constructed to give a sense of experience, rather than the explicit consumption of a good. Watts (1997) suggests that Disney theme parks are constructed to make the average visitor feel like a child. The literature highlights two particular issues of the park:



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the notion of sanitation and the notion of control. Giroux (1999) highlights that both these notions are central to the Disney construction of childhood, the pedagogy of innocence. Giroux suggests Disney is teaching what innocence means and how to be innocent. Wasko (2001) furthers this highlighting characters cannot diverge from the social order of their society and must be reincorporated into it. Visitors must remain within the social order of the park. The park is constructed to create a passive response, resulting in a swindled fulfillment by means of a constructed and commercial innocence (Giroux, 1999).

The park constructs the childhood experience by insuring the park remains safe from the unwanted. Schickel (1997) describes this as sanitization, a concept by which reality is removed to create a space that is inoffensive and safe. Disney World's physical location, cut off from its surrounding by a ring of swampland, is similar to the 1950s flight to the suburbs (Avila, 2004). The park also uses monetary barriers, particularly high entrance fees, to exclude those who could disrupt the park's presentation of innocence. Thus, like Disney's films, which omit issues of gender, race, and class, the Disney park passively restricts those unwilling or unable to consume its offerings. Both Weinstein (1992) and Avila (2004) distinguish these parks from other entertainment spaces in which reality and class are apparent. Bryman (2004) concludes that childlike innocence is constructed at the cost of authentic experience.

The park controls the behaviour of the guest by using techniques that limit the guest's alternative experience of the park's space. The park's construction draws on nostalgia as a method to shape the visitor's compliance with the park's social norms. Bryman (1995) and Wasko (2001) both highlight that the use of nostalgia, in the "Main Street," entrance, resists critical examination. Marling (1997) suggests that the carefully constructed nature of the park acts as a system of control, in which the visitor conforms to the norms and scripts through a loss of self-identity. Weinstein (1992) highlights the design of the park's spaces as constructed to limit the possibility of action, by means of fenced areas, height of signs, and Kodak picture spots. Through the park's creation of a particular point of view, and through its spiral design, which restricts visitor movement, its architecture, as Steven (2003) suggests, is an architecture of reassurance and passivity.

Though the park's construction leaves little space for transgression, the Muppets' venture into the Disney park highlights the transgression of the social norms of behaviour and undermines the pleasurable experiences usually associated with the park. The park uses a monetary barrier as an exclusionary tactic to limit who may enter the park. Since Kermit, the quasi-father figure, cannot pay for the Muppets' entrance, Animal breaks them into

the park. Thus the Muppets do not enter the park in the socially conventional manner of purchasing a ticket and entering in an orderly fashion. The Muppets avoid the barrier that would typically have eliminated the unwanted from the park.

Disney World has been constructed as the ideal family vacation; however, the park serves as a metaphor for separation in the case of the Muppets, as they transgress this norm. Kermit is separated from his biological family, his nephew Robin. This occurs as Robin ends up on a moving monorail, while Kermit is hiding from the park's security officers. Further, Kermit's non-biological family, the larger muppet group of characters, spends its visit separated from each other and fails to enjoy its visit to the park.

The ability of Fozzie Bear and his mother to enjoy their experience of the park is hindered by their lack of money. The two characters remain hungry for the first portion of the film despite the wide availability of food, because they do not have the money. Consumption is usually presented as a continuation to the park's experience. Schickel (1997) highlights that spaces of mass consumption, like Disney theme parks, are driven by principles of mass psychology. Without the ability to consume, Fozzie is left out of the mass experience. Further, Fozzie articulates that the experience of the park is one of consumption, and the act of consumption within the park is positioned as an experience. (Bryman, 2004, p. 5).

Fozzie's need to work during his visit to the park also demonstrates a transgression of the park's association with play. Fozzie despondently performs his comedy act to passing guests. The park functions as his workspace as he tries to earn "a little money for some honey." The importance of disguising the work, which makes the park function, has been highlighted by Kuenz (1995). She suggests that as all signs of the park's functions are out of view, such as garbage collection through tunnels, thus creating a removal of the real. Fozzie's public comedy act illuminates the generally hidden position of Disney World as a workplace.

The experience of Disney World is constructed to suggest freedom, while the visitor follows the scripted behaviour of the space. Bryman (2004) has highlighted this as a key construction to the social uniformity and control of the park space. Ralph the Dog, walking freely in the park, fails to conform to the park's social norms. Since he is a dog without an owner, there is no role for him in Disney World. Thus he loses his "incredible freedom," in his words, by being captured and placed in the pet detention centre. Transgression is controlled and social norms are enforced.

An overwhelming amount of the interaction of the theme park and its planned effects are mediated through visual information. Harris (1997) sug-

gests that the visual structure of the park requires that visitors be active in their own entertainment. He highlights the miniaturization of buildings and the use of the larger objects to restrict the view of park areas as a way of construction a child-like experience. He suggests that the visual technique of the park presents a form of nostalgia and innocence, which de-emphasize the reality of the park experience. The character of Beaker transgresses this notion, as he is unable to see, the result of a bait bucket stuck to his head. Without vision, Beaker does the usual comic gags of walking into poles and other objects. More importantly, the whole audience and Doctor Bunsen, Beaker's companion, recognize that Beaker does not experience the park because he cannot see the illusion. Bunsen makes comments such as "it will be beautiful, you'll see, sorry you'll hear" and "it's really a delightful place, you know, oh really you don't." Beaker's experience emphasizes the reality of sound and smell, over the illusion of sight which the park presents.

Similarly Stadler and Waldolf, Fozzie's hecklers, emphasize the lack of reality within the sanitized space of the park. They are unable to interact within the social situation of the park, because they can find nothing to complain about. They note that it is beautiful, clean, and therefore they hate the place. Their reaction is counter to the social norm, because they do not enjoy the illusion of perfection. Stadler and Waldolf transgress the notion that perfection and illusion are important. It is in reality and the disagreeable that the hecklers find their pleasure.

The most transgressive visit to the park space is that of Gonzo and Camellia, Gonzo's chicken girlfriend. These are the only characters that enjoy their time in the park. However, Gonzo and Camellia do not remotely follow the park's script or norms. Gonzo and Camellia find the "magic of Disney" in garbage cans, sewers, and unmarked doors. Gonzo undermines the park's presentation and function as simply a result of magic, an aspect of the park which Kuenz (1995) critiques. Gonzo finds the small pieces of reality in the park, marveling at the everyday rather than the creations meant to marvel the visitor. Together, they find Laundryland a thrilling adventure, and the Indiana stunt show spectacularly boring. Laundryland features the Disneyland employee highlighting the labour which is carefully hidden from view. Further, Gonzo and Camilla's enjoyment of the cleaning of laundry does more than reveal labour, it celebrates it.

The television special is self-reflective about the ways in which it articulates the differences between Henson and Disney products. This reflectivity is particularly evident when Kermit and Mickey meet at the end of the film. Mickey explains that "when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true." Kermit follows with "someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection, the lovers, the dreamers, and me." Another Muppet clearly identified that

“they’re talking philosophy.” If one takes the Muppets’ transgression in the park as a critique of Disney’s notion of childhood, the whole special is about philosophies of childhood.

Henson’s understanding of childhood seems opposed to Giroux’s (1999) notion of Disney’s pedagogy of innocence. Rather, Henson’s understanding and this paper’s analysis is consistent with Schilcrout’s (2008) argument of the Muppets’ behaviour as a tradition of non-conformity. Similarly Zipes (1997) suggests an opposition between Disney and Henson products, in his examination of the adaptation of fairytales. He finds that Henson’s production of traditional tales highlights a concern for history and social norms, rather than Disney’s removal of them. Henson’s conception of childhood rejects the notion of social control and protection, like the Muppets’ behaviour in the park. Further, Henson’s conception of childhood, as embodied by Gonzo’s happiness, demonstrates an emphasis on freedom and acceptance. It could be suggested that these differing philosophies of childhood would have posed a significant problem in the Walt Disney Corporation’s merger with Jim Henson Productions. The merger took place 15 years after Henson’s death and many changes to the Muppet franchise occurred before the Muppets would return to Walt Disney World.

Author

McDermott is a Phd student at the University of Calgary in Communication. Her current work on intersections of franchises and memory, particularly examining the development and reception of the muppet franchise. Her previous MA work at York University won the Film Studies Association Gerald Pratley award in 2006.

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