Rebecca Williams

Theme Park Fandom

Spatial Transmedia, Materiality and Participatory Cultures

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has truly been a labour of love. My long-standing love of the theme park experience began when I was 16 and has continued ever since as I've returned time and again to those formative spaces in Orlando, Florida and sought to visit as many of Disney and Universal's global parks as possible. As a researcher within media and cultural studies, however, I have often been met with disdain, abject ignorance and outright hostility by fellow academics who cannot understand that this is how anyone would choose to spend their free time. This project has often been similarly misunderstood or assumed by many to be a defence of the indefensible – the global corporate machine that is the Walt Disney Company. There are many reasons to be critical of Disney (and many of these are discussed within the book) but my starting point has been from a position of affective attachment and a determination to take seriously the experiences of those who, like me, love these themed spaces.

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1.   Introduction

Abstract

This chapter argues for a move away from the notion of theme-park visitors as naïve, controlled and duped into excessive consumption, and for approaches that take seriously the range of ways that theme park fans form active, reflective and pleasurable attachments to theme parks and their rides, attractions, and experiences. It argues that a Fan Studies-centric approach allows better understanding of how and why people become fans of theme parks and their attractions, and develop emotional and affective connections to these, whilst being acutely aware of the consumerist nature of the themed environment. Offering an overview of the chapters that follow, the chapter also provides a summary of the book's central arguments.

Keywords: theme park fandom, participatory cultures, transmedia, spatial transmedia, haptic fandom

Introduction

> [T]heme parks represent extraordinary spatial and social forms, they offer some of the most basic needs, reflect deep and powerful emotions and cognitive modes, and present some of the most telling and controversial representations of the world. (Lukas 2008, pp. 7–8)

In February 2017 the American pop singer, Katy Perry released the first single from her album, 'Prism'. Entitled 'Chained to the Rhythm', the track's video featured Perry visiting a highly stylized and futuristic fictional theme park featuring rollercoasters, swing rides and other attractions. The park, called Oblivia, represents the distractions of modern life including the taking of selfies, the instability of the contemporary housing market and, as represented by the park's star attraction, the endless treadmill or 'hamster wheel' of modern work. Whilst Perry's intent to make a broader political

comment has been well documented (see Savage 2017), the fact that the setting and the aesthetics of the video highlight the location of the theme park is telling. According to Perry's vision, the theme park is a place of mindless distraction and conformity; somewhere that promises everything yet delivers nothing tangible or 'real', a site as ephemeral and insubstantial as the candyfloss consumed by those in the video.

A month later, in March 2017, a video entitled 'Adult Disney fans are weird' began circulating via the online comedy site *College Humor*. With the caption 'Just because you were indoctrinated as a child, ignore all the bad parts about it and yield fully to its influence does NOT make it a cult', the short film features an adult couple on a date, discussing a potential vacation. The male Disney fan rejects the woman's proposal of visiting Europe, instead advocating for a trip to Walt Disney World (WDW) in Florida. He counters her proposal of 'seeing the world, experiencing new cultures' with the suggestion of EPCOT (Disney World's park that includes a World Showcase of eleven global pavilions) and reveals a tattoo of one of the Seven Dwarves from Disney's animated film *Snow White*. He declares that the tattoo is 'the mark of my people. The mark of Mouse House' and that 'My brethren and I would make an annual pilgrimage to the mouse. Now even though I am grown, my heart still yearns for the red rocks of Frontierland and the enchanted falls of Splash Mountain'.

His date comes to realize that, 'you're one of those families that goes to Disney for every vacation, instead of venturing out of their comfort zone'. This insinuation that those who visit Disney are insular and seeking the safe rather than being challenged is reinforced when she asks 'Is this why you don't have a passport?', whilst other common critiques of the company as uncaring about its staff (see Van Maanen 1991; The Project on Disney 1995; Wasko 2001) and those who visit as infantilized (Park *et al* 2009) are also drawn on in the female date's complaints that 'Disney is just another corporation that doesn't care about you and they don't care about their employees' and her question of 'What do you even want to do? Do you want to walk around wearing Mickey ears?' His reply, 'Please. I'm a grown man. A tasteful Jack Skellington hoodie and a lightsabre is all I need', does little to dissuade her. Ultimately, however, the woman realizes that 'Disney World isn't just a theme park to you. It represents the magic of childhood' and proposes a trip to Disneyland in California. However, the deleterious image of the adult Disney fan again rears its head in his complaint that this is not the same as (read: as good as) Disney World since it 'doesn't even have a Spaceship Earth' (an attraction that can only be found in Florida's EPCOT park).

Whilst one of these media texts is designed to provoke humour and another to sell a music track, they encompass a range of contemporary views of the theme park and those who enjoy them, also demonstrated in the quote from Scott Lukas that opens this chapter. The theme park visitor is portrayed as a mindless automaton, seduced by promised delights and lacking the capacity to break free whilst the adult theme park fan, and the Disney fan in particular, is childish, narrow-minded and insular, pedantic, and unable to criticize the corporation for its commercialism and allegedly poor treatment of employees. Such critiques are reflected in much of the academic work on theme parks, sites which have often been devalued 'because of the assumption that [they] produce stereotypical, inauthentic, and simulated reflections of people, things, cultures, places and moments in history' (Lukas 2007b, p. 183). The main aim of this book, then, is to enhance our understandings of why people become fans of theme parks and their attractions, and develop emotional and affective connections to these, whilst being acutely aware of the consumerist nature of the themed environment. It also explores how theme park fans create and maintain complex cultural hierarchies that privilege certain experiences, preferences, and opportunities for visiting over others. Thus, moving away from the widely held scholarly and mainstream notion of theme-park visitors as naïve, controlled and duped into excessive consumption (as discussed in more depth below), the book takes seriously the range of ways in which theme park fans form active, reflective and pleasurable attachments to theme parks and their rides, attractions, and experiences.

Spatial Transmedia and Haptic Fandom

As outlined, the basic premise of this book is that theme parks and their fans are worthy of attention and understanding and that those who visit theme parks are not the consumption-driven cultural dupes that is often assumed in academic work and mainstream culture. Moving away from critiques focused on concepts such as the 'Disneyfication' of society (Schickel 1986, p. 225), or the argument that the theme park is the ultimate 'fake' (Eco 1986, p. 8), the book instead concurs with J.P. Telotte's argument that theme parks offer the opportunity for 'play or playfulness' and that they 'wink at us and get us to acknowledge our own complicity with the technologically mediated world' (2011, p. 181). It addresses the relative lack of sustained scholarly consideration of theme park fans by offering the first-book length study of this fandom. It proposes that analysis of theme parks and their visitors

and fans has much to tell us about contemporary transmediality, participatory cultures, themed spaces, and audience relationships with objects and places of meaning. However, it also seeks to challenge the dominant view of transmediality as something that flows across and between different media spaces, since 'this assumption does not match up with embodied and spatialized realities of transmedia branding/storytelling. Media tourism, for example, can involve the extension of film and television narratives through located performances' (Hills 2017, p. 213).

The book thus proposes the concept of 'spatial transmedia' to account for these moments of narrative extension and world-building that take place within specified rooted locations. Whilst fans who do not visit these places may learn about them via publicity, reviews or the accounts of other fans, it is only by physically being there that one can experience the extended narrative or world. As discussed in more depth in relation to Disney's Haunted Mansion attraction in Chapter Four and character meetings in Chapter Five, this opens up possibilities for understanding how spatial forms of transmediality operate through narrative expansion via themed attractions, shops, and interactive opportunities only available to certain guests. However, in addition to this place-based form of world-building, the concept of spatial transmedia also offers the opportunity to challenge the more dominant 'mothership' (Scott 2013) concept of transmediality which assumes a central text or object 'whose transmedia narratives generally cohere as part of designed, corporately-owned world-building across media platforms' (Hills 2012, p. 37). Instead, as Chapter Four also argues, theme parks and the transmedia opportunities that they present are often 'not conceived all at once' but 'are pieced together over time' (Schweizer and Pearce 2016, p. 96). As argued here, transmediality in the theme park is not only often resolutely rooted in specific places and, therefore, physical experiences of an extended storyworld, it is also frequently a more organic and fan-led process than more typical dominant models allow for, offering a potential mode of slow or '*retrospective transmedia*'.

Linked to this, the book's second key theoretical proposition is the development of the concept of 'haptic fandom'. Part of the attraction of being physically present within theme park spaces is that it allows the fan to experience the bodily sensations associated with immersion in the theme park environment. In 'theme-park attractions [...] The senses now come into play with a greater immediacy that actually takes its toll on the participant's body' (Ndalianis 2012, p. 72) and fans experience motion, smell, taste and touch when engaging in practices within the themed spaces. The book is thus also concerned with the physical and sensory experiences of

the theme park space and how fans themselves accord value and meaning to the immersion of 'being there'. Proposing the concept of 'haptic fandom', the research considers the importance of the physical and the material to theme park fandom and the act of visiting these as 'embodied, multi-sensuous and technologized performances through which people are actively involved in the world, imaginatively *and* physically' (Haldrup and Larsen 2006, p. 276). It addresses the relative neglect of the importance of haptics to the fan experience (Lancaster 2001, Godwin 2017, Hills 2017), arguing for the centrality of the physical and experiential in understanding fan engagement with(in) the contemporary transmedia spaces of the theme park.

Theorizing Theme Parks

As noted above, there is a wealth of academic study of the theme park. Most commonly discussed are Disneyland in California and Walt Disney World in Florida (see Sandlin and Garlen 2016 for an overview) where the themed spaces have been perceived to be presenting the 'hyper-real' (Eco 1986) and inauthentic copies of actual places or historical periods (Bryman 1995, p. 142). As Janet Wasko summarizes, Disney's 'theme parks represent a profitable and lucrative business for the Disney company, as well as supporting conservative, corporate, and consumerist ideologies' (2001, p. 157), and 'a deluge of studies have attempted to interpret not only the aesthetics of the Disney theme parks, but their meanings and significance as sites of contemporary American culture' (2001, p. 153). Accordingly, sites such as Disneyland and the Walt Disney World Resort (WDW) have been widely discussed in terms of their ideological representations of national identities and nationhood (Fjellman 1992; Marling 1997; Lukas 2007). Much work has also focused on the tension between the apparent cultural imperialism inherent in the spread of Disney theme parks across the world and the need to adapt for a 'glocal' market (Matusitz 2010) in the Company's international parks in France (Trigg and Trigg 1995; Warren 1999; Lainsbury 2000; Matusitz 2010; Renaut 2011) and Asia in Tokyo (Brannen 1992; Van Maanen 1992; Yoshimoto 1994; Raz 1999, 2004; Hendry 2000), Hong Kong (Fung and Lee 2009; Groves 2011; Choi 2012; McCarthy and Cheung 2018), and Shanghai.

Those who visit theme parks have been largely characterized as cultural dupes who must 'agree to behave like robots' in a 'place of total passivity' (Eco 1986, p. 48) which is carefully controlled and regimented to restrict visitor autonomy (Bryman 1995, pp. 99–17; Bryman 2004, pp. 132–40). The parks have been viewed as existing solely to make money and to encourage

consumption; as Davis notes, 'Events, architecture and landscaping help to move people through and past concessions at speeds and intervals that have been carefully determined to enhance sales per capita' (1996, p. 403). The typical imagined theme park visitor is the consumer *par excellence*, someone who does not even recognize their own consumption within a space where 'the ultimate purpose of narrativizing experience is to naturalize consumption activities, so that visitors consume without being aware of it' (Yoshimoto 1994, p. 187). Equally, theme park attendees (especially those who attend Disney parks) are often assumed to be families and Disney's target audience is widely perceived to be children (Wasko 2001, p. 185). This is largely linked to the fact that Disney as a company is 'associated almost umbilically with childhood' (Giroux 1994, p. 87). Even when adult visitors are acknowledged, they are often perceived to be engaging in the superficial, trivial and inconsequential.

However, there is little doubt that such places are enormously popular. For instance, the world's most visited park, Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, attracted 20,450,000 visitors in 2017 (TEA/AECOM 2018, p. 6) with attendance up 4.7% among the top 25 parks in the World compared to the previous year (TEA/AECOM 2018, p. 6). This global dominance continued with 157,311,000 global visitors to the Disney Group's Parks (TEA 2019, p. 9) and its sites occupying eight of the top ten spots in a list of the most visited theme parks in the world in 2018 (TEA 2019, p. 11), whilst its main competitor, Universal Studios, attracted over 50 million visitors across its sites in the same period (TEA 2019, p.9). This popularity has led many academic studies, often from a marketing or tourism branding perspective, to attempt to map the types of people who visit theme parks, the reasons for their visits, and the implications that this has for theme park promotion and advertising (see Milman 1988; McClung 1991; Fodness and Milner 1992; Roest *et al* 1997; Braun and Soskin 1999; Wong and Cheung 1999; Kemperman *et al* 2000; Johns and Gyimothy 2002; Wanhill 2002; Bigne *et al* 2004; Milman 2009; Park *et al* 2009; Geissler and Rucks 2011; Ma *et al* 2013; Cheng *et al* 2016; Ali *et al* 2018; Rodríguez-Díaz and Pulido-Fernández 2018). These visitors come from a range of locations and demographics but there is a tendency towards assuming that the parks are primarily aimed at, and attract, children and families. Indeed, research does show that many parents feel a cultural obligation to visit Disney parks with their young families (Johns and Gyimothy 2002) and that children experience the parks in specific ways (Pettigrew 2011).

Academic work has often framed such familial trips via the metaphor of pilgrimage, as is also common in studies of fan tourism (King 1993; Aden 1999; Porter 1999; Alderman 2002; Brooker 2005; Brooker 2007; Erzen 2011;

Norris 2013; Larsen 2015; Erdely and Breede 2017; Linden and Linden 2017; Toy 2017). For example, King describes visits to Disney Parks as quasi-religious, arguing that 'Disney Land and World are directed and unified by the guiding spirit of Disney and his corporation; holy cities for the entire U.S., visited by pilgrims, in a constant festival state in which all participate' (1981, p. 121). She notes that it is 'obligatory – for Americans, adults as well as children, at least one pilgrimage to Disney Land or World as a popular culture 'mecca' of nearly religious importance' (1981, p. 117; see also Moore 1980; Mazur and Koda 2001). Such arguments are reflected in Ritzer's characterization of the trip as the 'middle-class hajj' (1996, p. 4). But as King (1981, p. 117) goes on to point out, even though this 'journey is a focal event in childhood and adolescence [...] since many more adults than children make the pilgrimage (by a ratio of 4 to 1), one is led to question the popular assumption that the parks are designed primarily for children' (see also Bryman 1995, pp. 88–91).

   In the analysis that follows, theme parks' appeal to child visitors will be discussed when appropriate. However, this book focuses on adult fans of theme parks who are likely to be active on social media sites, contributing to the participatory cultures that help constitute theme park fandom and, in some cases, functioning as important 'influencers' or 'lifestylers, who are known for their social media presence and large sub-cultural following' (Kiriakou 2018).

Theme Parks Meet Fan Studies

In order to explore these participatory cultures, the book argues that we need to examine and deconstruct the dominant negative views, held by society and even many media and cultural studies scholars, of theme parks and their visitors. Disney as a Company has attracted a particular level of often vitriolic academic critique from political economy perspectives (Bohas 2016) or approaches drawing on forms of psychoanalysis (Harrington 2015, Zornado 2017), with many other studies focusing on the effects of the Company's animated films on viewer's perceptions of romance (Garlen and Sandlin 2017), body image, and gender roles (Do Rozario 2004, Coyne *et al* 2016). This is not to say that we should not be concerned about how Disney as a company treats its employees, or that we should not worry about the implications of their 2018 purchase of the Fox media company for media ownership and corporate dominance, for instance. Rather I would argue that, despite many of the ideological or economically influenced critiques we may make of theme parks and corporations such as Disney, or America's

second-largest theme park company Universal Studios, it is necessary to move beyond simply dismissing these spaces and those who visit them. The research presented here argues for a shift in our perceptions, demonstrating that adult theme park fans form a dedicated and complex participatory culture around the places that they love and often develop deep emotional and affective ties to them. Adult loyalty to the Disney brand has been well documented (see, for example, Sun and Scharrer (2004) on college students' resistance to critique of *The Little Mermaid*), whilst both 'Disney Parks and Universal Theme Parks rank first and second in the hospitality and theme parks industry, according to the MBLM Brand Intimacy 2017 Report, a study of brands based on emotions' (Gazdik 2017), with millennials and women favouring Disney. Clearly, 'even in the face of their apparent artificiality theme parks are meaningful to people' (Lukas 2008, p. 234). This book argues that the meanings that fans make of Disney, and other theme park spaces, are more complex than many existing critiques allow, concurring that those who enjoy such spaces possess a clear 'ability to reflect on both the pleasures and the displeasures of their experiences, to articulate the gains and the losses, and to make self-conscious choices within the options which are available' (Buckingham 1997, p. 290).

In her extensive work on the Disney Company, Janet Wasko identifies a range of its audience archetypes from the antagonist, the resistive and the cynic (each of whom are negatively disposed towards the company) through to more admiring audiences and fans (2001, pp. 95–215). These are described, somewhat problematically, as 'fanatical and zealous Disney fans, who strongly, *sometimes obsessively*, adore anything Disney and arrange their lives accordingly' (2001, p. 196, emphasis added). However, a more resolutely, and sympathetic, Fan Studies approach to understanding theme parks can illuminate a range of practices and attachments;

> Countering misperceptions of visitors as supposedly passive viewers of visible spectacles and consumers of merchandise created and controlled by corporations, using Fan Studies as a theoretical framework illustrates how theme parks offer interactive, participatory, immersive experiences. (Godwin 2017, para 5.5)

Indeed, Godwin encourages the use of Fan Studies as a perspective from which to study the theme park experience, noting 'From its earliest examples, Fan Studies scholarship consistently emphasizes the active role of fans specifically and audiences in general. It thus offers a useful theoretical framework to examine theme parks' (2017, para. 2.5).

When I first began researching this project, the first English-language book-length study of theme park fandom, there was relatively little work on theme park fans and that which did exist, such as Lutters and Ackerman's (2003) discussion of online Disney fan site 'The Castle' and Bartkowiak's (2012) research into fans' desire to learn more about the parks by taking part in tours, was not rooted within a specifically Fan Studies perspective. Work on Disney fans more broadly, including Maria Patrice Amon's (2014) study of the subversive potential of Disney cosplay and Kodi Maier's (2017) exploration of the queer potential of the creation of Disney femslash (sexual fanfiction written about female characters), has offered useful insights to help understand theme park fandom, even though their work is not explicitly about these physical sites. Meyrav Koren-Kuik's (2014) discussion of how the Disney parks offer 'platforms that allow fans a selective physical engagement with those sections of the Disney spatial mosaic that most take their fancy' (2014, p. 147) offers the first explicitly Fan Studies-focused analysis of theme park fans whilst, more recently, work has emerged on myriad fan practices in studies such as Carissa Ann Baker's (2016) examination of the impact of the role-playing game *Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom* on Disney's theme park space, Olympia Kiriakou's (2017) work on the 'darker' side of Disney parks fandom as displayed in a fan podcast, Richard D. Waters' (2016) study of fans of the Disney Cruise Line, and Abby Waysdorf and Stijn Reijnders's (2018), Carissa Ann Baker's (2018), and Victoria Godwin's (2017) studies of fannish activity at the Wizarding World of Harry Potter within Universal Studios.

These prior studies, which will be discussed in more depth across this book, begin to highlight the similarities between the types of fan practice and behaviour that theme park fans engage in and those who participate in other types of fandom. Like others, theme park fans forge online spaces where they can connect with fellow devotees, create fanfiction about favourite characters and relationships, engage in dressing as certain figures, take part in events to learn more about these favourite places, and consider the parks to have a strong relationship to their own sense of identity. My own previous work on theme park fandom, focusing on individual examples such as the presence of *Star Wars* in the Disney parks (2019) and fan reactions to the replacement of rides (2018), which is expanded on in Chapter Eight, also highlights the importance of fannish connection and affect, as well as the links between the parks' attractions, branding and transmedia concepts such as world-building. Thus, as this book demonstrates, theme park fans have much in common with fans of other media forms whilst also offering distinct modes of engagement and participation.

Researching Theme Park Fandom

In order to map the complexity of contemporary theme park fandom, the book focuses on fans of theme parks and their engagement with these spaces physically and when they are outside of the parks themselves. It is rooted in participant observation carried out by the author over the course of five trips to theme parks in Orlando, Florida, taking place between 2011 and 2018. These consisted of two two-week trips staying in accommodation off-site (i.e. not in either Disney or Universal owned hotels) in 2011 and 2014, two two-week trips staying onsite at Disney hotels (in 2013 and 2018), and one 10-day trip staying onsite at a Universal Orlando Resort hotel in 2016. During this period, three visits were also made to Disneyland Paris Resort (comprising its two parks Disneyland Park and Walt Disney Studios Park) in 2014, 2015, and 2019, whilst Tokyo Disneyland Resort's parks of Tokyo Disneyland and DisneySea were visited in 2018, along with Osaka's Universal Park. Whilst these global parks are not the focus of the present study, familiarity with their attractions and immersive techniques, and physically encountering the guest experience in these parks has allowed for a broader knowledge and comprehension of the wider international and transcultural contemporary theme park.

Actually visiting and engaging with the Parks as part of one's research is essential in order to move away from

> a dead-end approach that 'hovers above' the theme park and presents a clinical analysis of its effects and meanings. Getting 'on the ground' – and on the rides – provides a different set of insights, immersed in the experiences of managing, working in, visiting and thinking about the theme park. (Bell 2007, p. ix)

Such approaches have been strongly encouraged within broader studies of space and place; 'bringing a[n] […] autoethnographic sensibility to the sociocultural study of space is to take it as read that our understanding and experience of space is itself action and praxis based' (Roberts 2018, p. 7). Scholars of themed and immersive spaces have also advocated for greater 'first-person, on-the-ground research that addresses either (or both) of the domains of the consumption practices of guests and workers' (Lukas 2016, p. 160) since much prior analysis of the theme park is 'characterized not so much by […] phenomenological research but by research essays or editorials that make vast and sweeping generalizations about people in the spaces' (Lukas 2016, p. 160). However, the practice of actively being part of a community or group that is being studied is also a central tenet of Fan Studies.

Such debates are best exemplified by concepts such as 'aca-fandom' (Jenkins 2006b) or 'scholar-fans' (Hills 2002, pp. 11–15; see also Burr 2005; Hills 2007; Booth 2013). As a dedicated long-term fan of the theme parks I am discussing here, my own position as an insider equips me with knowledge and experience of these places that informs the research. Thus, whilst heeding warning on the fashionability 'for academic writers to declare their own cultural 'positionality' in relation to the texts they are addressing' (Brooker 2000, p. 4), I wish here to briefly outline the implications of my involvement, and suggest that these inform the research questions at the very heart of my work.

In her discussion of the presence of *Star Wars* within Disney theme parks, Heather Urbanski argues that 'My position "in the know" of both the Disney and Star Wars fan communities, influenced by my identity as [...] an aca-fan, is a deeply personal, affective one, as many of my experiences involved attending events with family' (2017, p. 254). My own relationship with the Orlando parks is similarly one of an insider who has a strong emotional connection to those spaces, and a long history of visiting them. From my first trips as a teenager with family in 1997 and 1998 to a trip in 2011 where I became engaged, a return for a honeymoon in 2013, and subsequent visits in 2014, 2016 and 2018, my own history and sense of self-identity is indelibly interwoven with these spaces. Alongside these happier memories, Orlando also hold a more complex personal significance since my first trip in 1997 was cut short due to the illness, and subsequent death of, my grandfather which caused us to return home early to the UK. Therefore, the sites at both Disney and Universal in Florida hold great meaning for a range of reasons, echoing Urbanski's comment about the often 'deeply personal, affective' fan-identities that those discussing the parks may negotiate. The parks work to 'create a powerful nostalgic space in which fans engage with their object of fandom *and* their own life-course as fans, as well a space in which new memories are made' (Jones 2017). As my own memories of these spaces are activated, echoed, and re-worked with each subsequent visit, my experiences form a 'palimpsest' (Freud 1995) which is written over and reconfigured when a space once associated, for example, with grief and upset becomes one of comfort and celebration; as Starks and Phan note, 'palimpsests help to represent spatial representations as constructed spaces that are "lived"' (2019, p. 17) via this layering of new experiences over the existing traces of a location. In this process, a complex overlay of 'lost identities, idealized identities, fantasy identities and repressed identities [...] are enabled, enacted and allowed through the blended identities that being a fan/tourist/pilgrim simultaneously allow' (Erdely and Breede 2017, p. 45). It is my own history, my own experiences in the parks, that spurred me to undertake this research,

to try to uncover why these sites are meaningful and to counter much of the negativity that surrounds them.

The conclusions drawn in this study are also impacted by my own identity; as Les Roberts notes, the fact that 'the researcher may 'put something of herself' into whatever it is she is researching […] draw[s] attention to the subjective influence brought to bear on the object of study' (2018, p. 2). As a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman from the Global North my interpretations are limited by my own positionality; for example, I have been unable to research the practices and discussions of non-English speaking theme park fans, despite the fact that the parks being analysed are enormously popular with international guests and Floridian locals from Hispanic and Latin American backgrounds. My observations within the Parks themselves were also framed by the relative ease with which I was able to move through those spaces unimpeded; as an able-bodied guest, as someone not viewed as threatening or suspicious by dint of the colour of my skin, as someone able to hold hands with their partner without fear (see Sedgman 2019). The experiences of those with different backgrounds are likely to be quite different and it would be remiss to not acknowledge the privilege that is embodied as I undertook this research.

Both Fan Studies scholars and theme park researchers have argued for the need to get close to the spaces being studied. As Stephen Brown summarizes,

> there is a certain something missing in many learned accounts of the [theme park] phenomenon. For me at least, they do not reflect the down and dirty reality. They do not ring true or resonate as they should. They fail to capture key aspects of the theme park encounter, its iconicity, if you will […] the learned literature is true in a literal sense – immaculately recorded, authoritatively reported, rigorously reviewed, and so on – but not true in an emotional, experiential sense. (2018, pp 179–80)

To truly experience the emotional and experiential aspects of theme parks, Pinggong Zhang proposes that 'To understand the behaviour of tourists and "cast members" of the themed spaces, the researcher needs to become a "member" of them in order to elicit the meanings they attribute to their immediate environment and behaviour' (2007, p. 16). My own research is inspired by Zhang's work on Chinese theme parks and utilizes many of his ethnographic strategies including

> immersing in [the theme park] […] for extended periods of time; observing the consumption of the park by tourists inside the park; listening to and

engaging in conversations; [...] collecting written and oral materials pertinent to the item of study; developing a critical understanding of the issues and people. (2007, p. 10)

However, following Wright (2006) I did not engage in any active empirical audience research during my visits to the theme parks. As he notes,

This self-imposed restriction also resolved the potential ethical problem of conducting research at a location which is both a public space in that the public are admitted but also the private property of Disney Corporation. Therefore I did talk to other visitors and to park employees but my interactions were those of any tourist to the site with the exception that I was listening and observing attentively. (Wright 2006, p. 305)

Whilst the permission of those around me was not explicitly obtained, there are limited ethical issues here since the observations do not refer to any individual who could be clearly identified. Furthermore, following prior studies of theme parks, such as Lugosi and Bray's (2008, p. 471) work on theme park walking tours which argues that 'the public nature of the walking tours, and the practice of tour guiding meant that the study was less vulnerable to criticisms of invasion of privacy' (see also Torres and Orlowski 2017), theme parks and other tourist places/spaces can be considered as public, albeit places that are privately-owned.

Since 2011 I have also been involved in social and online media focused on the theme parks in Orlando and worldwide, engaging in a form of 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000) or 'netnography' (Kozinets 2009). Kozinets defines netnography as 'a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds' (2009, p. 1) which enables study of how people interact in and across a range of online social spaces. As in my visits to the theme parks themselves, such online participant observation offers 'a method in which the researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as a means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture' (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002, p. 1). Since 2011, I have followed the discussions of other theme park fans and bloggers on an-almost daily basis via social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and, since 2017, Instagram. The research takes in the importance of social media as well as more traditional message boards and discussions in the comments on blog posts which 'continue to be useful sites for fan research, given the space they offer for lengthy conversations as well as their ability to archive and maintain older discussions for the

future' (Williams 2015, p. 9). This form of analysis draws on previous work within Tourism Studies, which utilizes the concept of media convergence to 'explore and contextualise changes in media consumption and their consequences for tourism consumption' (Månsson 2011, p. 1635). Despite the longevity of my reading of these sites, and my own fannish interest in theme park fandom, I did not participate actively on social media in conversations with other fans. Although I operated a Twitter account dedicated to this project, this consisted almost entirely of retweeting news about theme parks or posting about my own trips and fan activities. So doing enabled me to 'concentrate on methods that seem in tune with the world in which we exist rather than seeking to satisfy a set of abstract and possibly theoretically inapplicable ethical codes. Non participation observation […] fits the local environment better than interviewing or any other method' (Leaning 1998). Such a multi-site approach allows an overview of the intersecting and often messy, yet intriguing, online communications and practices of contemporary theme park fandom and participatory spaces.

Indeed, the participatory culture that swirls around theme park fandom is complex and often spread across a range of social media platforms; a blog, for example, may produce regular posts whilst also sharing these and interacting with others on sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Theme park fans are often diverse, however, and different fans may engage in or prioritize different forms of engagement and practice. A fan, for example, who engages in acts of costuming and DisneyBounding (dressing in clothing inspired by Disney characters or attractions, as discussed in Chapter Seven) may be quite distinct from those who post memories and content online about old or abandoned theme park rides (see Chapter Eight). Therefore, 'Describing the average Disney fan is impossible, as the body of Disney fandom does not consist of a specific demographic but encompasses a multi-generational global community' (Koren-Kuik 2014, p. 147). This applies equally to the theme park fandom that surrounds both Disney and Universal resorts, since many fans have very different interests and points on entry and identification. To best represent this diversity, the research presented here offers a holistic analysis that draws on multiple online sites such as theme park blogs and comments on popular theme park planning sites including *Orlando Informer*, *Orlando United*, *Theme Park Tourist*, *Walt Dated World*, the *Disney Food Blog*, and *Parkscope*, social media postings from a range of theme park fans, as well as the comments posted on these by visitors to, and fans of, the Orlando theme parks, alongside the observations made during my physical trips to the parks. However, mindful of ethical concerns, where possible I have sought to minimize the potential

for identification of comments and material posted online, either removing recognizable user names from comments and Tweets analysed here or presenting 'aggregate findings' (Ayers *et al* 2018) which do not reveal the identities of those posting the material that has informed my analysis here.

As discussed in more depth in Chapter Three, and across the book as a whole, these online sites and the interactions between users across them, exemplifies forms of 'participatory knowledge cultures in which people work together to collectively classify, organize and build information' (Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson 2013, p. 3). The attainment, circulation and revision of knowledge amongst theme parks fans offers an example of contemporary participatory culture, a culture in which 'members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another' (Jenkins 2006, p. 7). Even as issues of cultural value, hierarchy and distinction are negotiated, and as fans maintain and rework their own affective attachments to theme parks and their attractions, this sense of participation endures through the complex web of blogs, social media sites and comments that constitute theme park fandom.

Organization of the Book

The organization of the book itself follows the trajectory of the fan tourist/visitor and proceeds through a logical structure which broadly mimics the journey from planning and preparing through to 'being there' during the visit itself, and then to the processes of reflection and continuing attachments after the trip has finished. Where appropriate, chapters consider how fans plan before their trips, how they respond to various elements of the theme park experience whilst there, and how they reflect on and mediate their memories when they return.

Chapter Two offers an introduction to the key literature that has examined the theme park space, often from a marketing or industry-focused perspective. It outlines the reasons for the development of Orlando, Florida as the so-called 'theme park capital of the world' and establishes the rationale for the focus on the Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando Resort sites in this research. The chapter also argues that there is surprisingly little academic work that focuses on fans of specific locations, despite the wealth of studies of fan pilgrimage and media/fan tourism. Proposing that theme park fandom offers one avenue for exploring the complexities of fan connections to certain sites, the chapter also outlines how these places operate as sites of transmediality. Arguing for a theory of spatial transmedia, the

chapter argues that greater attentions needs to be paid to the located-ness of transmedia experience, and how different physical locations contribute to transmedia encounters.

Chapter Three explores how planning one's trip and negotiating the level of detail that a visit to WDW necessitates means that 'As prosumers – productive consumers – we willingly participate in the Disney experience and become productive in ways that feel participatory but are in fact also providing free labor for the brand' (Huddleston *et al* 2016, p. 221). Equally, whilst running blogs or twitter accounts may be 'unofficial, all of these activities are essentially labor since they are all forms of productivity that 'build the brand' of the media text' (Milner 2009, p. 492). However, for visitors planning a trip this is less about labour that may result in employment or direct economic capital, or even in symbolic capital amongst other fans, and more about the work of exchanging effort and planning for the imagined pay-off of a successful trip. This work, which I consider a form of 'anticipatory labor' allows us to move beyond arguments that may foreground the imagined passivity or exploited nature of these fans and towards more serious consideration of their affective and emotional involvement and modes of work. Furthermore, it enables us to move beyond approaches that dismiss and critique theme park spaces from afar and to make space for work that gets on-the-ground and into the parks, as well as for voices from disciplines such as Fan Studies which allow for fans-scholars own attachments and knowledge to have value. In the case of contemporary theme park studies, we must acknowledge that critique can only emerge from 'immersion in the Disney [and Universal] experience, including [their] very real and valuable pleasures' (Budd 2005, p. 12).

Chapter Four focuses more closely on how theme parks provide a crucial site for the exploration of transmediality and the development of paratexts, offering an ongoing site for analysis of the intersections between fandom, media texts, and merchandise, as well as fans' own affective and physical responses to visiting the parks. Through an extended case study of Disney's Magic Kingdom's Haunted Mansion, I argue that such examples allow us to better understand how participatory culture and communal building of narratives intersect, and sometimes clash, with the enforcement of official interpretations by a global company like Disney. Moving away from the strictly 'textual' modes of poaching introduced by Jenkins (1992) and undertaken by generations of fan scholars since, the chapter introduces the concept of 'spatial poaching' where fans need to be physically situated and present in order to make meaning and 'scribble in the margins' of a narrative (Jenkins 1992, p. 155). Concurring with the argument that 'we need to

consider transmedia not just as storytelling but also as a kind of experience; not just as a "flow" across platforms and screens, but as potentially and spatially located' (Hills 2017, p. 224), the chapter argues that the concept of spatial transmedia allows for such explorations. As the example of the Haunted Mansion, alongside the themed character meet-and-greets explored in Chapter Five and the restaurants considered in Chapter Six demonstrate, transmedia storytelling takes place in rooted locations, allowing for more immersive forms of 'world-building, brand-building, and world-selling' (Bartolome Herrera and Dominik Keidl 2017, p. 157). The piecing together of a storyworld and narrative over time (in the case of the Mansion, over fifty years) also challenges our understandings of transmediality as planned and rational, as a coherent mode of world-building and diegetic expansion. Instead, in cases where both fans and creators are involved in the, sometimes fractious, process of extending the world of an existing text or attraction, we can view this as alternate modes of co-creation, as fannish readings and meanings are co-opted and integrated into the 'official' story as a form of 'retrospective transmediality'.

Chapter Five analyses the affordances of the opportunity to meet characters within theme park spaces and how this works to challenge many of the existing binaries in place when conceptualizing contemporary stardom and celebrity. Whilst digital stars or virtual stars are 'akin to embodied stars (perceptual realism) but also resembling media icons (circulating outside the text) and animated characters (lacking an indexical referent)' (Hills 2003, p. 84), theme park character interactions allow fans to meet characters who may exist only in animation. These characters, which we can call ani-embodied characters, enable that which has no real-life referent come to life, as fans suspend their disbelief during the character encounter. As in the related experience of meeting forms of metonymic celebrity (where a theme park cast member is 'playing' a character played by an actor in a film such as those from the Marvel or Star Wars franchises), theme park fans are acutely aware that they are not meeting the 'real' Mickey Mouse or the 'real' Kylo Ren. Instead, they engage in complex acts of pleasurable pretence and a 'willingness to participate in [the Park's] illusions' (Carson 2004, p. 231). In these moments, and particularly in themed meet-and-greet spaces, fans not only get to meet favourite animated characters or those played by actors they would never normally get a chance to encounter, but also to be immersed again in locations relevant to the imagined storyworlds. In these instances, established binaries between ordinary/celebrity, star/character, and live-action/animation (Barker 2003) become blurred, as the theme park worker behind the mask or in the costume becomes erased

whilst the character they are playing is the object of fannish adoration and celebrity reverence.

Alongside challenging our existing understandings of contemporary celebrity, taking seriously themed spaces also offers us new opportunities to explore the role of merchandise and material objects in contemporary fan cultures, which is the focus of Chapter Six. Beginning to map out the relationships between theme park fans and the merchandise that can be consumed both inside and outside of the parks, the chapter introduces new modes of understanding the role of food and drink within fan cultures, whilst the subsequent chapter focuses on the importance of the body via engagement with such consumable objects and with clothing and other wearable merchandise. The role of food within fandoms remains relatively under-explored, despite the overlaps between the activities and practices of the figure of the 'foodie' and the contemporary media fan and the opportunities for negotiating the boundaries between text, self and place that engaging in fandom-related cooking or consumption offer. In themed spaces, however, the role of food and drink is key in terms of establishing a sense of place, of furthering fans' immersion in a world, and in establishing and maintaining hierarchies regarding access, authenticity, and the auratic. Whilst the participatory culture surrounding the theme parks in Florida occupies a quasi-pedagogic role in recommending the best places to eat or making clear where should be avoided, when within the parks themselves fans are able to inhabit imaginary worlds via themed restaurants and bars which immerse them further within these spaces. Whether based on existing intellectual properties such as Harry Potter or The Simpsons, on rides originating in the parks such as Jungle Cruise, or on original concepts such as Universal's Toothsome Chocolate Emporium, such places allow opportunities for transmedia expansion or playful immersion in a new story. The chapter argues that by experiencing 'hyperdiegetic paratexts' such as Butterbeer or a Krusty Burger, fans are invited to imagine the experiences of characters within a storyworld and offered the possibility of extending their own imaginative engagement through the possibility of sensory immersion through food and drink. Equally, it argues that fans can accord levels of cult-culinary capital to foodstuffs that they encounter, whether these are generated by a text itself (e.g. Harry Potter's Butterbeer), a park (e.g. Freeze Ray) or fans (e.g. Dole Whip). Accessing edible objects that can only be consumed within official park spaces offers fans limited and rooted opportunities for this kind of practice since these can only be consumed whilst physically within certain places. Finally, the chapter considers how fans of pre-existing artists or texts may find their desire to undertake forms

of fannish pilgrimage curtailed when important places co-exist with the demands and expectations of other branded locations. As in the (admittedly relatively rare) example of Jimmy Buffett fans at Margaritaville in Orlando, fannish 'vernacular practices' (Alderman 2002) such as writing messages to commemorate one's trip may be at odds with the priorities of the corporate parent, challenging the notion that guests to the theme park resorts are 'drawn into reproducing the routinised behaviour required by the leisure providing organisation' (Wright 2006, p. 304) without resistance. In these instances, themed spaces linked to pre-existing fandoms of music artists, sports teams, or celebrities offer intriguing chances for wider research into the tension between fans 'commemorative practices and the insistence of companies like Disney and Universal that 'the norms of civility prevail' (Wright 2006, p. 304) and that sites not become too overtly 'fannish'.

Whilst the eating of foodstuffs within theme park spaces is a key source of enjoyment for fans, the body is also crucial in the forms of consumption that they engage in. As Chapter Seven explores, a wide range of merchandise across different price brackets, franchises, or attractions is available for collection and curation, such as Disney's Pin Trading scheme, allowing fans to use 'branded merchandise to denote membership in a brand community or to convey an affinity between one's world view and the media property' (Affuso and Santo 2018). However, it is through clothing and make-up that we most clearly see the links between 'identity, embodiment, and emotional affect' (Cherry 2016, p. 29) for many theme parks fans. Whilst this may involve the wearing of Disney or Universal branded clothing or Disney makeup in one's ordinary life, reflecting 'a desire to integrate fan practices into everyday life and speaks to a marking of the body in intimate – and often less visible – terms' (Affuso 2018, p. 184), it can be witnessed more overtly in the practice of DisneyBounding where fans resist outright cosplay and instead 'are endeavouring to embody their perception of the character's soul, but as though that character lived in the 'real' twenty-first–century world' (Brock 2017, p. 304) by wearing outfits from their character's colour palette or highlighting specific accessories. As with the centrality of location and place – physically being in the Parks – to the consumption of food and drink, however, DisneyBounding within those spaces offers significant pleasures and the opportunity for moments of paratextual-spatio play where transmedia expansion of existing Disney narratives become possible via the fans' material presence. As those engaging in DisneyBounding 'step outside the boundaries of conventional corporeality' (Anderson 2015, p.114), this form of embodied transmedia allows for broader understanding of the importance of merchandise and paratexts to the transmedia theme park, and

beyond, enabling exploration of how transmedia universes are constructed and 'reflected in the rituals of fan paratexual production' (Geraghty 2015, p. 2) whether these paratexts are food and drink, or clothing, jewellery and makeup.

Chapter Eight argues that greater understanding of theme park fandom also offers avenues to expand and enhance understanding of how fans respond to moments of loss and rupture since the ever-changing economically-driven business model necessities that 'Within the theme park industry, it appears to be common belief that investments in new attractions have to be made [...] one has to regularly invest in new, large-scale attractions because attendance will otherwise decrease' (Cornelis 2010, p. 265). How fans react to the replacement of favourite attractions, restaurants or bars allows us to consider the concept of 'post-object fandom' (Williams 2015) from a location-based perspective, allowing us to explore emotional ties to specific locations that are meaningful and important. The threat of replacement and progress inherent in theme park space moves us from text-oriented approaches to moments of ending and loss and towards exploration of the spatial;

> A television series or film text does not change over time, providing a slightly more stable text for viewers to engage with. Although one's relationship with a visual text may evolve, the actual content does not; a viewer can re-watch a series or film and be guaranteed the exact same narrative each screening. This is not the case for theme park fans. (Kiriakou 2017, p. 105)

Focusing on fan responses to the closure of WDW's Maelstrom ride and its replacement by an attraction based on the animated movie *Frozen*, and their use of online spaces to memorialize and discuss abandoned and lost spaces such as Disney's River Country waterpark, the chapter argues that even highly commodified and controlled spaces can be meaningful to people. Thus, in contrast to sites such as Elvis Presley's former home Graceland (Alderman 2002), Viretta Park (Garner 2014) or the location where singer Mark Bolan died (Bickerdike and Downing 2017) which became (more) significant *after the loss of fan icon or text*, the loss of theme park attractions and fan reactions to this highlights *what happens when it is spaces themselves that disappear*. The chapter thus proposes that fans' interest in archiving information about abandoned or closed rides echoes the practices of urban explorers who attempt to 'connect in a meaningful way to a world rendered increasingly mundane by commercial interest' (Garrett 2013, p. 240) and

'demonstrate[s] the power of the amusement park idea to command attachments to iconic place and remembered or imagined pleasure, an assertion of topophilia in defiance of the brute realities of profit, subsidy and loss' (Walton 2017, p. 173). Accordingly, the chapter argues that paying attention to fan reactions to loss and replacement both in theme park spaces and other themed locations allows for consideration of how fannish sites can be commemorated and memorialized within contemporary digital cultures, with fan memories, photos, and discussions presented alongside more archival histories of abandoned parks. It also opens up space for discussion of more personal forms of commemoration and remembrance linked to individual or familial memories; since theme parks often 'represent the pleasures and dreamlands of childhood, photographs of abandoned parks powerfully represent a nostalgia for the wonders of a naïve and hopeful worldview. The abandoned site can represent the abandoned dreams of childhood' (Levitt 2017). Moreover, the chapter posits that a focus on the links between important places, memory and notions of self-identity and narrative opens up further space for exploration of how people become fans of specific sites or places as a result of visiting them, or of related media or cultural objects. We can ask,

> what places can do to visitors who may not bring particular media or fan-specific imaginative expectations with them and yet may respond strongly to a particular place. What aspects of that spatial experience are these individuals responding to? What confluence of affective, emotional and experiential elements may cause them to become fans of that site and its associated texts or cult icons? (Williams 2018, p. 104)

Tracing further how one's own connections with themed spaces such as theme parks begin and end and considering the ebbs and flows of connection across one's life course offers opportunities for beginning to answer such questions in more depth.

Chapters Seven and Eight also explore the post-visit experiences of theme park fans, considering how they maintain their connections with fellow fans and continue to engage in their fandom of the parks. Since visiting parks is expensive, many fans cannot attend often and instead draw on a range of strategies to continue their fandom. For some this involves sharing content via social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and displaying the 'evidence' of their trip, as discussed in relation to merchandise and clothing in Chapter Seven. For other fans, the post or between-visit period involves reminiscing about old or closed rides, sharing memories and

photos online or voicing dissent when favourite attractions are replaced, as discussed in Chapter Eight. This approach to structure allows the various stages of fan engagement with theme parks to be considered, as well as enabling exploration of a broader range of participatory practices.

Before beginning this journey through theme park fandom, however, the next chapter introduces existing theoretical approaches to the themed space and the associated concept of immersion, how the theme park has been approached as a transmedia space that offers potential for acts of world-building, and how fans of these spaces have been previously approached and understood. It outlines the key themes that this study deals with, considering the importance of understanding fans' spatial relationships when it is a space itself that is the object of fandom, and the existence of cultural hierarchies and distinctions even within a subculture that is often associated with the banal and the ephemeral. It also considers fans' 'emotional investments, seeking to understand how affect permeates discourses of culture, subjectivity, embodiment, and identity' (Sandlin and Garlen 2016, p. 17), highlighting the crucial links between the elements of the theme park that fans identify with and their affective and emotional attachments.

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