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**Performing New Cosmoses: Environmental Matters
and Disability Issues in Disney's Animations between
1990 and 2010**

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In my doctoral dissertation, I analyze the subversion of binary systems in Disney animations in the context of the environment and body representations. The observed time-frame (1990-2010) is the period between the Disney Renaissance and the merge of Disney and Pixar Animation Studios (2006), as well as the years after the merge. I have chosen two decades of the Disney canon to observe for three reasons. First, the beginning of the time frame coincides with what the literature calls “Disney Renaissance”: between the mid-60s and the very end of the 80s, there was a wasteland in producing children’s animated films, which came to an end when Disney started again making feature-film length animations with its nostalgic/anachronistic motifs and application of magic, typical to 1930s-1950s’ Disney films. Second, the twenty-year-long interval incorporates the appearance, blooming and soaring of Pixar Animation Studios - now a subsidiary of Disney with an immense influence on its parent. Pixar animations are groundbreaking in their visual performativity as well as in their thematic openness. Third, twenty years are

enough to point out developmental changes in the two central topics (contemporary environmental matters and the representation of disability).

The starting point of the study is the discrepancy that appears between the visuality/content of mainstream animations and the postmodern social context typical to the 1990s. This discrepancy is most visible in Disney animations, whereas independent American animation studios appear to incorporate postmodernist concepts more smoothly. The success of the independent studios and the insupportable anachronism necessitate significant changes within the conservative Disney concepts. My aim in the present study is to analyze how and to what extent the studio manages to build subversion into the normative Disney narratives. I observe such changes in two topics: the conceptualization and representation of the environment (macrocosm) and of the body (microcosm).

The antecedent of the research is the long-lasting Disney practice to adapt European fairy tales (the genre offering a practical context for subversion). The ‘disneyfied’ adaptations deprive the original tales from their

subversion,¹ thus creating an ideological, utopist world with conformist range of ideas, which excludes all subversively conceptualized (subject) categories. The idyllic vision of the environment, described as untouched by social effects, becomes untenable in a contemporary context where the roots of environmental problems are clearly identified in social and consumerist practices. Similarly unavoidable is the re-consideration of the representation of the body: I observe the changed bodily dimensions, the representation of bodies envisioned as disabled and the subject-formation of characters depicted with such bodies.

I introduce the two topics separately since their research and theoretical background are significantly different. Concerning the subversive representation of the environment, I refer to (1) the relevant theses of environmental philosophy, (2) the effects of consumer society on the environment and (3) the wide media publicity of environmental problems. I observe bodily disabilities – as the subversion of Disney’s concept of the

¹ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion. Second Edition*, New York, Routledge, 2006., 193-212.

perfect body – in two groups: (1) animations which suggest that changed bodily dimensions originate from the individual's moral flaw, thus reproducing the paradigm of the perfect body; (2) animations which detach the disabled body from moral behavior, realize disability as a social construction and argue on the need for change in the social mentality. In both groups, I apply contemporary theories and results of the interdisciplinary research field, disability studies.

The two different topics are both related to a significant paradigm shift: the natural/transcendental magic – as the tool inducing narrative changes – is contested by the 'man-made' magic: technology. The tension between nature and technology brings about newly-formed, subversive categories, such as the dying planet destroyed by (over-)developed technology and the 'expanded' human body, complemented with prostheses and other electric utilities.

The platform applied for the analysis of the two topics is Enikő Bollobás's theory on performativity.²

² Enikő Bollobás. *They Aren't Until I Call Them*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010.

Binary oppositions lose their legitimacy in the age of poststructuralism and postmodernism, which argues against the connection between signifier and signified. Meaning, similarly to the ‘essence’ of given categories, is not anchored to a given entity: meaning is constructed in and by the discourse. With the same logic, binary pairs are also discursive categories. These categories, therefore, are not pre-existing givens but entities which can be performed: either as ‘re-staging’ or as ‘creating.’ In this sense, Bollobás defines two aspects of performativity: (1) *performance* is in accordance with the dominant ideology, replaying already existing scripts in a normative fashion; (2) *performative* is created out of resistance to the ruling ideology, thus bringing about new ontologies in a subversive manner. In my dissertation, I identify normative and subversive entities with the help of Bollobás’s theory.

The results of my study can be summarized in the following points:

- In both topics, subversive items are dealt with in a similar fashion: they appear fragmentarily in the normative structure of narration, which does not allow

their complex representation in depth. For this reason, the description of the dying planet, for example, loses its significance in a structure where the storyline cannot avoid the compulsory happy ending. The appearance of subversive elements cannot be doubted but their roles are still of no significant weight in Disney animations.

- The multilayered nature of the semiotic channel can be observed in the animations of the observed twenty years. On the one hand, this is a (profit-generating) tool to address wider layers of audiences; on the other hand, it functions as a referential ‘playground’ for filmic, literary and popular cultural intertextualities where visual and textual subversions appear.
- The generic hegemony of musicals in animations is replaced by the multiplicity of genres. With the widespread appearance of technology, the genre of science-fiction becomes very popular; the motif of subversion and breaking-away is emphasized in road movies; the pulsating, fast rhythm of narratives demands the genre of adventure films. The merging of various genres is typical to most animations but the decisive genre

remains comedy – the ‘normative’ genre of American animations.

- The tension between nature and technology shows a strengthening tendency of the latter towards 2010. Since technology is a man-made creation and a tool with which humans can (ab)use and control nature, most animations argue for the ethical use of technology or criticize the all-pervasive technological development. Typically, these animations take place in urban settings: from the exotic wilderness, animations ‘move to’ contemporary urban spheres, that is, to the (American) metropolis, or to its suburbs.
- The critical description of the consumer society appears in the urban contexts because consumer practices deplete the environment, on the one hand. On the other hand, commodities appear as subject-categories (toys, cars, etc.), which leads to a strong anti-consumerist tone. Animations that criticize the throw-away practice of consumerism argue through the unique individuality of commodity-characters. Paradoxically, the (non-existing) personality of the commodities encourages the audience to purchase the

merchandise of these animations, thus propelling the system of consumerist practices, which is criticized by the exact same animations.

- The extension of the disabled body is understood as a positive aspect of technology. The biological body and the technological advances substituting for or complementing the abilities of the body visualize the tension between nature and technology on the surface of the body. As a new category, a version of the natural body appears, which is unable to detach itself from technology or to function without it: the ontology of the body is not biological any more, but it is not yet completely technological either. In this sense, the unethical use of the ‘man-made magic’ destroys the environment and over-writes the dimensions of the human body: the body’s dependency on technology is conceptualized as a dystopic disability.

Publications related to the dissertation

“Disney Goes Performative: A Poststructuralist Reading of Subjectivity in Contemporary Disney Animations.” *BAS Conference*, Timisoara, Romania, 2011 (submitted paper)

“Blinded by the Desk Lamp: Object Values and Consumerism in Pixar Animations.” *American Studies and Visuality – on the Horizon of Information Society* (Conference in Szeged, May, 2011). (in press)

“The Hunchback and the Lucky Fin – The Issue of Disability in Walt Disney Animations.” In *HUSSE10-LitCult. Proceedings of the HUSSE10 Conference. Literature and Culture Volume*. Kinga Földváy, Zsolt Almási and Veronika Schandl, (eds.). Available: <http://mek.oszk.hu/10100/10171/>

“Disney’s Brave New Americas: Historical Re-Interpretations in Disney’s *The Emperors New Groove* and DreamWorks’ *The Road to El Dorado*. In *Americana* Vol. VI., Number 1 (Spring 2010). Réka M. Crisitan and Zoltán Dragon, (eds.). Available: <http://americanajournal.hu/vol6no1/borthaiser>

“Can you sing with all the voices of the mountains? –
Environmental ethics in American Animations.” In
Philobiblion Vol. XIV. 2009. Cluj University Press, 72-
84.

“A Whole New World(?) – Rereading Disney
Animations of the Early 1990s” In *Americana* Vol. IV.,
Number 1. Réka M. Cristian and Zoltán Dragon (eds.):
<http://americanajournal.hu/vol4no1/borthaiser>

Conference lectures related to the dissertation:

19-21 May 2011: “Wait! That doesn’t look like Earth!”: Environmental Turn in American Animations.” 21st *Conference on British and American Studies*, Timisoara, Romania.

6-7 May 2011: “Buy N Large”: Reflections on Consumerist Society in Mainstream American Animations.” *American Studies and Visuality – on the Horizon of Information Society*, SZTE, Szeged

24 April 2011: “Urbanized American (Disney) Animations in the Perspective of Environmental Philosophy.” PhD Research Seminar (2010-2011-2), SZTE-BTK, Szeged

27-29 January 2011: “Lucky Fins and Happy Feet – The Issue of Disability in Contemporary American Animations.” *HUSSE 10*, Piliscsaba

4-6 February 2010: “Animations Urbanized– Spheres and Forms of Popular Culture in Disney, DreamWorks and Warner Bros Animations.” *9th Brno International Conference of English, American and Canadian Studies*. Brno, Czech Republic.

2-4 October 2009: „A testek szemiotikai preparációja – Günther von Hagens és kortársainak munkássága.” (The

Semiotic Preparation of the Bodies – The Work of Günther von Hagens and His Contemporaries) 7. *Semiotica Agriensis*, Eger.

17-18 October 2008: “Disney-sembling the American Myth. Paradigm Shift in the 1990s’ Disney Animations” *HAAS Conference*, Szeged.

25-26 September 2008: „A környezeti felelősség nevelése és tudatosítása az animációk tükrében.” (Environmental Awareness and Responsibility in American Animations.) *Fejlődés és környezeti felelősség – környezetetikai konferencia* (Development and environmental consciousness. Conference on environmental ethics), Szeged.