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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

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Theme Parks in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rebecca Williams

This piece explores the impact of the coronavirus in 2020 on theme park spaces and their fans. It outlines the ways that fans maintained connections to favorite physical sites, even when they were unable to visit these places. It also considers the debates surrounding the reopening of themed spaces, and how these mapped onto pre-existing political allegiances and highlighted divisions surrounding civil liberties and the concept of freedom.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep across the world, one of the first industries to be affected was the tourism sector. As museums, galleries, and leisure sites began to close, the impact on one specific form of tourist site—the theme park—became clearer. From national theme parks such as Denmark's famous Tivoli Gardens, Hong Kong's Ocean Park, and Efteling in the Netherlands through to the international giants of Disney and Universal, gates to theme park spaces were shuttered around the globe. Indeed, for the first time in history, there was a period when every one of the six Disney theme parks in the world (in California, Florida, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai) were closed. Whilst these sites have slowly begun to reopen (Disney's Shanghai Disneyland reopened in May 2020, with its France, Florida, and Japan parks following in July 2020), the temporary closure of themed spaces

that have a dedicated fan base and frequent visitors offers a unique chance to consider how connections to such spaces were continued during the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic.

Broader "media or participatory fandom refers to loosely interlinked interpretive communities, mainly comprising women and spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and national, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, formed around various popular cultural texts" (Pande 2019, 2). Such fans typically form communities with one another, often through online platforms, and produce "fan works including fan fiction, fan art, meta commentary, and fan videos" (Pande 2019, 2). For many fans, there is a spatial element to their fandom and "media fans often have strong emotional interests in finding and visiting sites related to their favorite films, TV shows or celebrities. … Engaging in acts of tourism can offer fans opportunities to learn more about fan objects, immerse themselves in fictional worlds, and make connections with others who share their interests" (Williams 2019, 98). For other fans, however, it is specific places or locations that are the source and focus of their fandom and "it is possible to be a fan of a destination, location or place and considers the resultant fan practices and discourses when it is *particular places or spaces themselves that are the focal point for fandom"* (Williams 2020, 49). Theme park fans fall into this group. There are many fans of Disney more broadly, for example, who undertake fan practices such as writing fanfiction (Maier 2017) or engaging in cosplay (the act of dressing in costumes that represent certain characters) (Winge 2019, 169). For theme park fans, however, it is the act of visiting the physical sites themselves that is central to their engagement, as well as planning for these visits, recording photos and experiences, and discussing the parks online with others on message boards and social media sites.

For such devoted theme park fans, the advent of the coronavirus caused an inevitable rupture in these fan activities. For many dedicated visitors this instigated a sense of mourning and collective loss, especially for those living in the local areas near to the California and Florida Disney sites and who visited frequently. Theme parks fans have typically become used to such feelings of loss when favourite attractions or rides have been replaced or removed. They may find themselves "entrenched in a perpetual and oftentimes nerve-wracking sense of physical evolution … the landscape of Walt Disney World [and all theme parks] is always changing, and remains unstable and forever 'incomplete'" (Kiriakou 2017, 105). This can pose a threat to fans' identities or sense of security in the spaces that they love (Williams 2020) since these can change at any time. In moments of heightened global uncertainty such as the pandemic, such threats may be felt even more intensely; if one cannot visit their favourite places such as theme parks (or more broadly, any physical location that has meaning) they may become anxious and unsure. The pandemic thus

offers the chance to examine reactions to temporary closures or lack of access to favourite spaces.

For those who are fans of sites that are closed during the pandemic, attempts to recreate the experience of being there offer a way to maintain a sense of closeness and, also, to try to deal with any anxieties that may arise from the temporary loss of being able to visit. In response, some Disney fans attempted to recreate rides and shows at home, to cook their favourite recipes from the parks, and to reminisce about their previous visits. The theme parks themselves sought to maintain connections with visitors, posting official recipes for classic foods such as Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* 'grey stuff' dessert (McClintock 2020) or cakes from Woody's Lunch Box in Toy Story Land (Dunlap 2020). Universal Orlando Resort also sought to engage its absent fans with recipes from around the parks and hotels on its official blog (2020). The ability to make food and drink associated with a place that was unattainable enabled fans to maintain connections through familiar tastes, smells, and textures and to try to recreate physical embodied experiences in their own homes during lockdown. Indeed, as one online article noted, "a near-universal sentiment is that what people are missing isn't a specific attraction, or their favorite snack, but an emotional connection that's impossible to replicate" (Renshaw 2020). In trying to recreate attractions and experiences in their domestic spaces, these fans attempted to keep that emotional connection alive.

However, the reopening of themed sites also offered interesting and perhaps unexpected chances to explore the links between fan attachments and more political debates. Such examples work against the commonly held belief that theme park sites are frivolous or even "a force for social ill" (Kokai and Robson 2020, 6) and that those who frequent them are no more than "consumption-driven cultural dupes" (Williams 2020, 12). For instance, when the reopening of both Universal Orlando Resort and Walt Disney World in Florida was announced, visitors on social media were divided. The strict social distancing rules that theme parks needed to enforce, alongside a requirement for wearing face masks, were welcomed by those who accepted the inevitability of a change in behaviour and experience in "the new normal" of the post-pandemic theme park. However, others rejected these demands, arguing that such limitations would adversely impact the enjoyment of the theme park experience, that such a reduced experience (lacking, for example, fireworks, parades, and character meetings) was poor value-for-money and, in some extreme cases, that such requests were an infringement of an individual's civil liberties. In these examples, the social media channels and Facebook groups usually devoted to planning tips or sharing experiences became hotly contested sites of political discourse, with posters often fiercely disagreeing with one other and dividing across partisan lines.

As journalist Dan Kois summarizes:

> As has happened in many discussions about safety precautions during
> the pandemic, the comments [on theme park websites] were soon over-
> whelmed by visitors who viewed safety precautions as an impingement
> on their personal liberty: "Masks?? Temperature readings before
> entering?? Sounds to me like you're pushing New World order kind of
> things and I'm not here for it." Some annual pass holders declared they
> were finished with Disney forever. Others swore they'd attend but pro-
> claimed they wouldn't be wearing face masks. Wrote one commenter: "I
> do care about other people and safety, the issue is that I care about free-
> dom more." (Kois 2020)

Universal Orlando Resort was one of the first to re-open in Florida on 5
June 2020, with Walt Disney World beginning a phased reopening from 11
July 2020. Despite not being the first to throw open its gates to guests, WDW
has attracted the majority of the criticism for restarting operations during
the ongoing pandemic. This has been especially pertinent since the state of
Florida witnessed a wave of new infections and a steady rise in cases and
deaths from COVID-19 as the resort reopened (Wisel 2020). Whilst both UOR
and WDW have taken a number of health and safety precautions, including
increased sanitation, mandatory masks, removing character meet-and-greets,
and eliminating high-crowd events such as parades and fireworks shows,
criticisms remain. Many have voiced their disapproval via social media, others
in more creative ways; when WDW released an apparently reassuring video
to welcome guests 'home' to their resort, online critics were quick to edit the
clip with foreboding music from horror movies or with voiceover soundtracks
instead imploring visitors to 'stay away' and that the resort was 'not safe'
(UMICL 2020).

As the arguments over the parks' responses to the pandemic make clear,
theme parks are not apolitical sites and fan/guest discussions over the
practices and behaviours that are enacted within them cannot be divorced
from broader socio-political viewpoints and structures. In fact, there are
other cases of Disney's parks in particular, appearing as vectors for political
and cultural discussion including protests and counter-protests over the
inclusion of the 45th US President Donald Trump in the Magic Kingdom's Hall
of Presidents (Ian R. 2017), and the inclusion of imagery from Disney's *Song of
the South* film (widely critiqued for its racist depictions) in its Splash Mountain
attraction (Sperb 2012). This latter issue became especially intensified when
the global Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020 coincided with the pan-
demic and sparked discussion of racism and racial inequalities.

The architectural spaces of the Disney parks have been seen to

> reinforce historical erasure and injustice. Participants enjoy staging
> themselves around the facades at US Disney parks, the design of
> which often owes its origins to colonialism or Victorianism. The non-
> everyday life that fans admire in the parks are colonial throwbacks,
> painting nonwhite cultures as exotic and Euro-American culture as
> mainstream. (Lantz 2020, 1350)

For example, attractions including "the Jungle Cruise (a light-hearted boat
ride through savage country), … [includes] spear-wagging natives with
bones through their noses dancing on the shores" (Wood 2020) whilst
the original Disneyland Haunted Mansion is designed in antebellum-era
architecture which has an obvious visual correlation with the Deep South and
its history.

In particular, however, the BLM movement focused attention back on the
Splash Mountain attraction which had been critiqued "as a racially sanitized
commercial venture ready for popular consumption" (Sperb 2005, 935).
When Disney announced its intention to renovate the ride to be themed
around its animated movie *The Princess and the Frog*, many fans read this
as a direct response to these criticisms and the impact of the BLM moment
(Frank 2020). Although not a direct response to the coronavirus, it is, as Alison
Hearn and Sarah Banet-Weiser note, difficult to read the pandemic's cultural
impact without also considering the context of the BLM movement in the
summer of 2020, since "the conjuncture of Black Lives Matter activism and the
material inequities exposed by the global pandemic has provided … [a] kind
of ontological shattering" (Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020, 5). The discussions
over fans' acceptance or rejection of health and safety measures post-COVID,
and how the parks responded to the BLM movement, were thus mapped
onto broader political debates over civil liberties, freedoms, and pre-existing
political inclinations.

For those of us who research theme park spaces, the pandemic offers new
methodological challenges as well. Indeed, "there is no 'back to normal' and
there is no knowing or predicting a way 'forward' either; external events move
at breakneck speed, and yet also, in the different lived realities of lockdown,
unbearably slowly" (Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020, 2). We are facing a world
where global travel can perhaps no longer be taken for granted, and where
the future of tourism looks set to be less affordable, less accessible, and less
spontaneous than we are used to. This poses questions about how we can
continue to examine the lived practices and behaviours that occur within
theme park spaces, especially since much research has urged that "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, ix). If the post-pandemic landscape restricts our ability to visit the sites of our research objects (whilst ongoing concerns over the impact of international travel on the environment also play a role), we need to reimagine how such work can take place.

As researchers across media and cultural studies consider the methodological and ethics implications, the use of digital and virtual media may become more integral to how we conduct our work. Many tourist sites embraced the use of virtual exhibitions during lockdown, allowing visitors to see sites otherwise unavailable to them due to geographical distance or other limitations to access. For example, the Studio Ghibli Museum in Japan (which is notorious for limiting its daily guest numbers) offered rare online clips of its artefacts and spaces (Weiss 2020). Online visits to theme parks (especially if new technologies such as virtual reality can be harnessed) may be one way for both fans and researchers to keep up with developments and new attractions in these spaces.

There are also emerging debates in fan studies around ethical consumption (Wood, Litherland, and Reed 2020), and the need to travel to sites such as theme parks can be critiqued from an environmental perspective. One way forward for those who research mediated places or fan tourism is to reimagine a more ethical and ecologically friendly way of conducting this work, ensuring that such journeys are made carbon-neutral or that potential environmental harm is offset. In this landscape, physical visits to sites of fan tourism and pilgrimage (whether theme parks, museums, filming locations, and beyond) may no longer be possible, for both environmental and health reasons. How we research these spaces will need to be reimagined in the coming months and years in the post-pandemic cultural, and scholarly, landscape.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

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