Anthropology in a Simulation World

When Fieldwork Engages Pop Culture

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When I was asked to provide the keynote at the 2008 Storytelling, Architecture, Technology and Experience conference (SATE) in Orlando, FL, I was somewhat hesitant. I was accustomed to presenting my research on theming at academic meetings, and I was unsure how the conference attendees—most of them professionals in the popular architecture, theming and entertainment industries—would react to an academic speaking on their turf. For over ten years I have been engaged in the study of themed parks, casinos and restaurants, and since I began work as an employee trainer at the now defunct theme park Six Flags AstroWorld, I have been aware of the elicit nature of my ethnographic objects. Theming is an increasingly common practice in the world today, where design professionals use an overarching theme to spatially, experientially and socially organize a consumer space, be it casino or museum. Because theming approximates, recreates and re-presents other cultures, people, places and events, it could be said to be a natural object for ethnographic inquiry. However, the difficulty of studying theming rests on its complex politics. The very fact that this form of consumerism is a typically stereotypical and simplified re-creation of culture, and that the ubiquity of theming has led to what we might call “simulation worlds,” has resulted in many people decrying the practice, including anthropologists.

The conference was held at Pleasure Island—a section of the Disney resort that featured a variety of themed dance clubs. A number of our events occurred at the explorer-themed Adventurers Club—a hodge-podge of kitsch décor, precious African art, explorer photos, a replica of the Artemision Bronze, a dilapidated pipe organ, and barstools fashioned to resemble elephant legs. During one social event, a number of cultural theorists and architects considered the nature of theming at the club and theming in general: What were the cultural referents involved in the theming? How did the décor and architecture contribute to patrons’ enjoyment of the consumer space? Unlike the typical conferences I attend, which involve smaller numbers of interested participants and take place in clearly academic contexts, the SATE conference allowed for many in situ conversations about theming.

One of the most interesting conversations occurred during a presentation by WATG. Two of the firm’s lead architects were discussing their plans for La Mondial, a planned themed resort in Egypt. The architects framed their project in reference to two facets of theming: (1) the essence of the place or thing being themed (often erroneously called the “original”), and (2) the recreated or simulated place (the “copy”). The architects addressed the lack of a pure object. Their Egyptian clients were critical of simplistic representations of Egypt, and argued that recreations of Egypt should not present too “pure” an image to consumers. The architects themselves expressed a desire to not replicate Egypt in the manner of the Luxor Las Vegas, which they critically and reflexively described as too stereotypical, recognizing the complex issues of representation involved in theming.

During my talk at the conference I asked the participants to play off of this critical and reflexive spirit, specifically through a series of cultural provocations. “If you have ever found yourself having to defend your thematic creations—perhaps from a cultural critic who accuses you of cheapening culture or history—then I would suggest that you directly engage those critics. And if you have ever felt unable to theme certain events or cultural circumstances—perhaps because they would be considered too serious to replicate in a consumer venue—then I suggest that you reconsider and take on those projects.” My suggestions to the theming professionals paralleled my own academic understandings of theming, namely the desire to question the concept of unified culture, to challenge simplistic notions of the original and the copy, and to react against the urge to view consumer space as simply a form of conformity and mass hedonism. I hope to expand my ethnographic studies of theming to consider how it is constructed discursively among industry professionals by further developing relationships with those professionals.

In the days following the conference I took the opportunity to conduct field research at a number of the Disney theme parks in Orlando. It was an uncanny experience. In many ways Epcot epitomizes the central tenets of professional anthropology: a recognition of diverse world cultures, an understanding of emic versus etic perspectives, and an appreciation of pluralism. Most cultural anthropologists are horrified to think that parks like Epcot could be in any way an accurate representation of world cultures, seeing them as bad copies and condemning their designers, architects, patrons and workers. But what is interesting for theme park patrons and workers is the extent to which these bad copies are, in fact, quite real. Many people do enjoy theming specifically because it is an escape from the reality of the world. Others fully understand the nature of the simulation at hand in these places, but use irony, humor and cultural critique to interact with and within these spaces in complex ways.

The cultural models that have been applied to themed spaces have been incredibly limited. Many critics, including anthropologists, have expressed disdain for the cultural simulation that takes place in theme parks, and others have stated that any behaviors occurring within such spaces lack creativity or authenticity. Although anthropologists should be critical of all cultural forms, including popular ones, they should also be cognizant of respects in which such criticism is often not culturally relativistic. As theming and its variations continue to expand throughout the world we should use the opportunity to develop more emic-based, constituent and complex analyses of popular culture. Although anthropologists do not have to enjoy the theme parks that they visit, they should be aware of why others do.

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