Living a Theme (20:25)

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This video explores the meaning of thematization and themed environments. Based on previous studies and theses developed about the subject by scholars from different fields, we investigate 1) construction and features of various themed environments and 2) lay person’s thoughts and feelings about thematization compared to the academic perspective. To understand this phenomenon, we use still images and video images from themed environments such as Las Vegas, theme parks, and themed restaurants; from parts of cities that are constructed as places for people to live in that can now be perceived as themed spaces, as well as footage from interviews with theme park visitors.

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and are unable to dispose without clear conscious motivation or control. Through the use of video ethnography the dynamic nature of possession attachment and its obstruction to disposal practices is illuminated.

“Stay-at-Home Dads Unite: Coping with Stigma and Isolation”
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Based on video ethnographic research at Stay-at-Home Dad (SAHD) playgroups, 2006 SAHD convention and in-depth interviews, this film explores the challenges SAHDs face as they undertake the primary caregiver role and the strategies they employ to negotiate their gender positioning vis-à-vis more hegemonic masculinities. While prior CCT research has mainly studied consumption communities (e.g. Salomon snowboarders, Cova and Cova 2002; Apple computer users, Schau and Muniz 2002; Harley Davidson bikers, Schouten and McAlexander 1995) for what they do for individuals, the film discusses SAHDs’ organized activities as collective efforts to transform what it means to be a man and a father.

“Living a Theme”
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This video studies thematization, a phenomenon that has attracted much attention. Themed environments are all around us and there is an interest in knowing why this is a phenomenon of our time. The video raises the question as to whether this is a phenomenon of our time or a phenomenon that has been with us for a long time.

The video begins with images from Las Vegas, exploring the different sites and people’s reactions. This phenomenon of people visiting, enjoying and appreciating themed environments, recognized by many astute observers of contemporary culture has resulted in a respectable sized literature, and several theses have been advanced. These theses are briefly reviewed in the video.

Two themes that are common to many of these theses are that (1) thematization is driven by corporations and (2) contemporary consumers are accomplices in the theming of the world. Davis (1999) sees theme parks as models of reality that identify issues that need solutions, and that also provide corporations with opportunities to have philanthropic answers to world’s problems. Gottdiener (2001) further argues that many old themes are recycled in present day theme parks in which people find comfort and seek to actualize their consumer selves. Sorkin and colleagues (1992) see theme parks as the privatization of public space as well as a regulated and pleasurable substitute for the democratic realm. Ritzer (2004) also sees theme parks as centrally created and controlled, as spaces where space, things and people lose any personality becoming generic followers of scripts. Beardsworth and Bryman (1999) introduce the concept of quasification to emphasize that both those who engineer and those who purchase themed spaces are active and knowing accomplices. Finally, Baudrillard (1988) presents a postmodern perspective, where themed spaces are seen as timeless— that is, without a past, present or future—places that don’t simply simulate reality, they constitute the real as the theme park—reality becomes the theme park.

The video then moves to EPCOT (the acronym for Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow) Center, a theme park within Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, especially its World Showcase section featuring several countries of the world, to show segments from interviews with visitors to find out how they feel about themed environments. In these segments we find that many visitors have visited EPCOT several times and that they enjoy and appreciate the experience of visiting different ‘countries’. It is seen that people do not seem discomforted by thematization, rather they see EPCOT as an experience of different cultures and places.

To explore why, the video continues with a visit to a city in Texas, San Antonio. This is a city that has become a tourist destination due to the historic site of the Alamo, but also because of the fact that the city’s heart is built around the San Antonio Riverwalk. Many parts of San Antonio that can be considered to be themed areas are visited and observed, and it is noticed that these were not created as themed spaces, but as places for people to live in. The video shows people, tourists and residents of San Antonio, in their daily activities at these sites.

The video moves back to EPCOT Center where further segments from interviews indicate that people who visit EPCOT Center do not seem to be keen on making a distinction between theme parks and the world ‘outside’. Then, images from many places, all around the world that can be seen as themed spaces are exhibited. The point is made that all of our humanly constructed environments are themed. Images from New York and Phoenix are displayed to further make this point.

The video concludes that intellectuals and scholars are more dedicated to maintaining a distinction between the thematic and the everyday, between the ‘real’ and the ‘fantasy’ than are lay people. It is suggested that this promises to be a fruitful issue to investigate.