In the Window at Disney: A Lifetime of Brand Desire

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"Immersive theatre is suddenly the rage"—so writes Richard Zoglin in *Time* magazine, suggesting that this transformation of theatre-going into participatory event produces market advantage: "a unique live experience that simply can't be duplicated on the movie screen or the computer" (2013:55). The extraordinary critical acclaim and economic success of Punchdrunk's shows in New York (*Sleep No More* [2011]) and London (*The Drowned Man* [2013]) certainly substantiate Zoglin's claim and might seem to be an exhilarating end point of a performance trajectory that runs from the disciplined audiences of fourth-wall-removed realism to Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator. But, as Jen Harvie astutely observes of Punchdrunk, they are "an almost-textbook example of the kind of business advocated by Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in their 1999 book *The Experience Economy* (published in a revised version in 2011)" (2013:178). Importantly here, the Pine and Gilmore book, replete with theatrical discourse, is not at all about art performance or even the entertainment sector, but is instead a "how-to"

Figure 1. Pink princess pyramid in the World of Disney. (Photo by Susan Bennett)

Figure 2. Entrance to the World of Disney store, which houses the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique. (Photo by Susan Bennett)

book advising businesses to boost profitability by providing consumers with experiences that build loyalty and, of course, spending. What aligns Punchdrunk's recent work with the Pine and Gilmore blueprint, then, is the efficacy with which the Punchdrunk company has produced brand desire.

If all kinds of contemporary producers of performance seek to become recognizable brands in an ever-expanding cultural marketplace, we might usefully interrogate what is generally considered the original performance brandscape: Disney. As a company, Disney describes its mandate as the production of "quality entertainment for every member of the family, across America and around the world" (Disney n.d.). Their 2012 Annual Report boasts record net income, revenue ($42.3 billion), and earnings per share, glossed by a mission statement: "we continue to find new ways to capture the imagination of millions with entertainment experiences that exceed expectations and become cherished memories"; and justified: in "a world cluttered with a growing number of entertainment choices, people look for the quality brands they know and love" (Disney 2012:3). Indeed, the Disney Corporation has had a long and profitable history in the creative management of consumers, building aspirational, life-long brand desire through an immersive experience that starts in childhood. One signature Disney performance—the princess makeover—exemplifies the interplay between the production of a desiring subject and the commodification of experience. It reveals a connection between the particularities of a neoliberal economic regime and what Adam Alston has usefully called the "entrepreneurial participation" required by immersive theatres such as Punchdrunk (2013:128).

It was a first trip, in 1995, to the first of Disney's now ubiquitous retail stores that prompted Maurya Wickstrom to develop her important and groundbreaking project, *Performing Consumers*.[1] As other brandscaped retail environments replicated the innovations of the Disney

1. Note that Wickstrom suggests that these stores were sold off to A Children's Place when their staging grew familiar and tired (2006:9). By 2013, Disney reacquired the "Disney Store" brand and established outlets across the United States and Canada, as well as an online shop with American, British, French, and German websites.

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model, Wickstrom observed that "corporations produce subjectivity as aspects of their brands through mimetic and identificatory processes akin to those of performance, somatic and embodied. They reach into our corporeal desire to be like others, to take on shapes and forms unlike one's own" (2006:2). These corporations have, Wickstrom concluded, "turned us into affective, embodied, theatrical laborers on their behalf" (4), a cautionary note that might temper some of our more recent enthusiasm for participatory performance. In 2013, we were invited by the American Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) conference organizers to lead an "adventure in brandscaping" at the Downtown Disney site that boasts "world-class restaurants, dazzling entertainment and unique shops" including, among its attractions, the world's largest Disney store.[2] In this context, eight of us set out on 3 August to see what kind of affective, embodied, theatrical laborers we might become. Despite critical preparation and no small amount of cynicism among us all, we found ourselves collectively drawn to the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, the showpiece of the Disney Store and site of the princess makeover—an exemplary immersive theatre constructed from brand desire and the acting out of the consuming body. This signature performance offers a magical stage where any girl can "Transform into the Princess of

Figure 3. Peering into the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique through the purple curtains that frame the boutique as both stage and show window. (Photo by Susan Bennett)

2. This was one of several "playdates" organized as part of the 2013 conference held in Orlando, Florida, and designed to encourage attendees to engage the performance landscape of the area. The ATHE conference organizers provided a suggested itinerary for our exploration of the Downtown Disney site and we asked participants to read some critical work on branding before meeting in Orlando. The "playdate" participants were Susan Bennett, Laura Purcell Gates, Laura MacDonald, Sarah Myers, Marlis Schweitzer, Susanne Shawyer, Monica Stufft, and Kayla Yuh. Advance readings included the introduction to Wickstrom's *Performing Consumers,* selections from Pine and Gilmore, and from Matthew Haig ([2004] 2011).

[her] dreams"[3] through the ministrations of service personnel masquerading as kindly servants from Cinderella's own staff. It takes place hourly at the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique (a name that references the Fairy Godmother's loopy celebration of magical metamorphosis in Disney's *Cinderella* film). Young girls who enter this consumer paradise are primed for transformation, like Cinderella before them, into desiring subjects and desirable objects.[4]

Building the Brand Experience

The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique uses the immersive princess experience to promote Disney's distinctive consumer pedagogy. The top-of-the-line princess experience costs $209.00 (including state taxes) and provides the would-be little Cinderella ("guests" must be between the ages of 3 and 12) with hairstyling, shimmering makeup, face gem, princess sash and tote, nail polish, complete costume of her choice plus accessories, as well as numerous photos in a princess-themed frame.[5] Among the hairstyle selections are fairy-tale princess (complete with shiny tiara), Disney diva (with ponytail extensions), and pop princess (with colorful hairpiece). A booking in advance or on-site (a dedicated pink princess phone, naturally, at the threshold of the Boutique) reserves one of the seats in the salon-like setting of the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, where girls sit in scaled-down salon chairs before large, gilt frames that recall the magic mirror from *Snow White*. Their performance involves waiting patiently (or less so) while hairdressers/stylists costumed as Cinderella's servants brush their hair and style it *à la* princess in a tight topknot bun, which is then shellacked to a sheen with hairspray and adorned with sparkles from the servant's magic wand.

Figure 4. Pink telephone used to book an appointment at the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique. (Photo by Marlis Schweitzer)

The stylist-servants are branded "fairy godmothers-in-training"—not yet ready for the inner sanctum of Cinderella's castle, but, like the newly branded princesses, practicing their craft until perfect.[6] Though varying in age and body type, the women working in the Boutique all wore the same costume/uniform—purple skirt, violet blouse, and red vest—signaling their membership within the service corps. Each of the godmothers-in-training is a dedicated performer of her version of a script that hails each girl consumer as a "princess" and invites her to join the "magic" world

3. A sign bearing this invitation to the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique appears in one of the Disney Store windows, set in a gold mirror frame—another example of the way Disney hails child consumers and invites narcissistic fantasies.

4. For a lengthy discussion and critique of the Disney Princess phenomenon, please see Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011).

5. More modest price options, starting at $54.85, included a knight package (hairstyle with gel, sword and shield, and confetti) that appeared to be directed at boys, but we saw only princesses at the Boutique.

6. The Disney College Program offers a short video on the "Fairy Godmothers-in-training," the interns working in the Boutique (DisneyCPInterns 2011). Another, longer video (around 12 minutes) by "Amanda" describes "How to Talk like a Fairy Godmother in Training" (Amanda Condit 2013).

of Disney's princesses. This interpellation starts with the Disney movie and merchandise, and finds its stage at the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, as well as in the encounters with other princesses, at Cinderella's castle in the Disney parks, and in the other princess experiences that rides and shows throughout the park encourage.

In *The Mouse that Roared*, his polemical attack on the Disney brand, Henry A. Giroux argues that contemporary "corporate culture uses its power as an educational force to redefine the relationship between childhood and innocence, citizenship and consumption, civic values and commercial values" (1999:19–20). As configured by Disney, "choice is about consumption" (157) and differences of race, class, nationality, sexuality, and ability are flattened into a "Small World" fantasy of global harmony articulated through costume and hairstyle. Children are rewarded for their willingness to play according to the Disney script: the sooner they embrace their roles as consumers, the sooner they gain entrance into the "Magic Kingdom" where self-transformation awaits.[7]

The princess makeover is a fully immersive environment, a world apart, where the fairy godmothers-in-training invest a great deal of authority in the princess-consumer and her right to future happiness: the makeover is completed with the wish "may all your dreams come true forever and ever"—a fantasy moment that will never be realized but perhaps forever desired. And it starts and ends with the Disney brand.

The Girl in the Window

The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique services a maximum of 13 child-consumers at any time for the 30–60 minute makeover with bookings starting at 8:45 in the morning (more than an hour before the store proper opens to the public) and available until 7:30 at night. In each session, the fairy godmothers-in-training select one of the 13 girls to sit in the Disney store "show window" where she will transform before the public eye. The show window is located in a different section of the Disney Store, near the main entrance where child-sized mannequins dressed in Disney-branded clothing greet customers. Unlike the Boutique, which uses curtains and a stationed fairy godmother to deter gawking, the show window set-up, complete with raised platform and attractive backdrop, invites spectatorship. Indeed, the window's proximity to a plastic Sleeping Beauty statue directs guests to view the show behind the "show window" as yet another form of Disney-branded entertainment.

We asked one of the fairy godmothers if there was an extra charge for this exceptional setting and were told that the Boutique did not take bookings for the window, that they bestowed a "magic moment" by choosing one girl from each intake for this singular experience. This "magic moment" borrows from turn-of-the-20th-century department store techniques, whereby "living models" dressed in the latest couture fashion posed in store windows (Purdy 1911:42–43).[8] These consumer spectacles relied on the model's liveness, mediatized by glass and window frame, to animate the clothing, accessories, and other consumer goods, provoking desire for a similar experience of couture gowns or brand-name goods. In some small American towns, these displays were so popular that they attracted thousands of onlookers, much to the frustration of local authorities who worried about public safety (Leach 1994:103). Despite

7. We have not addressed in this short essay the complicated racial dynamics inherent in the Princess Experience, which, among other things, promotes white beauty standards as part of its brand. Important work on Disney and race includes Sarita McCoy Gregory (2010), and Gabriel Gutiérrez (2000), and Celeste Lacroix (2004).

8. On the history of the show window and its influence on film scholarship see Charles Eckert (1978), Jane Gaines (1989), William Leach (1994), and Janet Ward Lungstrum (1999). The recent popularity of such television series as *Mr. Selfridge* (BBC 2013) and *The Paradise,* an Anglicized adaptation of Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (BBC Worldwide and Masterpiece 2012), suggests a resurgence of interest in the glamour and spectacle of the late-19th- and early-20th-century department store.

these concerns, the "living window" remains a popular promotional gimmick today with luxury department stores, flagship stores, and even reality television shows.[9] In Jefferson City, Missouri, the annual December "Living Windows" celebration, during which downtown shop windows are transformed into mini stages for community performers, draws crowds of 25,000 or more, though not without controversy (*NewsTribune.com* 2013). In 2011, a window showing a woman getting a tattoo on her hip, with occasional flashes of an "exposed derriere," outraged many Jefferson City residents, who complained that the display was inappropriate for children (Leroux 2011).

Derrieres are not on display in Downtown Disney; rather, the "living window" at the Disney Store embraces family values in the interests of stimulating desire for the princess experience. Seated behind glass in an elevated window seat, the "chosen" princess-child-consumer labors on behalf of the Disney brand, modeling the ideal relationship between consumer and service representative. In this regard, the technology of the show window, which uses light, glass, and a proscenium-style frame to cast an auratic glow on the objects/bodies displayed behind it, arouses desire not only for particular goods, but also (more importantly) for particular consumer experiences. As signs of signs, child and stylist are both themselves and more-than-themselves: they are the Disney fantasy come true.

But, as with all immersive performance, there is the risk that participants will refuse their part of the script and, more generally, children (those classic up-stagers) don't always follow the rules. When we visited the Disney Store, we watched a grumpy-looking girl aged 10 or 11 endure her princess transformation in the show window. The magic of this "magic moment" seemed entirely lost on her. Her expression was one of resignation bordering on boredom or frustration as the godmother-in-training tugged and pulled at her hair to give it that "princess look." Rejecting her role as "ideal princess-child-consumer," the girl exposed the complicated layers of labor and affect that underlie the princess experience. The magic of the magic moment failed, exposing the risks of brand desire.

Mirror, Mirror

The Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique offers the fullest, most immersive experience of Disney princess-ness. But the Disney store offers princess-ness for all. Those without an appointment at the Boutique (perhaps because their parents or caregivers cannot afford the significant price tag) can nevertheless rehearse their princess transformation through an engagement with the "Magic Mirror," one of the store's interactive screens. Mounted on the wall in the midst of shelves upon shelves of Disney Princess dolls, costumes, and accessories, the "Magic Mirror" invites the child-consumer to enter a virtual closet where she can try on Disney Princess dresses without any obligation to buy. This watered-down yet still magical moment begins with the child-consumer standing on a special mark on the floor (necessary for the Mirror's Kinect technology to work). As she looks into the mirror, her reflected body is "dressed" in the first of six Princess costumes, each of which appears for several seconds before transforming into a different costume.

The Magic Mirror replicates the experience of a theatrical quick change but replaces laboring dressers with technological wizardry in a 21st-century articulation of "service." The child-consumer does not need to change her clothes to experience transformation; the Mirror does that work for her. In offering the princess-child-consumer a conveyor belt–like sequence of attractive images, the Mirror also plays with the technology of the modern fashion show and its attendant promise of self-transformation via consumption. Yet unlike the fashion model on the catwalk, the transfixed child-consumer does not move, for if she shifts from the spot on the

9. For example, in 2006, the Adidas store at the Westfield San Francisco Centre used living models in its window display (ThatShazbotGuy 2006). In 2012, the reality TV show *Fashion Star* featured an episode in which contestants were required to create a living department store show window (Binlot 2012).

floor or makes rapid hand gestures, the Kinect technology behind the mirror will fail and the illusion implode. In other words, the magic of the Magic Mirror can only be realized through the child's compliance with the technology, with her willingness to stand in one place and adopt gestures appropriate for a princess: curtseying, smiling, primping, posing. During our time in the Disney Store, we watched as one young girl stood shyly before the Mirror, watching her Minnie Mouse-like summer dress transform into Belle's ball gown from *Beauty and the Beast.* In that brief moment, the much-loved fairy tale transferred from screen to child, from Disney Princess to Disney consumer; the princess reflected in the mirror looked back at the shy girl with confidence.

Figure 5. Marlis photographs her princess experience before the "Magic Mirror." (Photo by Kayla Yuh)

Throughout the Magic Mirror experience, cute animated animals run across the screen and hail the princess-child-consumer, who watches her self interact with the animals as though watching a Disney film. In these brief moments of interspecies/intermedial engagement, the animated animals bestow an animated quality upon the child, who in turn gives "life" to the animals through her appearance before the mirror. As Maurya Wickstrom writes, "The market depends on the commodity's claim on the mimetic imagination of consumers: we desire to be bodily like the commodity. It waits for us to bring it to life" (2006:99–100). In the case of the Magic Mirror, the performance of commodity life is peculiarly doubled. The child who follows the Mirror's implicit "rules" is animated by the costume imagery layered across her body; in exchange, she grants life to the animated characters and dolls that surround her by embracing the commodity form.

At the end of the Magic Mirror sequence, the screen fills with six "photos" (i.e., screenshots) of the princess-child-consumer in her various Disney guises, creating an instant photo album that lasts for only a few moments. If, at this point, the child's desire for princess-ness has been fully aroused and she wishes to prolong her princess fantasy, she can simply turn towards the wall of costumes and dolls beside the Magic Mirror and beg, plead, kick, scream for her real-world reward. If her parents or caregivers are unwilling to purchase the full Disney princess costume, complete with hairpieces, jewelry, and high heel shoes, the princess-child-consumer might settle for a surrogate in the form of a princess doll.

Like their Magic Mirror friends, those fortunate enough to experience the full Princess makeover may also leave the store with a look-alike princess doll, but whereas the spectacular labor of the child posing in the Mirror ends as soon as she walks away, the consumer labor of the made-over princess extends well beyond the point of exchange. The Store requires its

Figure 6. Princess dolls, costumes, and other merchandise available for sale just outside the boutique. (Photo by Susan Bennett)

princesses to perform their transformation, the authority of their experience, for a wider Disney Downtown audience: another magic moment is bestowed on a newly created Princess (from a session before the store is opened to the public) and she must cut the ribbon outside the door that announces it is time for everyone to consume! Others parade through the store or out onto the pedestrianized street (itself a parade of brands from Lego to Harley Davidson), becoming brand ambassadors for Disney and the particular experience of the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, although the thrill of the moment seemed often to be more enthusiastically expressed by the families of the newly minted princess than by the girl herself.[10] Whatever consuming desire may strike a guest, Downtown Disney has already anticipated and folded it into the larger Disney brandscape and, like the little princess, has made our (shopping and eating) dreams come true.

Brand Appeal

Perhaps the most surprising part of our princess voyeurism, as we took our turns at the Magic Mirror and as we gawked, rather horrified, at the unhappy window actor, was how familiar it was to all of us. Some of us had been to one or more of the Disney parks as children or with our own children; some of us had experienced the Disney Store (albeit on a much smaller scale) in hometown malls; some of us were there because we had never had a Disney experience—but all of us had expectations of the brand. As Alston recognizes, the appeal of immersive theatre is to "hedonistic and narcissistic desire" (2013:130). The burgeoning popularity of one-on-one theatre festivals and the "secret" encounters of Punchdrunk shows trade on the spectator's illusion that this is "just for me." In Alston's words, "[t]he reflection appears unique to each participant, but the mirror remains much the same" (2013:131). What passes for innovation in performance—or at least novelty—turns out to in fact be a familiar mode of economic exchange, and, *pace* Jon McKenzie, one that we have been collectively rehearsing since childhood: consume or else.

10. We observed that some sparkly, coiffed children continued to perform as "brand ambassadors" in the Orlando International Airport while waiting to go through security.

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