Essay in Response to Professor Zipes and Professor Waziyatawin

Robert Sullivan

Hei Mihi. Ko Papatūānuku kei raro, ko Ranginui kei runga, tēnā korua. E ngā mana, e nga reo, e ngā karangatanga maha o te motu, tēnā koutou tēnā koutou, huri noa, tēnā koutou katoa. I greet the Earth mother and Sky father, all the mana here, the voices here, those of all walks, greetings.

My thanks to the many organizers of this thought-provoking symposium, and greetings to colleagues and scholars from near and far.

I have been given the task of responding to two very different presentations, by Professor Waziyatawin, and Professor Jack Zipes. I will begin with a common point, in that they both tell stories.

I was thinking about cinema last night, thanks to Jack Zipes’s very interesting and thoroughly rich account of Disney-fication of fairytales, its antecedents, and subsequent De-Disneyfication responses. So I woke up with cinema memories.

I remember taking my son to his first movie; he was three at the time, and we were going to one of the suburban picture palaces left in Auckland, New Zealand. We are lucky to have a few amazing art-deco theaters. The movie we were watching was *Babe*, all about a talking pig. My three year old son had great powers of concentration. He was known for sitting through story-time at his kindergarten avidly listening to the storyteller. After about ten minutes of the movie, where we sat in one of the front rows during a daytime showing, his attention began to shift upwards. Soon his head was back and he was gazing up at the ceiling, and not long after that his legs were in the air, wiggling his sandals skyward. We got through the movie, although I don’t recall what drew his attention back to the screen.

My conscious point is that spectators learn to behave. If we are no longer interested in a movie, we cling on because we have invested the price of our ticket. But sometimes that is not enough commitment and so we leave. Apart from *Rocky Horror*, generally one does not see adults shaking their legs in the air at the movies. Occasionally I hear very young children talking during a film, or see them walking up and down the aisle, free of the ritual expectations of silence, and
passivity, of sitting with their attention drawn to the big screen, until their parents quietly reel them in. Professor Zipes told us this, how technology alienates and standardizes human relations. Occasionally, during this symposium, when the technology briefly failed [as it did while showing the early Disney film version of *The Three Little Pigs*], when the screen wouldn’t behave as it should, the silence in the audience briefly disappeared, or we found ourselves looking around and noticing more about where we were. I have a colleague in New Zealand, Alice Te Punga Somerville, who has a forthcoming essay¹ in which she repeats a line from Hone Tuwhare’s poem “Rain”: I can hear you making small holes in the silence.

There is a ritual before cinematic movie watching too. We line up, we buy our ticket, we show our ticket to someone else, and we find our seats. The room is darkened and the movie appears to be a source of light we are drawn to. At the end of the movie, the lights go up and people start leaving, while a few stay seated reading the rolling credits.

Some of this is shifting to the small screen now, with bigger small screens, and mobile screens proliferating so that full length feature films feel like test match cricket that last five days compared to the faster one day game; the rituals are also becoming less communal and more idiosyncratic, depending on the owner of the screen. This has happened to Disney of course too, with its cable channel for teens, where fairy tale fragments remain, such as Miley Cyrus’s transformation to Hannah Montana. But now I have completed my journey far from my own scholarly area, which is Polynesian poetry, Maori literature and creative writing.

I am a supporter of decolonization, and I like the sound of De-Disneyfication. My impulse is to see symbolism in words. I see childhood in Disney as well as conformity, reductionism, standardization, education, and art, whether in the fairytale retellings, or other films by the company such as *Fantasia*, or the utopian journeys of Disneyland which New Zealand children of my generation saw both on the big screen, and Sunday evening’s TV highlight, *The Wonderful World of Disney*. I agree that Disneyland represents an idealized mythic founding of the country, just as the Romans had the *Aeneid* and temples, or Maori had carved meeting houses and orators invested with centuries of history.
Jack Zipes’s points about the super-clean totalizing spectacle had very clear truths, and as he points out, we are all experts in Disney, hardly a child in the West has not seen a Disney film. This fluency in the workings of the Disney machine (it reminds me of the contraption in the early Disney film that beat up the big bad wolf last night), which simplifies cultures—and Zipes reveals an early racial, militaristic and gender-role reductionism too—enables counter-narratives such as those by Andrew Adamson, although they are of course dependent on Disney too for their jouissance, as well as a standard version of the fairytale. There is a lot lost, of course, in the most honest attempt at translation, but Zipes demonstrates very well the priority of Walt Disney’s utopian vision, which does not create sufficient space for holistic views of culture, history, language, faith, gender, economy, but rather redacted versions scaled for national and international markets.

Zipes’s response to last night’s question about the castration of Disney characters, reminds me of the castration by missionaries and officials of the great phalluses on carved representations of Maori ancestors held in museums. Greek and Maori literary scholar Agathe Thornton’s account of the agency of individual body parts within Maori conceptions of the physical body, how each part has a different characteristic or persona, emphasizes the roundedness of carved representations which are analogous to visual arts representations; for instance, “In ancient Maori thought, the penis is not a ‘figurative symbol’, nor does it ‘stand for’ virility and courage, but it is imbued with, or one might even say the very essence of the man’s virility and courage (159).” The wholesale destruction of carved penises was quite literally an attack on the mana of the ancestors represented in carvings, and of their descent-lines.

Now let’s move on to Waziyatawin’s account of her people’s struggle. She honored us by sharing for the first time the great mystery folktale of her people, and also the account of her and her children’s arrest. She reminds us that every place has a memory before history, such as Bedote before Fort Snelling, before the violence of Treaty violations, and sesquicentennial feel-good folklore.

She asked a question, “what does justice look like?” and as an indigenous person I know that is a utopia worth following. I have never seen justice. She gave justice voice, which includes reconciliation with animals and land, restoration of indigenous infrastructures, and the cessation of all
oppression on the part of the colonizers in all systems of power. Justice would result in the end of
the United States. It begins with a truth-telling campaign. It reminds me of NZ Prime Minister Helen
Clark’s statement that Maori rights guaranteed under our 1840 Treaty threatened the legitimacy of
the state, which was a perceptive comment. It also reminds me of the arrest of poet and artist Tame
Iti and the police raids on the community of Ruatoki, and the rounding up of mainly Maori political
activists around New Zealand.

I also remember fragments of the photos Waziyatawin displayed:

--The image of the frame of nooses through which we could see the state capitol
--Words from the protest banners: “Honor Dakota treaty”
--Part of a banner with the word “Rights:”
--“The rent is due plus interest”
--The photo of Waziyatawin’s arrest.

Which brings me back to Waziyatawin’s vision of justice, which is very different from Disney’s, a
process that includes:

--truth-telling
--taking down the fort
--reparations
--decolonization

These actions would [or could] result in a time when Dakota and non-Dakota live alongside each
other in Minnesota in peaceful reconciliation.

In New Zealand, we are moving through the truth-telling stage, taking down the fort and
reparations stages, where individual claims by tribal groups and individuals are being documented and
shared by both government and tribal leaders in communal truth-telling sessions that are videoed and
transcribed, and then compiled into lengthy reports: from fisheries, the foreshore and seabed, the
forests, land, airwaves, language, education, everything-- as it says in the Maori version of our
Treaty-- that we deem to be precious, that we have the right to undisturbed possession; we include as
evidence our folk narratives, our reasons for being. Our aim is sovereignty, and our catch cry, softened by years of peace, and translated into arenas such as education and the law, is *ka whawhai tonu matou*, we will fight forever.

I felt very proud of Ka’ililauokekoa, the educational Hawaiian film that Professor Noenoe Silva showed, and the connection she made to Aotearoa’s language nest movement, and also of Professor Vilsoni Hereniko’s *The Land Has Eyes*, which is a fine example of indigenous storytelling taking advantage of the available technology, and also of the Pacific-wide connections an artist of mana can make in achieving a story of his people. I also continue to be in awe of the success of *Whale Rider*, the movie, which comes out of Witi Ihimaera’s amazing database of people’s stories, despite the reduction of its political elements such as the antinuclear message, or its animal elements embodied by the whales’ dialogue. The representation by an outsider of an indigenous story was, in my opinion, a greater success than the bit-part depictions in *The Piano* directed by expatriate New Zealander Jane Campion, because the consultation with Ihimaera and the people of Whangara was genuine, and the Maori roles were central. In passing, I also nod to Kiwi director Andrew Adamson, who places Maori and Pacific Islanders in heroic roles in his Narnia features, such as Shane Kake who plays the lead centaur.

In short, there is a need to tell well-rounded stories about communities who have not been well-represented in the past in order to perpetuate and not undermine or reduce the life-ways of those communities. Zipes and Waziyatwin are both particular and visionary in this regard. My thanks to them both who have come all the way to Honolulu, and for sharing their treasures with us. Noho ora mai rā.

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