Consolidating the Magic Kingdom: Disney's Live-Action Remakes and the Corporation as Storyworld

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This paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship concerned with the form and function of adaptation in the context of contemporary practices of media franchising through a discussion of world-building in the Walt Disney Company's ongoing series of live-action remakes. Specifically, I argue that in their attempt to reclaim their dominance over the family film, Disney's live-action remakes engage in a performance of adaptation for the purposes of constructing the corporation's intellectual property holdings as territories within a common metatextual storyworld.

Beginning with *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014), Disney's live-action remakes constitute an exercise in formatting that engage with discourses of adaptation as incarnation (Elliott *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* 161) in their remediation of Disney's "classic" animated features into the format of the fantasy adventure blockbuster. Not only the dominant form of entertainment at the global box office, the fantasy adventure blockbuster has also become the dominant genre within the commodity for which the Walt Disney Company is best known: the family film. The convergence of the fantasy adventure blockbuster and the family film is embodied in recent Disney acquisitions, such as the Star Wars and Marvel Cinematic Universe franchises, and thus we can read Disney's live-action remakes as an attempt to reincorporate the corporation's existing media properties into the twenty-first-century Magic Kingdom.

This process of reincorporation is signalled through each film's engagement with the Walt Disney Pictures production logo. First appearing in 2006 to accompany the release of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Verbinski 2006), Walt Disney Pictures' current production logo takes the form of a 30-second CGI animated sequence that reimagines the concept of the Magic Kingdom – a term which denotes both physical location within Disney's parks and resorts and a shorthand for the totality of the Disney

brand and its products – as an imaginary territory. The standard sequence begins with a shot of stars twinkling in the night sky – an eagle-eyed viewer will notice that the star that shines the brightest is the second to the right – before the camera descends through the clouds to reveal a twilight vista populated with pirate ships, steam trains and the warming glow of the lights from a handful of scattered towns, all split by a lazy river. As the music swells – an arrangement of "When You Wish upon a Star" from *Pinocchio* (Ferguson et. al. 1940) – the camera pulls back to reveal the now iconic Disney Castle. The image of the Magic Kingdom depicted by the Walt Disney Pictures production logo proves both "highly standardized and at the same time extremely flexible" (Kelleter 2012, 22) across Disney's current oeuvre of live-action remakes. While films such as *Cinderella* (Branagh 2015), *The Jungle Book* (Favreau 2017) and *Aladdin* (Ritchie 2019) use the castle as an entry point into the imaginary world of the film, others such as *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014) and *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon 2017) transform the landscape of the Magic Kingdom so as to bring it into dialogue with the fantastic world that constitutes the film's own diegesis. Disney's most recent live-action remake, *Mulan* (Caro 2020), not only places its iteration of the Disney castle amidst a mythic rendering of a historical Chinese landscapes but replaces the generic Disney Castle with a representation of Shanghai Disneyland's Enchanted Storybook Castle.

As Mark J.P. Wolf asserts "Worlds can exist without stories, but stories cannot exist without a world" (Wolf 2012, 29). Through their creative use of the Walt Disney Pictures paratext, Disney's live-action remakes construct the Disney castle as a mutable portal, a central node in a wider network of commodities around which the corporation's newly systematized properties converge. Examining how Disney deploys its paratexts to unify its otherwise disparate products yields new insights into the relationship between world-building and media in the context of franchised media and entertainments while demonstrating the means by which the pleasures of intertextuality are increasingly commodified within a context of intensifying conglomeration and consolidation.

Works Cited

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