

Summer 6-2008

Children's Film as Social Practice

Joseph L. Zornado
Rhode Island College, jzornado@ric.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Citation

Zornado, J. 2008. Children's film as social practice. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1354>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact kayton@ric.edu.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>

Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture (ISSN 1481-4374), the peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, is published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University online in full text and in open access. The journal publishes scholarship following tenets of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies" in a global, international, and intercultural context and with a plurality of methods and approaches: papers for publication are invited to <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/submit.html>>; for the aims and scope of the journal consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebaims>>; for the journal's style guide consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebstyleguide>>. In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, in Humanities International Complete, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is member of The Council of Editors of Learned Journals <<http://www.celj.org>> and it is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <<http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <<http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection of Library and Archives Canada* <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>>. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is affiliated with the Purdue University Press hard-copy monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies and selected papers of the journal are published in thematic annuals in the series <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>>. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 10 Issue 2 (June 2008) Article 8
J. Zornado, "Children's Film as Social Practice"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/8>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008)
Thematic Issue *Racialized Narratives for Children*
Edited by C. Richard King and John Streamas
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/>>

Abstract: In his paper "Children's Film as Social Practice," J. Zornado argues that the animated feature is a genre distinct in its own right, and, although overlooked by film criticism up to now, deserves rigorous, scholarly attention. Zornado employs the term "iconology" to develop a foundation for a critical methodology indebted to Althusser, Foucault, and Lacan as well as contemporary film criticism. Iconology of the animated feature film is the study of the meaning systems of the dominant culture and the ways in which such systems are inscribed into all kinds of social practice geared, specifically, to seduce and inform the mind of the child. Zornado analyses Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), elaborating it as an example of an iconological reading of an animated feature and he argues that *Monsters, Inc.* encodes ideologies of hegemonic power relations and while at first seeming to criticize and to reveal the corrupting nature of hegemonic power relations; thus, the film's narrative works ultimately to confirm the status quo in which the child, like the Other, must learn to accept his/her objectified and exploited status as "natural" and "inevitable."

J. ZORNADO

Children's Film as Social Practice

In his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* Louis Althusser defines ideology as, "the imaginary relationship that informs our relationship to the actual conditions of our existence" (131). Althusser's definition is useful for not only to latter-day Marxists, but especially to those interested in understanding the nature of cultural and ideological reproduction as, at bottom, a materialist process of biological conditioning. Culture, in other words, transmits its imperatives: it is a story of itself as a practice and a strategy of pedagogy adults subject children to. Imbedded in the practice are ideas -- often unconsciously held by the individual -- that manifest as relational practices in which the individual learns the "right" way to relate to self, to other and the wide world all around. Pedagogy here, then, signifies more than its humble denotative definitions. Understanding pedagogy more broadly -- as a notion that signifies the power dynamic at work between and among power positions. Children almost with exception experience themselves in positions of powerlessness. From grade school pedagogies to representations of the child in film, the powerless child is a staple of the dominant culture's story of itself.

Children's film as social practice assumes that "the unconscious ... is not simply a ready-and-waiting place for repressed desire -- it is *produced* by the very act of repression" (Flitterman-Lewis 172; emphasis in the original). The unconscious, in other words, emerges as a result of repression of desire for the Real, and culture in one way or another represents the sum totality of all human culture as one mind's fragmented, often conflicted discourse with itself. Animated feature film represents such a fascinating site of filmic analysis from a psychoanalytical point of view indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, John Bowlby, and Alice Miller. Lacan provides the notion of the mirror stage and the Symbolic Order. Althusser allows us to understand the Symbolic Order -- as a repressive order in which a dominant culture's ideology will be learned by repeated exposures to the numerous ideological state apparatuses. Living the life demanded by the Symbolic Order requires training, and in our case, constant supervision. As a result, the child's life becomes almost entirely scripted by the dominant institutions. In childcare, pre-school, kindergarten, K-6, Middle School, and High School; in church, in competitive rituals where winners and losers are determined; in nearly every waking moment of media exposure the siren call of culture resonates. Are there escapes for the young, developing mind? Ways too resist meaningfully? The though popular answer is "yes," my answer is a resounding no. In theory, I admit to the possibility of resistance, and work for it. But in practical, material reality resistance, as television tells us, is futile.

The animated feature film has a history and its true beginnings some say go back to the Egyptians and early pharaonic cultures. Others say it begins in the newspapers of the late nineteenth-century (see Wells). Others say animation has its roots in the cartoon short, or in the fairy tale, or in narrative story telling, or in photography (see Kanfer). An analysis of the iconology of children's film takes as one of its theoretical premises that "when we watch a film we are somehow dreaming it as well; our unconscious desires work in tandem with those that generated the film-dream" (Flitterman-Lewis 180). Here understood as, "the totalizing, womblike effects of the film viewing situation represent, for him, the activation of an unconscious desire to return to an earlier state of psychic development, one before the formation of the ego, in which the divisions between self and other," or between mouth and mother have not yet established themselves" (Flitterman-Lewis 182). I am appropriating the term iconology from Erwin Panofski and to some extent from W.J.T. Mitchell. An iconological reading of an animated feature explores the narrative structure and the discourses employed to tell the tale. Iconology understands the animated feature as a perfect merging of ideology and pedagogy both in the way the animated feature represents pedagogy in terms of narrative while enacting pedagogy in terms of the positioning of the spectator as one in a community of passive recipients of the film

screen's action. For Panofski the term literary iconology refers to the study of religious art from the Renaissance, and so the animated feature seems far removed from images of the Madonna and Child, but this is not really the case. In fact, the function of religious art might in some ways correspond roughly to the function of secular film. Both forms serve to represent, confirm, perhaps question, but almost always work towards ideological consensualization of the community. In this way, the imaginary relationship one has to one's material existence might be tended to, reinforced, and always conditioned. In other words, a belief in the supernatural, in the hereafter, and in the relationship between the hierarchy of heaven and the hierarchy of earth might help to control populations that might otherwise feel dominated unjustly by those in power. Thus, although I am divorcing the term iconology from its first use, I think the animated feature shares with Renaissance religious art a similar reason for being: both represent the world "as it really is," although rich metaphor is often a part of the story telling, the sense that the animated feature exhibit pivotal "truths" that are "obvious and true" because common and familiar, yet moving, and still beautiful despite the fact that so the Madonna with infant is a common story told many times in oil and canvass.

It is the very familiarity of the narrative that an iconological reading calls attention to. Beneath and behind the familiar depictions of innocence to experience stories lie cultural imperatives that teach as well as delight. Ordinary and invisible for its ubiquity is the animated feature's depiction of power and power relations. The position of "good" power -- the status quo, the adult system and the evil of "bad" power, identified with the child as chaotic, destructive, and otherwise unfit for membership in the "real" world. The choice offered to the child is really only the illusion of choice: be yourself and risk the loss of all that you need to survive, or conform. It is the same illusion of choice the child experiences in every other institutional moment of their lives, compulsory education being, according to Althusser, one of the most significant and powerful of the ideological state apparatuses. Broadly speaking, iconology remains sensitive to the cultural conventions assumed -- as well as subverted -- by the animated film text in order to decode the message-system of the narrative in order to, as Graeme Turner says, "read off" the ideological content and bring to the foreground the ways in which ideology "obscures the process of history so that it appears natural, a process we cannot control and which it seems churlish to question" (134).

The employment of the concept of iconology allows for the analysis of the animated feature as the unconscious dream of not one author but of an entire culture. Although it might be argued that semiotics and psychoanalysis address similar interpretive issues in textual and filmic analysis -- and will be borrowed from routinely -- the formal differences between live action filmic texts and the animated feature film are significant enough to invite a way of seeing the animated feature as a genre in need of its own analytical nomenclature. Iconology, then, signifies an approach to cultural and textual analysis that takes as its premise the belief that ideology manifests as social practice, and that culture and cultural forms -- a culture's icons -- tell a story. But more specifically, iconology signifies a way a belief in the possibility of "reading off" prevalent ideological themes at work in the animated feature film, an art object that might be described as a cultural icon made up of animated images that stand in, and that stand for, something else. The icons in question are secular, assumed, and obvious so much so that they become largely invisible -- like the background noise or the ambient atmosphere that we are not aware of. Reading the animated feature as a system of iconological processes assumes the processes to be largely unconscious and beyond any singular act of conscious volition. From an iconological point of view, then, the animated feature is a cultural product created by individuals each of which have been raised as children in culture, by power, for the status quo. As a result, the animated feature embodies a shared psychodynamic experience of adult nostalgia for fantasies of childhood in which the powerless triumph in spite of the material and emotional conditions of their situation. Ideologies of race, gender and class (among others) feature largely in this common narrative strategy; the representation of abusive power relations between the strong and the weak, (often the large vs. the small, although not always) which, although depicted, remain "invisible" and

made obviously inevitable; the representation of the status quo as a state of hierarchized conflict between the subject and its object, often represented as predator and prey (or between an adult and a child); the process by which the dominant culture scripts the imaginary relationship of the child to his/her actual conditions of existence; and a social practice in which adult culture constructs the real as fantasy and fantasy as natural.

The psycho-dynamic process is, strictly speaking, a relational process, by which the child introjects (or is interpolated by) adult culture -- and so, in turn, gives birth to the cultural field that requires the use of power in ever intensifying manifestations in order to maintain and so reproduce the status quo. Reproduction becomes the end all and be all of the child's training at the hands of the adult. When the adult misuses power in relation to the child, the child will grow and learn not that power has been misused, but rather, that power is the permanent, obvious and inevitable condition of human relationships, and by extension, the child's relationship to self, to other, to material. Because the child experiences the misuse of power in a hierarchical, hegemonic relationship with adults, and because the child's experience almost always includes emotional repression, the child's unconscious mind copes with an intolerable situation by developing a coping psychic structure, itself organized as a hierarchy, the "good" child dominating the "bad" child. The burgeoning character structure thrives on the repressed energy of childhood trauma, trauma here recognized as any emotional experience rejected and unrecognized by adult culture. Moreover, the adult's definition of emotional trauma when applied to the child's experience often serves as nothing more than a projection of the adult's unconscious hierarchical, hegemonic projection onto the child which in the end serves to reinforce in the child's thinking mind that emotional repression -- the denial of the body -- is necessary for survival. The adult's unconscious projection structures the child's unconscious mind -- which is the child's body -- in a very particular way, yet it has become so common, so obvious, as to no longer be recognizable as a symptom. Adult power in all of its manifest forms seduces the child out of the body and into the ideological realm of the thinking, or "ego-mind." That the adult unconsciously enacts his or her own emotional repression in and through child-rearing practices is a central theoretical premise of an interpretive poetics of childhood, or, Childhood Studies.

All of this might be said in less technical terms, even poetic ones, and this, I think, is what Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick have done in *Artificial Intelligence*. As a *Pinocchio* story, Spielberg locates the inventors of childhood at the feet of the "human" world, which, in this case, is synonymous with the white, adult world. The robot world -- the world of the manufactured toy is synonymous with the world of the child, the Jew, the African American and all other so-called subalterns. The significance of Disney's acquisition of Pixar Animation Studios in 2006 can only be fully appreciated within a larger historical context which includes an understanding of Disney animation studios, Walt Disney himself, and the rise of the animated feature. A very brief history, thus, is worth considering so that we might then step into the recent past and an iconological reading of Pixar's financially successful 2001 hits *Monsters, Inc.* (Docter and Silverman) and *Finding Nemo* (2003). John Lasseter began corresponding with the Disney studio and then during his high-school senior year they sent him a letter stating that they were initiating a character animation program with the California Institute of the Arts. Lasseter enrolled and spent four years learning the craft from Disney's masters of the medium. By 1986, Steve Jobs, co-founder and chairman of Apple Computer, Inc., had acquired the computer division of Lucasfilm and incorporated it as his own independent company, under the name Pixar. Disney's 2005 acquisition of Pixar brings Jobs into the Disney corporate family with, so far, indeterminate results. Between 1986 and, arguably, today, Pixar remains at the head of the computer animation industry both technically and aesthetically, their only true competition coming from Ghibli studios in Japan. It is important to note that the Disney corporation, once again in a down-cycle in terms of its own aesthetic and commercial influence in the world of the animated feature film since *Mulan* (1998) acquired Pixar in 2006 as well as the US-American distribution rights to Hayao

Miyzaki's animated filmography. Short on inspiration, but not on cash, Disney remains at least in titular control of the animated feature film world.

Lasseter directed Pixar's first short film *Luxo, Jr.* (1986) which starred a desk lamp and its precocious child. Two years later, another of the studio's shorts, *Tin Toy*, also directed by Lasseter, would tell the tale of a destructive baby and a nervous wind-up toy. The short subject would make history as the first computer animated film ever to win an Academy Award. Only five years before computer graphics had been summarily snubbed by the Academy Awards when nominators ignored Disney's *Tron* (Lisberger) because it was believed at the time the film makers had "cheated" by using computer animated images. According to an interview in the "special features" option on the *Tron* DVD, Lasseter explains that what the creators of *Tron* were doing was revolutionary. He was able to get an early glimpse of the film's "light cycle" sequence. Lassiter's reaction was immediate: "It absolutely blew me away! A little door in my mind opened up. I looked at it and said, 'This is it! This is the future!'" Lasseter talked the Disney studio into letting him do a thirty-second test that combined hand drawn animation with computer backgrounds. "It was exciting," says Lasseter, "but at the time, Disney was only interested in computers if it could make what they were doing cheaper and faster. I said, 'Look at the advancement in the art form. Look at the beauty of it.' But, they just weren't interested" (Lasseter qtd. in Lisberger). At least not yet. *Luxo, Jr.* and *Tin Toy* impressed Disney executives sufficiently that they signed an agreement with Pixar. Pixar would create the product, Disney would distribute the product. Profits would be shared fifty-fifty. By 1995 -- fifty-eight years after *Snow White* -- the first computer-generated animated feature arrived in theaters as *Toy Story*. By 1996 *Toy Story* had grossed nearly two-hundred million dollars. Six years later in 2001 *Monsters, Inc.* was released and in 2003 *Finding Nemo*. With the hundreds of millions of dollars at stake, Pixar hoped to come to some new agreement with Disney now that their original contract had been completed. Jobs hoped to find a distribution deal along the lines of filmmaker George W. Lucas and his relationship with Twentieth Century Fox. Lucas finances *Star Wars* films, and Fox gets a meager 6% distribution fee (meager compared to Disney's 50% distribution fee it exacted from Pixar profits). With its substantial cash reserves, Pixar has been able to finance its own production. According to *businessweek.com*, "Pixar made profits of \$235 million from its 2002 hit *Monsters, Inc.* but might have posted more than \$500 million if it hadn't had to share, says Jeffrey B. Logsdon, managing director of Gerard Klauer Mattison" (Grover and Burrows <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/03_06/b3819096.htm>). Then, in 2004 negotiations between Steve Jobs and then CEO of Disney, Michael Eisner, broke down. Pixar went its own separate way to find a suitable distribution deal. Soon after, however, stockholders dumped Eisner in favor of Robert Iger and Disney purchased Pixar for 7.4 billion dollars. According to reports at the time, Steve Jobs would become a board member of Disney and John Lasseter, the highly respected creative director at Pixar who had previously worked for Disney, would rejoin Disney as chief creative officer for the company's combined animated studios and will also help oversee the design for new attractions at Disney theme parks. Unable to work along side Pixar, the Disney Corporation swallowed it.

"Without screams we have no power!" declares the panicked voice of James Caan in the opening minutes of Pixar's blockbuster animated feature, *Monsters, Inc.* (2002). From the opening moments of the film the audience is made to understand that there is a crisis in Monstropolis and this crisis threatens the monster-way-of-life. The narrative develops an extended metaphor in terms of an other world, a world populated by fantastical monsters of all shapes, sizes, and colors. It is a diverse world of monstrous diversity. There is the "real" world as well, of children, of bedrooms, of nighttime, of fear. But the significance of the "real" world remains undeveloped at first. All we know is that there is a *scream* shortage, or in other words, Monstropolis is experiencing an energy crisis. The metaphor is impudent, and perhaps for some, amusingly familiar. "Oh yes," the ideal audience responds as the film hails them with its narrative message. "That's true. That's us, that's how it is." On the surface of

it *Monsters Inc* depicts a world of power relations in which the audience learns the difference between "evil" corporate leaders and "good" ones. Nothing is said about the nature of corporate power. Corporate power is an obvious good and all that it requires is a "good" leader to make it work "right."

The film's blatant ideological defense of The Corporation should come as no surprise, unless of course one is under the assumption that the animated feature is purely "innocent." Those who champion the "innocence" and "fun" of animated feature maintain consciously or at least subconsciously that the animated film, because of its cartoon nature, remains incapable of carrying any complicated ideological information short of the obvious moralisms adults like to preach to children: good children are rewarded and bad children are, well, bad: "don't be bad." Without question, these surface moralisms are rampant in *Monsters, Inc.* as they are in the "family magic" that characterizes most animated feature film before *Monsters, Inc.* However, underneath these surface moralisms, and just barely below the surface, *Monsters, Inc.* tells an especially interesting tale about power relations between those who have it and those who do not. In this case, the monsters of Monstropolis have it and children in the "real" world do not. As a result, it seems obvious that Monsters, who need power have some kind of right to it, even though they get power from children, from the screams of children, to be precise. When broken down to its constituent parts, the dominant metaphor of *Monsters Inc.* is ghoulish, yet familiar. The weak have what the strong need. Power, then, justifies its use and so children -- like an Arab oil field -- must be pumped for the power Monstropolis needs to exist. Read: Monstropolis is modern civilization; child is oil.

The question *Monsters, Inc.* raises is not whether it is a reliable, sustainable, and justifiable relationship. Rather, the film teaches us that the relationship between the Monsters and the Children is necessary. So is the Corporation -- Monsters, Incorporated -- empowered to fuel Monstropolis with Child-Oil. The issue is strictly a reactionary, conservative issue in the film: bad people who run Corporations are bad. Corporations are good when good people run them. The basic relationship between those with power and the exploited weak remains. Children are still Oil by the end of the film, only their energy is extracted "more humanely," that is, by making them laugh instead of making them scream. All of this serves to barely, thinly disguise the master trope of the film: children, like the sands of the Middle East, exist to be exploited for what "they" can do for "us." In the terms of the film narrative "us" is defined alternately as "the monsters," or, "adults." Or, "civilization" and it is natural and normal of "us" to be in relations of exploitation with "them," especially when "they" are something less than "us."

The film begins in a child's bedroom as a boy of about nine goes to bed. The gentle "goodnights" of the parents are heard off screen as the boy lays his head down on his pillow (the colors are rich, although muted for nighttime effect and the calm, almost hypnotic visual quality of the film's backgrounds have become synonymous with Pixar and computer animation). As the boy goes to sleep the closet door opens and a shadow emerges, rises up over the bed and then proceeds to slip, trip, and fumble the moment. An alarm sounds and a voice intones of the loud speaker that the "simulation is terminated. The simulation is terminated." The lights come up and the audience learns that we are not in a boy's bedroom; rather, we are in the world of monsters, we are in a factor in which new employees are being trained. To scare children. Among other things we learn that the worst thing a monster can do is "to leave the door open," the door being the magical portal between the world of children and the world of monsters. There shall be no contact between the two worlds. It is forbidden, dangerous, potentially catastrophic. As a result, elaborate stories circulate about the danger of children. Just as elaborate is the Corporate security apparatus -- monsters in yellow Hazardous Material suits -- empowered to make real the supposed danger children pose to the monster world. Any rumor of a child -- even a child's sock coming back into the monster's world -- is met with the full, terrified force of a team fearing an outbreak of Avian Flu. The character Mr. Waternoose explains: "There's nothing more toxic, or deadly, then a human child. A single touch could kill you. But you're

going in there because we need this. Our city is counting on you collect those children's screams. Without screams we have no power."

The iconology of the opening scene thus establishes that there is the "real" world -- like ours -- where children sleep in suburban beds and have two middle-class, white parents. This "real" world -- uncomplicated and perfectly natural -- is in an unsteady relationship with the "fantasy" world. The "fantasy" world is the world of the monsters and Monsters, Inc. The fantasy world of Monstropolis, however, is yet another thinly disguised metaphor for the world in which the audience lives. When we meet Sully and Mike, buddies who work together at Monsters, Inc., they live in an idealized urban setting that looks like a Disney theme park than an urban landscape. Beautiful brown stones set against towering domes that glitter in the background under the morning sun. And it is all seamlessly rendered by Pixar's computer graphics. As the shot pans down, we see Sully and Mike exiting their building and beginning their walk to work. A small monster delivers the newspaper on a bicycle. Cars line the streets, parked neatly. Our heroes walk to work because there is a "scream shortage." "We're walking," Sully declares. The shot pans right to pick up a headline of a newspaper: "Rolling Blackouts Expected." Mike and Sully walk to work amid comic patter and extended metaphor. The monster world is a friendly neighborhood filled with monsters of different sizes, shapes, colors and ethnicities. Even an Italian grocer who tosses an apple Sully, "on the house."

In the next scene, the Corporate factory, Monsters, Inc., appears for the first time. It is a massive instillation that that spills off the screen left and right. Center right is the largest structure of the factory that looks like a NASA assembly building, but larger. On both sides are smaller shapes, spheres and pipes, smoke stacks spewing white smoke -- like a distillation facility of some kind or other. In the mid-ground, in front of the larger building and the distillation works are rows of triangle shaped buildings, like low-lying green houses, and in front of this row of buildings is the parking lot; the cars are tiny to show the scale of this facility. It is massive. The logo for Monster's Inc is a blue capital "M" on a field of white, a single eye looks out from the center of the "M." The factory is also a neighborhood, friendly, familiar. Sully is the factory hero, having been "Scarer of the Month" for eleven months in a row. Can he make it twelve? Sully is a hero to the crew who keep this factory clean and everyone loves him because he is so lovable. Everyone except Randall, another employee vying for "Scarer of the Month." Breaking the record, and the bragging rights of such accomplishments, appears to be a defining, driving force of Monster's, Inc. As we meet the noted characters that populate the factory and the story, Mike addresses Ros, a paper-pushing secretary with a nasal voice and fish face. Later the audience will come to realize that it is Ros who maintains the status quo, even beyond the evil CEO, Mr. Waternoose. When Ros says, "I'm watching you, always watching," it comes across as a boast, yet by the end of the film, we realize she is stating only the facts. She controls the NSA-like security forces of Monsters, Inc., and she is, indeed, watching. Mike does not know this, and so he dismisses what he considers to be officious demands with a cavalier wave.

Next, we follow Mike onto the Scare Floor: here the film elaborates on the relationship between the monster world and the "real" world. They enter the "real" world through a technology that is part hydrolic, part magic. The massive building that is the Monsters, Inc., we come to understand because it holds, apparently, every door to every child's bedroom in the entire world. The harvesting of screams is a laborious process requiring highly trained personnel. When the "Scarers" come to the factory floor they move in slow-motion, Sully at the lead: they are the heroes; they are the objects of our desire; we are them; we love them. The music swells. It is calm, but majestic. The slow motion is dignified and serious. If this is not clear enough, one of the janitors says, as he gazes upon them and sheepishly wipes his nose with his arm, "Wow, they're so awesome." And then scaring proper commences. The tote board keeps score. Sully pulls ahead. Randall is a poor sport. The over-arching metaphor of relying on the trauma of children to fuel a culture is lost in the essentialist fervor to support the "good guy" and the "home team." Meanwhile, the screams of children are heard in the

background as the yellow canisters take it all in. At this point one might argue that the entire film is about overthrowing this bizarre and violent state of affairs that exist between the monster world and the child's world. And for a time it seems so. By the end of the Scare Floor scenes, we have watched Sully triumph, while another monster, George Sanderson, is shaved, scoured, and remonstrated for bringing back, unwittingly, from a child's room a child's sock, stuck to the fur on his back. Monsters, we learn, are vulnerable and terrified of children. Monstropolis in general fears, even loathes, children -- although the very source of their power, of their civilization, comes from children, yet even so monsters believe they are the source of disease and "contamination." They believe it in spite of the fact that it is, we learn, not true.

Learning that children are not poisonous; rather, they are lovable state comprises much of the middle act of the film. When Sully brings back with him not a sock, but a little girl, he discovers that all that he had been taught was wrong. It follows, then, that all of Monstropolis is built on a self-serving lie. Monsters objectify children in order to use them without pitying them. Monsters, in other words, demonize children as "Other" in order to assuage their guilt. Why should one feel guilty about traumatizing a toxic event? The worst thing that could happen to Monsters, Inc., and to Monstropolis, is for Sully to discover the truth about children. And he does. Oddly, however, nothing changes in spite of the fact that the film seems to be offering itself as an attempt to take on a basic iconological trope and to undo and to free the child symbolically from adult hegemony. Perhaps, by extension, Monsters, Inc. might have been a story about the need to free the masses from Corporate Hegemony. Perhaps it could have been, the film seems to think that it really is making a difference, but it turns out that the iconology of the film overwhelms any progressive intentions of the makers, for, as Turner says, the writers, directors, artists and animators are not the authors of the discourses of *Monsters, Inc.*, the dominant culture is. Turner goes on to discuss Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* as a film about the ideological status quo in spite of Lang's own personal progressive philosophies. What Turner says about *Metropolis* is no less true about *Monsters, Inc.*

Like *Metropolis*, *Monsters, Inc.* has a power and a charm that arises from its opening series of representations that make clear, although gently, that the hegemonic relationship between monsters and children is intolerable, and unsustainable. "That being the case," Turner writes, "the ending of the film needs to resolve its social/political conflicts as well as its personal dilemmas -- but it does not. It is characteristic of the workings of ideology that they express social or political differences as personal and individual, therefore to be resolved the personal not the political level, and a of individual weakness, not the weakness of the social or political system. The ending of *Monsters, Inc.* resolves the love interest, reunites the parent and child, but changes almost nothing in the social or political structure of its world" (152). Sully and Ros are central to the narrative's reactionary rejection of true change. Sully learns in his experience with children that they are not toxic, not a "thing" to be feared, yet by film's end Ros -- now the revealed Chief of the Child Detection Agency -- acknowledges that Sully now knows the truth but that he will need to keep this secret, especially if he is to take the place of Mr. Watnoose as the "new" CEO of Monsters, Inc. It is simple, really. All the Corporation needs is a nice man to run it, not a mean, evil crab-like villain. Mr. Watnoose is evil, we realize, because he puts the Corporation before the children. He will, he announces, "kidnap a thousand children" to keep the factory working. These words condemn him, inexplicably. It is not that he is willing to kidnap children, rather, it is that Mr. Watnoose is willing to have any dealings at all with children, kidnapping or otherwise. Contact is forbidden for contact means education and education means the realization that children are not toxic. From here, things must change, Monstropolis cannot go on relying on children to fuel their lives.

"The energy crisis will only get worse," Mr. Watnoose cries as he is led away, a self-condemned man. Sully has ruined the Corporation. Number One suddenly appears and it is the officious Ros. She is watching, in charge, taking care of the status quo: "None of this ever happened, gentleman, and I don't want to see any paper work on this," Ros warns as she steps out of the scene. The love interest

between Sully and the girl child resolves, but the social and political structure remains intact. In fact, Ros demands "no paperwork." Sully is to forget what he knows about contact with children. And for his willingness to forget the truth, Sully is rewarded with power and privilege. He becomes the new "enlightened" CEO of Monsters, Inc.

As a result of Sully's "leadership," the Scare Floor becomes the "Laugh Floor." Balloons and music festoon the factory. No longer just a place of work, of competition, of industrial exploitation, now it is a place where balloons and music make it all "fun." Children laugh instead of scream because Sully's exploitation is kinder and gentler than Mr. Watnoose's. Sully knows that there is no need to terrify the child to get what you want out of it. You do not want screams, *per se*, the film teaches us (although children's screams have worked a long, long time and made Monstropolis the rich, successful, corporate capitalistic structure that it is today). Even so, what Sully learns and teaches his colleagues at Monsters, Inc. is that there is more energy in a child's laugh than in a child's scream. No longer will monsters come through magical doorways into the child's dreams and scare them for power. Now, in the new, kinder, gentler world of Sully's Monsters Inc, monsters will pass through magical doorways into the child's bedroom, at night, and make them laugh for power.

At first the film appears to be an homage to the humane treatment of children by those larger forces that inform their lives. It comes as no surprise that the film's dominant metaphor is not far from a larger cultural and unconscious ideological truth that circulates in children's film as social practice. In raising it almost to the surface, the creators of *Monsters, Inc.* ask us to reconsider how adult culture uses children and more broadly, how those in power demonize the weak for their own ends. By the end monster hegemony has not been overthrown. Far from it. Monster hegemony over children has simply discovered a more efficient, a more sustainable manner of exploitation, but the basic power relation remains intact. Indeed, in spite of the narrative manically trying to indicate otherwise, nothing has really changed in Monstropolis. The basic technologies remain. The basic relationship between monsters and children remain. The social practice of exploitation as an obvious, necessary process remains, and I would argue, has become even more invisible than it was from when we began viewing the film.

There are blunt, brazen lessons of power to be absorbed from watching *Monsters Inc.* It is a conservative, even reactionary story. It is a story of objectified exploitation made to look sugary sweet, necessary, and innocent. By film's end we learn that there are subjects in the world -- agencies of power and authority -- and that they are good and have only our best interest at heart. Yet, at the same time we learn that there are objects in the world -- the child, the other, the subaltern -- who are not agencies in their own right, but who occupy positions of passivity and subjugation in the cultural fabric. The passive object should feel lucky to help the master run his world. The powerful, dominant subjects who control the world are the large and they have an obvious right to harvest whatever they feel they require. In the end, *Monsters, Inc.* as social practice makes more invisible what is always already invisible and at work in the dominant culture. At the film's narrative core lies an assumption about the world and its depiction is the iconological manifestation of the assumption that predatory hierarchies in human relations are "normal" and "obvious." Inculcating this ideological belief in the young serves not only relations between adults and children as they exist now, but all predatory power relations are defended and made invisible, natural, even innocent -- especially those ideologies that confirm and correspond to Corporate ideologies.

Ticket sales and home video sales speak clearly about the film's popularity. A film's popularity is no small thing: why do we watch it? Why do we see it again? Why must we own it? *Monsters, Inc.* reached undoubtedly its target audience again and again, raking in almost seven hundred million dollars to date since its release. I think the popularity of an animated feature might be understood productively in terms that deny the film as "pure fun" or mere "innocent pleasure." Social practice assumes that there can be no "pure" fun and no wholly "innocent" pleasures. That said, I would argue that as social practice *Monsters, Inc.* offers the adult audience a story that provides psychological

maintenance of their individual identities as they are comprised by Corporate cultural and the ideological status quo.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review P, 1971.
- Barrier, Michael. *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation In Its Golden Age*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Bowlby, John. *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Docter, Pete, and David Silverman, dir. *Monsters, Inc.* Burbank: Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2001.
- Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. "Psychoanalysis, Film, and Television." *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Robert C. Allen. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1987. 172-86.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- Grover, Ronald, and Peter Burrows. "Is Steve Jobs About to Move His Cheese?" *Business Week* (10 February 2003): <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/03_06/b3819096.htm>.
- Lisberger, Steven, dir. *Tron: 20th Anniversary Collector's Edition*. 1982. Burbank: Walt Disney Studios, 2002.
- Kanfer, Stefan. *Serious Business: The Art and Commerce of Animation in America from Betty Boop to Toy Story*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1978.
- Miller, Alice. *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*. Trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- Panofski, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. New York: Harper Collins, 1972.
- Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Zornado, J. *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology and the Story of Childhood*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Author's profile: J. Zornado teaches English literature at Rhode Island College. His interests in scholarship include children's literature and culture, the animated feature film, future studies, and US-American literature and culture and he has published articles in these areas in journals such as *Children's Literature Quarterly*, *Children's Literature*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *Religion and Literature*. Zornado's 2001 book, *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology and the Story of Childhood* was published in paperback by Routledge in 2006. His first novel *2050 Volume One: Gods of Little Earth* was published by Speculative Fiction Review in 2007. E-mail: <jjzornado@ric.edu>