

Scenography in Cinema and Media for Children. An Educational Visual Experience

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Abstract

This article examines the educational potential of scenography through comparative readings of *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016) and *Coco* (2017). Drawing on production design and scenographic theory, research on educational television, and media literacy scholarship, it considers how environments and objects acquire meaning as their narrative functions change. The analysis follows the movement from enclosure to shared space in *Frozen*, the recovery of voyaging through the discovery and reuse of ancestral canoes in *Moana*, and the relationship between photographs, spatial access and remembrance in *Coco*. These examples suggest that scenography can support interpretation by giving abstract conflicts concrete forms that viewers encounter repeatedly under changing circumstances. Production accounts and scholarship on cultural representation further qualify the relationship between design intention and meaning. The article proposes an approach to educational interpretation centred on the reconsideration of visual evidence. It distinguishes this interpretive potential from demonstrated learning, identifying questions for audience research while preserving the artistic and cultural specificity of each film.

Keywords: scenography, production design, cinema for children, animation, visual literacy, educational interpretation.

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Introduction

Screen environments organise the actions through which a story becomes intelligible. Rooms determine who can meet; boundaries establish the consequences of movement; objects preserve information that characters may overlook or misunderstand. In cinema for children, these relationships can give concrete form to questions about belonging, responsibility and memory. Their significance develops as a narrative changes what a place permits or what an object appears to mean. A scenographic account of educational potential must therefore attend to the work performed by design within the film.

The issue is particularly clear in animated cinema, where a setting can grow from a character's gesture, participate in an encounter or respond visibly to a change in circumstances. Such possibilities join the construction of space to the unfolding of action. They also make it insufficient to assess a design principally through its attractiveness or technical elaboration. A spectacular environment may be memorable without clarifying a conflict, while an ordinary object can become central to an audience's understanding of the story.

This article asks how scenographic elements support the interpretation of narrative relationships in films addressed to children and family audiences. It argues that their educational potential can be located in the reconsideration of visual evidence: a familiar boundary, environment or object comes to be understood differently as the story develops. The argument connects production design with questions of visual literacy, while distinguishing an interpretation supported by a film from a learning outcome established through audience research.

The discussion concentrates on *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013), *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016) and *Coco* (Unkrich, 2017). The films offer contrasting forms of scenographic organisation within a shared field of American studio animation. In each, the protagonist's changing relationship to a community is expressed through changes in spatial access or the use of meaningful objects. Reading these developments comparatively makes it possible to identify a specific contribution of design without assuming that the films communicate an identical lesson.

Scenography and educational interpretation

Scenography is understood here as the organisation of a fictional environment through space, materials, objects, colour and light. Production design names the coordinated development of the screen world within the filmmaking process. A scenographic reading examines the relationships produced by that world, including contributions realised through costume, animation and visual effects. This distinction permits analysis of the finished image without attributing every aspect of it to one department or professional role.

Barnwell (2004) relates production design to narrative through the use of space, motifs, colour and material detail. Hann's (2019) account of scenography as place orientation shifts attention towards how environments situate participants and organise their relation to an event. McKinney and Palmer (2017) similarly consider the spatial, material and environmental dimensions of performance alongside their social and ethical implications. Together, these perspectives support an analysis concerned with what a setting enables, restricts or makes perceptible. Their application to cinema requires attention to the camera: viewers encounter a designed space through selected viewpoints, movements and durations, rather than moving through it themselves.

Education introduces a different question. Recognising a character's goal, interpreting the significance of an image and applying an idea beyond a film are distinct achievements. Fisch's (2000) capacity model examines the relationship between narrative processing and educational content in television, including the degree to which that content is integrated into the story. His later study also addresses the transfer of learning and adult mediation (Fisch, 2004). These distinctions help specify what an educational argument about scenography would need to establish. They offer a framework for inquiry rather than evidence that entertainment films produce particular developmental effects.

Buckingham's (2003) discussion of media literacy provides a complementary emphasis on the competencies involved in using and interpreting media. Applied to scenography, this perspective encourages questions about how a setting directs attention, which relationships it makes visible and whose account of the world it presents. A discussion of design can consequently involve both comprehension of a story and examination of the means through which the story invites that comprehension. The educational interest lies in the interpretive

activity, including the possibility of disagreement.

The article offers comparative interpretations of selected narrative situations rather than an exhaustive account of the three films. Each reading follows a scenographic element across changes in its use or significance. In *Frozen*, the emphasis is on doors, the ice palace and the redistribution of access. In *Moana*, it is on the reef, the ancestral canoes and the transition from stored objects to vessels in use. In *Coco*, it is on the ofrenda, photographs and the conditions governing passage between the living and the dead. The comparison asks how these elements participate in action and how later events revise an earlier understanding of them.

The films are the primary objects of interpretation. Published production accounts contextualise specific design decisions, while scholarship supplies the conceptual and cultural terms of the discussion. Statements by filmmakers and studio publications are treated as accounts of process or intention, not as independent evidence of audience response. No study of children's reception is reported here. The educational implications are proposals arising from the analysis, and the concentration on Disney and Pixar features limits their generalisation to other production traditions and audiences.

***Frozen* and the changing meaning of enclosure**

The early separation of Anna and Elsa in *Frozen* is organised through the spaces of their home (Buck and Lee, 2013). Following the accident involving Elsa's powers, a closed bedroom door repeatedly places the sisters near one another while preventing contact. Its force comes from this proximity: physical closeness does not secure a relationship. The domestic setting gives the parents' protective response a durable form, so that a measure intended to prevent harm also structures the sisters' experience of loss. Protection becomes inseparable from the restrictions through which it is maintained.

Elsa's creation of the ice palace appears to reverse that arrangement. During the "Let It Go" sequence, she constructs an environment through the same powers she has been required to conceal. The relationship between character and architecture becomes unusually direct: Elsa is both the inhabitant and the maker of the space. Brittney Lee's account of the visual development explains that the design team had to establish the visual language of Elsa's own creations. A snowflake motif, particularly the pattern on the floor, became a generative principle for the palace

(Lee, 2014). The resulting coherence links the scale of an individual gesture to the scale of a building.

This design permits a reading of the palace as an expression of authorship. Elsa can create the conditions of her own visibility, and the setting makes that ability materially apparent. Yet the palace also continues the earlier organisation of separation. She has moved from an enclosure imposed within the family home to one she builds at a distance from it. The translucent material and expansive forms give the space an appearance of openness, while its location and use sustain withdrawal. The tension is between visual freedom and the relationships that this freedom can accommodate.

Anna's arrival brings that tension into the palace. The environment in which Elsa could celebrate her powers alone becomes the site of another difficult encounter. Its earlier significance is revised because the demands placed upon it change. Architectural control cannot settle the conflict between the sisters. Costume participates in the same development: Elsa's abandonment of the gloves associated with concealment signals a changed relation to her powers, but this transformation does not by itself resolve how she will live with others.

The ending reworks the organisation of access. The castle gates remain open, and Elsa's powers contribute to a space of shared play. Ice continues to be present, but its social use changes. This provides an interpretive alternative to assigning cold materials a stable meaning such as alienation or danger. Across the film, a related visual vocabulary supports secrecy, self-expression and communal activity. For educational discussion, the productive question is how the same capacity acquires different consequences when the arrangement of relationships changes. Comparing these moments asks viewers to reconsider a visual judgement in light of the narrative rather than simply identify a symbol.

***Moana* and the recovery of a navigable world**

In *Moana*, the reef establishes a boundary whose significance is sustained by the community's rules and Chief Tui's fear of the sea (Clements and Musker, 2016). Motunui initially appears to contain the resources and practices necessary for collective life. The restriction on voyaging helps define where responsibility is expected to be exercised. Moana's desire to travel therefore creates a problem of belonging: movement beyond the familiar world can appear to threaten the

obligations that bind her to it.

The discovery of the ancestral canoes changes that spatial understanding. The cavern contains evidence of a history that exceeds the community's present boundaries. Its boats are material witnesses to an earlier relation with the ocean, but their storage also registers the interruption of that practice. The setting allows the narrative to present cultural memory through objects whose function has become dormant. Once the canoes are understood as vessels for voyaging, the apparent opposition between leaving the island and belonging to its people begins to change. The possibility of departure is located within the community's own history.

The canoe subsequently becomes a space in which knowledge has to be exercised. It carries the protagonist across the ocean while exposing the practical demands of navigation. Moana's association with voyaging is developed through action and instruction, including her encounters with Maui. The vessel thus connects a claim about identity to a practice that must be learned. Scenographically, the transition from boats stored in a cavern to a canoe in motion gives cultural inheritance a temporal structure: an object preserved from the past becomes meaningful through its use in the present.

The ocean complicates this relationship because it acts within the fictional world. Its interventions extend the setting into the domain of agency, while the journey still requires decisions and acquired skill. The film's environment offers assistance and difficulty rather than functioning as a resource entirely subject to human command. By the conclusion, the return to voyaging broadens the community's field of action. The reef has not physically disappeared; its authority as the limit of collective life has been revised.

The cultural implications of this design require more than a judgement about whether the island looks convincing. A study by Tamaira with Fonoti (2018) examines Pacific participation in the production, including negotiations undertaken through the Oceanic Story Trust. Their account acknowledges the tensions of collaboration with Disney while attending to Indigenous contributors' efforts to shape representation. It also complicates a reading of the island solely as an exotic spectacle: images of paradise can evoke a recognisable homeland and attachments to place. This scholarship gives the scenographic discussion a more precise question about cultural authority: which practices and understandings informed the image, and through what process did they enter the film?

The educational possibilities of *Moana* accordingly extend to the distinction between recognising a cultural reference and understanding its context. The canoes provide a concrete starting point for considering how objects preserve knowledge and how that knowledge becomes active. Further discussion can connect the fictional voyage with accounts of navigation and voyaging from Pacific communities. The film becomes one representation through which to begin that inquiry, rather than a comprehensive explanation of the cultures on which it draws.

***Coco* and the objects that organise remembrance**

Coco makes remembrance consequential through the organisation of objects and access (Unkrich, 2017). The family ofrenda, an altar displaying photographs and offerings, places selected ancestors within a visible arrangement of family history. In the film's fictional afterlife, the presence of a photograph also helps determine whether a deceased person can return to the living. Pixar's production account identifies this rule in its description of Héctor, whose inability to cross follows from his absence from an ofrenda (Pixar Animation Studios, n.d.). Memory becomes a condition of movement through the designed world.

The marigold bridge enlarges this relationship into an architectural form. The production account published by The Walt Disney Company (2017) connects its design to paths of marigold petals encountered during research in Mexico. In the film, the bridge makes separation and connection visible as a route between two domains. Its function is clarified by the restriction on crossing: the presence of an impressive structure does not ensure that everyone can use it. The contrast between the bridge's apparent invitation and Héctor's exclusion turns an abstract condition of remembrance into an obstacle with narrative consequences.

The family photograph develops a related problem of visibility. The missing face and the guitar that remains visible allow Miguel to construct an incorrect account of his ancestry. The object supplies evidence, but that evidence is incomplete and interpreted through his admiration for Ernesto de la Cruz. As a prop, the photograph actively organises misunderstanding. Its importance lies in the relation between what is shown, what has been removed and what the protagonist is already prepared to believe.

The later recovery of Héctor's place in the family revises that reading. Mamá Coco's recollection and the preserved fragment of the photograph supply

information that the displayed family history has failed to transmit. The significance of the image changes as it is connected to a voice, a song and an account of past events. This interaction also sets a limit on attributing meaning to visual design in isolation. The prop works through its place within an audiovisual narrative, and the restoration of recognition depends on relations among different forms of evidence.

Digital effects contribute to the material coherence of this world. The marigold petals on the bridge function as light sources and respond to characters' steps, according to the production account (The Walt Disney Company, 2017). Illumination and movement make contact with the environment perceptible. These technical choices sustain the bridge as a place through which characters act, as well as an image of family connection. The contribution of scenography is distributed across modelling, lighting, animation and effects rather than confined to the design of a static object.

Taken together, the ofrenda, bridge and photograph present remembrance as a practice involving selection and recognition. The family honours its ancestors, yet its inherited account contains a consequential error. This opens an educational question more demanding than the general injunction to value tradition: how can a community preserve its history while allowing that history to be corrected? Following the photograph through the film provides a way to examine how an interpretation changes when previously excluded evidence becomes available.

Discussion

The comparison identifies a recurring relationship between material continuity and narrative change. Doors and ice in *Frozen*, canoes in *Moana*, and photographs in *Coco* remain recognisable as their significance develops. Their recurrence allows an interpretation to be revisited rather than replaced by an unrelated image. Scenography participates in narrative reasoning by preserving something that can be compared across different circumstances. This is the basis of the article's proposal that educational potential can be examined through changes in the reading of visual evidence.

Spatial access is central to this process. The characters' relationships to their communities are expressed through the possibility of entering, leaving, crossing or returning. However, crossing a boundary does not have the same meaning in all three films. Elsa's retreat sustains a difficulty that must be

renegotiated; Moana's departure restores a neglected collective practice; Héctor's exclusion exposes the consequences of an inherited account of the past. The comparison therefore supports attention to the narrative conditions of access, rather than a general equation between open space and freedom or enclosed space and oppression.

The objects are similarly embedded in action. A canoe carries cultural knowledge because it can be used; a photograph matters because its display and interpretation organise recognition. This connection is relevant to Fisch's (2000) distinction between content integrated into a narrative and material that remains tangential to it. In the readings offered here, the issues proposed for discussion are carried by the problems characters encounter. That relationship provides an analytical reason to select these elements for educational work, although it does not establish how a particular group of children will interpret them.

An activity based on these readings could begin by asking viewers to describe an object or setting at two points in a film and identify what has changed. Follow-up questions might distinguish an observed detail from an inference about a character, or invite comparison between competing explanations of the same image. A further exercise could ask how altering one design decision would change a scene: whether the palace would retain its significance without its separation from Arendelle, or whether an intact photograph would permit Miguel's initial error. These proposed activities make the construction of meaning available for examination, consistent with Buckingham's (2003) account of media literacy.

Cultural context also changes the questions that can responsibly be asked. Recognising a canoe or an ofrenda does not amount to understanding the range of practices associated with it. The account of consultation in *Moana* demonstrates why the production of a cultural image deserves scrutiny alongside the image itself (Tamaira with Fonoti, 2018). Educational discussion can attend to contributors' perspectives, differences among communities and the conventions of commercial storytelling. This gives cultural detail a role in inquiry without treating visual specificity as a certificate of authenticity.

The scope of the comparison remains limited to three studio features and selected narrative situations. It privileges the relation between scenography and story, leaving other possible objects of study, such as the independent pleasures of visual excess or the circulation of designs through merchandise, outside its central argument. Reception research would also need to distinguish spontaneous

observations from interpretations encouraged by adults. These limits define the next stage of investigation: examining which relationships viewers notice, how they explain them, and how different contexts of discussion affect their readings.

Conclusion

The analysis locates the educational potential of scenography in the way a designed world makes relationships available for reconsideration. The three films give recurring environments and objects consequences that develop across the narrative. A place or object first understood in one way subsequently acquires another significance because a character acts differently, gains knowledge or encounters a competing account. This continuity gives interpretation a concrete point of reference. Viewers can return to something they have already seen and ask why it now means something different.

The comparison also clarifies the relation between design and character development. In *Frozen*, the transformation concerns how Elsa's powers and spaces accommodate other people. In *Moana*, it concerns the recovery of a practice through which individual aspiration becomes connected to collective history. In *Coco*, it concerns the revision of family memory through evidence that its visible arrangement has excluded. Each film places a different demand on the protagonist's understanding of belonging. Scenography gives those demands form through access, movement and the use of objects, allowing the argument to be followed through the organisation of the fictional world.

For designers, this account places emphasis on relationships that persist and change over time. An environment's narrative contribution may depend on how it is revisited, and an object's importance may lie in the difference between its first appearance and its later use. This does not prescribe a single style or require every detail to deliver a lesson. It suggests that a discussion of educational intention should be able to explain what a design helps viewers notice and how its role develops. Such an explanation is more informative than an appeal to immersion or visual appeal alone.

For educators, the corresponding opportunity is to make interpretation an activity that can be articulated, compared and revised. Questions about a closed door, a stored canoe or an incomplete photograph connect close observation to larger issues without requiring an immediate consensus about the film's message.

Cultural inquiry can extend this work by asking how particular practices were represented and whose knowledge informed the production. The distinctions among a fictional world, its cultural sources and a viewer's own experience remain part of the learning task.

The argument establishes a basis for educational investigation rather than a claim about measured effects. Research with children could examine how they describe these recurring elements, whether later scenes change their explanations and how discussion influences their ability to distinguish observation from inference. Attention to age, cultural familiarity and previous viewing would help explain differences between responses. The contribution of scenographic analysis is to make the objects and questions of that research more specific. It shows where a film offers an opportunity to revise understanding and provides the visual and narrative evidence through which that opportunity can be examined.

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