

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Discursive Collisions: A Reading Of “Ellen’s Energy Adventure”



Located near the center of Walt Disney World, near Orlando, Florida, is the 550-acre Epcot Center. Epcot, thematically evocative of a world’s fair (Nelson, 1986), is comprised of two major elements. The first of these is World Showcase, which includes eleven pavilions representing what the 2002 Birnbaum’s, the “official guide” to the Disney World theme parks, characterizes as “Disney conceptions about participating countries in remarkably realistic, consistently entertaining styles. You won’t find the real Germany here; rather the country’s essence, much as a traveler returning from a visit might remember what he or she saw” (Safro, 2001, 135). The second, and more important part of Epcot for our purposes, is Future World, a set of nine pavilions that thematize corporate problem-solving and technology’s contributions to major issues confronting humanity[i]. As Birnbaum’s also notes,

A mere listing of the basic themes covered by the pavilions at Future World – agriculture, communications, car safety, the ocean, energy, health, and imagination – tends to sound a tad academic, and perhaps even a little forbidding. But when these serious topics are presented with that special Disney flair, they become part of an experience that ranks among Walt Disney World’s most exciting and entertaining. (Safrom, 2001, 123)

The pavilion upon which this essay focuses is the Universe of Energy, sponsored by ExxonMobil corporation. It offers the Epcot visitor an extended “educational” message in its hybridized film/theme park ride, “Ellen’s Energy Adventure,” (“EEA”) featuring Ellen DeGeneres and Bill Nye, the Science Guy, as well as other recognizable entertainment personalities.

Our interest in “EEA” is grounded in Goodnight’s observation that, Many forms of social persuasion are festooned with the trappings of deliberation, even while they are designed to succeed by means inimical to knowledgeable choice and active participation. The increasing variety of forums, formats, styles,

and institutional practices – each claiming to embody the public will or to represent the public voice – demands careful attention. If such practices continue to evolve uncritiqued, deliberative argument may become a lost art. (Goodnight, 1982, 215)

We believe that “EEA” constitutes the near-perfect example of such efforts and deserves critique for two reasons. First, it illustrates how corporations seek to participate in and influence discursive practices in the public sphere. Walt Disney World and ExxonMobil rely upon sophisticated techniques of multimedia production, fragmentary deployments of Western mythologies, and allusions to popular culture to “educate” audiences through entertainment. It is our claim in this essay that such practices seek not to enhance deliberative argument, but rather to diminish participation. As Fjellman observes, “What is important is that our thoughts are constrained. They are channeled in the interests of Disney itself but also in the interest of large corporations with which Disney has allied itself, the system of power they maintain, and the world of commodities that is their life’s blood” (Fjellman, 1992, 13).

“EEA” interestingly relies upon the appearance of technical discourse to accommodate itself to the public sphere but does so in ways that denigrate the value of both domains of argument, expanding corporate influence at their expense. Such efforts at influencing public discourse certainly are not new. Cheney and Christensen note that many organizations, “but especially those in the embattled industries of oil, chemicals, and tobacco,” engage important sociopolitical issues, particularly those affecting their own survival (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, 237). However, they add that, “When the social space is saturated with corporate communication asserting social righteousness, only the indirect or more unusual messages are able to stand out and attract attention” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, 256). “Ellen” constitutes an exemplar of such messages.

Second, ExxonMobil’s message at Walt Disney World is important in its own right – significant both for the size of its audience as well as for the context within which it occurs. According to the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, more than nine million visitors attended Epcot in 2001, making it the sixth most frequented theme park in the world[**ii**]. Epcot’s target audience – adult, well-educated, middle-class consumers – are placed “in the middle of scenes that unfold in a carefully choreographed manner as they move through them on foot or strapped into Disney’s various ride vehicles” (Fjellman, 1992,

399). This “envelopment-by-theme,” described by Fjellman, focuses the visitor “on countless coordinated details passing by at high velocity, to the point that one’s powers of discrimination can be overwhelmed. [Walt Disney World] is organized according to the principle of cognitive overload; it is with the overriding of visitors’ capacities for making discriminations that Disney metathemes may take effect” (Fjellman, 1992, 23). Fjellman’s description generalizes the Disney strategy; “EEA” exemplifies it.

“EEA” appears to be just a simple, entertaining narrative of competitive conflict and resolution, but it is anything but simple in format. The levels of virtuality are breathtaking: a television show and historical recreation embedded within a dream, which is reproduced in a film, which is introduced by a secondary, film framed in direct address, all within a pavilion at a theme park. But the complexity of “EEA” does not end with the multiplicity of media it incorporates. Even as it presents itself as an entertainment narrative, it embeds a serious, public policy argument about the feasibility of alternative fuels.

Emerging from the layered narrative of “EEA” is a set of arguments that work together to serve the corporate interest of ExxonMobil, advocating continued reliance on fossil fuels without appearing to advocate much of anything. The complexity and entertainment value of the attraction mask the near-irrelevance of over half of the narrative (in terms of time on each segment) to learning about energy in general and to ExxonMobil’s arguments specifically. While these segments are argumentatively and educationally tangential, they do serve important rhetorical ends, so it seems important to attend to them as well as to the argument as the narrative unfolds.

Ellen’s “adventure” – and ours as well – begins with our entrance into the Universe of Energy pavilion and into a large, oval-shaped, carpeted anteroom with a giant screen on one side. At either end of the room are signs that inform us that ExxonMobil sponsors the Universe of Energy. A film begins with Ellen DeGeneres speaking directly to the audience, introducing herself, asking us questions, seeming to wait for our responses, even admiring the hair style of an audience member in the back. She also introduces the remainder of the show, in which we will learn about how she became the “spokesperson” for this venue, an “expert” on energy. She transports us into her living room where she (a second Ellen) is sitting down to watch her favorite television program, *Jeopardy!* Ellen’s next-door neighbor, Bill Nye, the Science Guy enters to borrow a candle, aluminum foil, and clothespin for one of his experiments, and he too expresses his excitement about

Jeopardy!

As the game show begins, Ellen is astonished that one of the contestants is her former college roommate, Judy Peterson, now a “Professor of Energy” (Jamie Lee Curtis). Ellen expresses a clear aversion to the Professor, saying that her nickname for her former roommate was “Stupid Judy.” Bill objects: “That makes no sense. She has a Ph.D.” Ellen informs Bill that she doesn’t care about energy, to which he responds, “Energy is the most important thing in the universe. Without energy, nothing would go. Nothing would happen. I mean, there’d be nothing.” Bill Nye leaves with his experiment paraphernalia, while Ellen mutters about “stupid energy; Stupid Judy.” She drifts off to sleep only to begin dreaming that she, too, is a contestant on Jeopardy! along with Judy Peterson and Albert Einstein, and that all the categories are about energy.

Ellen performs terribly. We watch her attempt only one question, in which she is unable to identify the substance “formed from microscopic plants and animals trapped... in sediment millions of years ago.” Judy, however, immediately provides the correct response, answering in a petty tone, “What is petroleum, Alex?” We watch as Judy smugly provides correct responses to multiple items in turn. She ends the first round with what host Alex Trebek labels “a commanding lead.” Ellen is tied with Einstein – who never speaks and looks continually puzzled by the events around him – with no money on the board. At this point, Ellen notes that it’s her nightmare, and she freezes the action and asks Bill Nye for help. Nye had shown up on the set to see Einstein. Bill agrees to help by taking Ellen “way back” in time.

This introductory segment of “EEA” is important to the narrative, for it sets Ellen up as a slightly daft but congenial protagonist. And it establishes Bill Nye, the Science Guy as her knowledgeable sidekick and straight man. But it “teaches” us only two things about energy. First, we learn from Bill Nye that it is “the most important thing in the universe.” Second, in case we were not already aware of it, we that petroleum is formed from fossilized plants and animals. The remainder of the Jeopardy! sequence is simply a series of decontextualized, correct questions from Judy Peterson. Because we do not see or hear the answers to which Judy’s questions respond, there is nothing to learn. Indeed, the short sequence seems only to reinforce the need for Ellen to find a way to defeat her rival. Judy seems to fit precisely Ellen’s earlier characterization of her as a “smarty-pants, know-it-all.” Jamie Lee Curtis’s elaborate acting of Judy Peterson as unlikable offers her up as

the antagonist Ellen must overcome. But Judy's "commanding lead" by the first commercial break in the dreamed Jeopardy! game represents a daunting obstacle, providing the motivation, indeed the urgency, for Ellen (and us) to learn about energy and learn it quickly.

At the end of this first film, two doors open beneath the screen and audience members file into a large room where trams are aligned with seating for more than 500 people. After the audience is seated, the room grows dark, and another film opens with Bill and Ellen appearing on a nearly blank, dark screen. They (and we) are at the beginning of the universe, and a small spot of light (the material from which the Big Bang emerges) appears in the center. Bill places ear protection devices on Ellen, handing her two flashlights like those used to guide airplanes as they taxi to jetways. Ellen, acting like a ground crew member, informs the Universe that it is "cleared for takeoff." Bill Nye pulls Ellen through a doorway, just as the spot of light, which has been increasing in size, explodes into galaxies, planets, and stars rushing toward the audience at high speed. All of this is accompanied by enormous sound delivered through a state-of-the-art audio system. As we move through the universe, we settle onto one planet using a low-aerial shot that shows computer-generated animation of mountains thrusting up from the earth's crust, along with the newly formed oceans and beaches, until we land in a primeval forest. It is here that the lessons on energy begins. Bill informs Ellen that the plants and animals that surround them are "soaking up energy from the sun. When they die and get buried, time, pressure, and heat will cook them into the fossil fuels we rely on today, like coal, natural gas, and oil." Ellen wonders aloud if the gas in her car is "dinosaur soup," and Bill answers: "Not exactly, but dinosaurs *did live* when fossil fuels were developing in the earth. Dinosaurs are just cool! Let's check them out!" Ellen expresses trepidation at that notion and tells us to go ahead with Bill.

At this moment, our tram cars rotate and move into the world of dinosaurs, and we are transformed from spectators into participants, moving through the adventure, rather than simply watching it. We enter this world at night and see the shadows of dinosaurs looming directly ahead of us. As the "sky" lightens, we see other reptiles on either side. The tram cars move past giant Apatosaurus, which hiss and spit water at us as we pass. We then move through a diorama that includes a "lofty allosaurus battl[ing] with an armored stegosaurus, and an elasmosaurus burst[ing] out of a tide pool with frightening suddenness - all under the vulturelike gaze of winged creatures known as pteranodons" (Safro, 2001,

After our encounters with these creatures, our tram cars enter a dark room with no visual images save a radio tower and sparkling lights on the floor, walls, and ceiling. It is here that we listen to light-hearted "Radio KNRG" announcements, punctuated by dates ranging from 55 million, BC to 750,000 BC, and reporting on a meteor that hits the earth sending dust into the atmosphere, a traffic tie-up where an elephant has popped his trunk, the appearance and flourishing of mammals, dinosaurs being wiped out in the Mastodome, large ice sheets covering the earth to near the equator, and animal evolution described in a fashion report ("wooly is definitely in," and "saber teeth are popular among cats this year").

At this juncture, about two-thirds of the way through "EEA," we still have learned little that is directly related to energy. We learn from Bill Nye that the matter expanded during the Big Bang contained "all the energy in the universe." We learn - again - in the primeval forest that the plants and animals we are seeing will ultimately be forged into oil. We also are taught there how pleasing fossil fuels are, not by word, but by visual display. The lush, leafy plants represent the only form in which we will ever see "oil." The dark liquid substance never makes an appearance in "EEA." Here in the Universe of Energy, oil is beautiful.

The ensuing ride-through phase, introducing us to the dinosaurs, is entertaining but beside the point. Bill Nye even alerts us to its irrelevance when he tells Ellen that dinosaurs *lived at the same time as* fossil fuels were forming, but simultaneity is the extent of the connection. The dinosaur diorama and the radio tower segment together form the lengthiest portion of "EEA", but they are nothing more than transitional moves to the next segment, where Bill and Ellen are reunited on film.

Bill introduces Ellen to the "dawn of the human age" and the discovery of fire. The discovery, Bill says, will "spark the progress of civilization." There follows a harried montage of animated images, accompanied by frenetic music, portraying the rise of civilization. The rapid sequence of images begins with a pre-Roman façade that turns into Rome, where a Caesar-like character pulls down on a billows handle, forcing the air into a ship's sails and moving it across the screen (and presumably the ocean). In the course of its journey, the ship is transformed from a Roman galley into a ship from the Age of Discovery, where it sails into a building that becomes a mill-like structure showing water power driving pulleys, gears, and levers. As a human (non animated) figure drops into the mill, it is

transformed into a steam engine pulling a train. Telegraph and telephone poles spring up, and a house is shown. Oil derricks sprout from the ground, and a sign, "Growing for our Future," appears. A tractor tills the soil, enters a barn, and emerges as an automobile. As the automobile begins its movement across the screen, there is a quick glimpse of an Exxon filling station in the background. The car travels into a cityscape of the early twentieth century and then into a modern city with skyscrapers and traffic lights. After this short, but intensely concentrated series of animated images, a helicopter-like vehicle appears with Bill Nye and Ellen, now in the present. She thanks Bill and suggests he return her to the Jeopardy! set, for she's ready to "kick Judy's big ol'...." Bill interrupts her: "Wait! To play the game, you have to know where energy comes from, you have to know where it's gonna come from, and how to use it more wisely."

The series of images constituting "the progress of civilization" flash by in just over a minute, but they serve an important argumentative end. All the images, but for a single exception (the oil derrick), represent consumption, not production of fuel. Indeed, the series equates "the progress of civilization" with energy consumption. It ends with Ellen and Bill appearing back onscreen in the helicopter-like vehicle. Bill explicitly marks their reentry into the present, and it is at this juncture that he also lays out the issues of the ExxonMobil case: "To play the game, you have to know where energy comes from, you have to know where it's gonna come from, and how to use it more wisely." The "game" to which he refers explicitly, of course, is the Jeopardy! game. But another way to read his statement in light of the just-completed segment is that the "game" is about maintaining the "progress of civilization." If we are to continue to progress, i.e., consume energy, then it follows that we must produce ever energy to satisfy this urgent need. The alternative, we recall, from Bill's admonition before Ellen's dream, seems dire: "Without energy... there'd be nothin'." So, the first argument composing ExxonMobil's argumentative brief, and presumably a lesson we are supposed to "learn," is about the necessity of consumption to civilization. Since consumption is dependent upon supply, energy production becomes the key to continued progress.

It is from this point in the story that ExxonMobil's primary set of arguments finally emerges. It denigrates the viability of "alternative," especially renewable, energy sources and minimizes the environmental effects of continued reliance on fossil fuels. Additionally, the presentation works to inoculate audience members

to future critique of fossil fuels. Bill and Ellen stop at several sites of energy production. At each stop, Bill offers an explanation of each source of energy, and Ellen provides the comic “relief.”

Bill tells Ellen that most energy issues from the sun. This provides the transition to visit various energy production possibilities, or “great ideas for tomorrow,” beginning with solar power. As expansive, futuristic orchestral music plays, a wide-angle shot reveals a field of solar collectors, and we focus in to Bill and Ellen on the ground, Ellen peering into and making faces at the mirror-like surface of one collector, which seems to have a “reflective” mind of its own. Bill explains briefly that these “solar mirrors are one way to convert the sun’s energy into electricity.” But he adds that it is “not sunny enough everywhere” for solar power, and energy from the sun “still isn’t that cheap. But we’re getting’ there.”

Bill and Ellen travel from the solar farm to a wind farm, where we learn from Bill that “Today we’re using the clean energy of moving air – wind – to generate electricity.” It is worth noting here the value of image and sound to the overall message. The wind farm shots are accompanied by soft background music that blends with the sound of the wind turbines, but the music changes as the inevitable objections to wind power come up. “To power a whole city,” Bill tells us, “we’d need a whole lot of windmills.” As Ellen adds, “When the wind stops blowing, we’d be left in the dark, wouldn’t we?” As she raises the objection, the background skyline of San Francisco begins to go black. The lights come back on only when dozens of windmills sprout from San Francisco Bay to create a forest of structures that violates our aesthetic expectations of the city’s beauty. As the mills spring up in the Bay, the sound becomes piercing, cyclical, and unpleasant.

Bill and Ellen continue on to Hoover Dam. Hydroelectric power, Bill informs Ellen, is “clean and efficient.” It “converts the energy of falling water into electricity.” However, while hydroelectric power is a renewable energy source, “we’ve already used many of the best sites, and sometimes building a dam can be pretty hard on an ecosystem.” As they finish their tour of the dam, Bill explains that renewable energy sources like these provide about 10% of the world’s energy. Ellen insists, “We still need a heck of a lot more energy. Where’s it coming from?”

Bill answers by flying Ellen over a train loaded with coal, suggesting that there is a plentiful supply of the “solid fossil fuel.” When Ellen inquires about global warming, he replies: “It’s a hot topic with lots of questions. It’s one of the big reasons scientists are working on a way to burn fuels like coal more efficiently than ever.” Their next stop is a natural gas plant, where Bill changes the topic from abdominal discomfort to explain to Ellen that there are sixty years of known

reserves of natural gas. She expresses alarm that there is so little. Bill reassures her that more is being located all the time, but that that “we do need to use it wisely.” The next site is an oil field, where Bill’s instruction continues, but only after the Beverly Hillbillies theme plays, and Ellen responds: “Black gold, Texas tea, swimming pools, movie stars. What is the Beverly Hillbillies? I mean, what is oil?” Oil, Bill tells her patiently, “is our main source of energy, and we’ve found enough to last fifty years.” He and Ellen travel into outer space where they encounter a satellite, one of the “far-out” ways of locating more oil on earth. They return to earth where he shows her one of the more unlikely locations – under the ocean. Their helicopter becomes a submersible vehicle, and they dive down for a look at an offshore drilling platform that is juxtaposed with an image of the Empire State Building, for Bill’s size comparison of the two.

Bubbles in the water, created as their vehicle rises rapidly from the ocean depths, transform into free-floating particles, representing nuclear power. Bill explains: “Today, we take atoms like these and split them apart to release energy. It’s called fission.” Bill and Ellen spend little time among the suddenly active atoms, as Bill explains that nuclear energy is “expensive and highly controversial.” He turns then to the one source of power we will never run short of – “brain power” – and suggests we might even be able to figure out how to harness the energy of the stars by fusion.

This quick excursion through energy alternatives clearly privileges three – coal, natural gas, and oil – conveniently the three energy sources in which ExxonMobil is invested (ExxonMobil, 2002). The “EEA” message is little more than an echo of the ExxonMobil corporate line. The company’s board recently opposed a shareholder resolution that would have required “strategic plans to elp bring bioenergy and other renewable energy sources into ExxonMobil’s energy mix” (Exxon Mobil Corporation, 2002, 36). The Board responded to the resolution prior to the shareholders’s meeting in May, 2002 by arguing that:

renewables have not demonstrated an ability to compete effectively on a large scale with fossil fuels, nor are they expected to reach such a position for the foreseeable future. Performance to date indicates that to have any significant impact on conventional energies, renewables must overcome significant cost and reliability disadvantages. For example, in electric power generation, solar and wind are only as dependable as sunshine and the wind, which naturally limits their reliability for base load or peaking power needs with current technology. (Exxon Mobil Corporation, 2002, 36)

The Board's response continued:

[T]he use of renewables is not free from impact on the environment, particularly if deployed on a scale necessary to make an appreciable contribution to global energy demand. Wind power faces challenges because of the impact of turbines on wildlife as well as its inherent sight and sound implications. Large-scale solar power and bio-energy pose significant land use issues... In our view, these are significant factors with regard to the potential growth of renewables (Exxon Mobil Corporation, 2002, 37).

And, finally, "after evaluating relevant considerations, management does not believe that renewables represent commercial opportunities at this time. Instead, we will continue to concentrate on our core energy and petrochemical businesses" (Exxon Mobil Corporation, 2002, 37). ExxonMobil does recognize that climate change is a "risk" and that its consequences may "prove to be significant"; nevertheless the corporation will "work with others to develop effective long-term solutions that minimize the risk of climate change from energy use without unacceptable social and economic damage" (Exxon Mobil Corporation, 2002, 37). Such statements are consistent with the message advocated in "EEA." The only feasible energy options are natural gas, coal, and oil.

It cannot come as a surprise that ExxonMobil would push its own corporate agenda in Walt Disney World. The point, is rather how the agenda is worked rhetorically in the Epcot venue. This final segment in Ellen's dream resembles a standard "residues" policy argument: List and eliminate options to fix on the final, preferred solution. Indeed, that basic argumentative structure does emerge here, but with important twists. The preferred solutions - oil, gas, and coal, are not saved for last, as in most residue structures. Nor are they presented as "preferred." They simply emerge unscathed in an apparent random review of possibilities. And in the end, if all else fails, we can rely on the omnipresent, American optimism that defers serious planning for the future by promising that "brain power" will offer the way out of the quandary of energy production.

Missing from the energy alternatives for the future is conservation - scaling back on consumption. Since the progress of civilization is predicated upon consumption, conservation is eliminated as an alternative before the idea of alternatives can even be raised. Also missing is any acknowledgment that energy consumption and production are global issues. There is no politics of energy

consumption or production here, only that we consume, and therefore must produce. And of course, the final missing element is mention or image of environmental degradation, except as they might accompany non-fossil fuel energy sources, e.g., wind or hydroelectric power. Here, the arguments in “EEA” are hauntingly like those drafted by the ExxonMobil Board.

After Bill and Ellen’s excursion, the adventure returns to Jeopardy! where Alex Trebek is marveling during the commercial break about how well Judy had done in the first round. During the ensuing Double Jeopardy round, though, it is Ellen, newly knowledgeable about energy, who responds correctly time and again. Judy, haughty to this point, now becomes agitated, as Ellen exchanges her bumbling for an overacted confidence and even smugness that further increases Judy’s ire. At the end of the round, when Ellen and Judy are tied in winnings, Judy says to Alex Trebek: “How could she have learned so much during the commercial break? She’s obviously cheating.” Alex replies uncharacteristically: “Zip it, Judy.” Einstein has earned no money and so is eliminated from the game. In Final Jeopardy, both Ellen and Judy wager all their earnings on a category about future energy sources. Judy loses all her winnings by insisting that there is no correct question to accompany the Final Jeopardy answer: “This is the one source of power that will never run out.” Ellen, of course, provides the correct response: “What is brain power?” and is declared the new Jeopardy! champion, thereby offering a satisfying resolution to the narrative conflict. At the end, Ellen returns in her role as “spokesperson,” saying, “So, that’s how I became an energy expert. Again, ‘expert’ may not be the exact right word. More expert-ish.” As the lights come up and we exit our tram cars, we see a sign, reminding us that “EEA” is sponsored by ExxonMobil.

The knowledge that allows Ellen to become “expert-ish” enough to defeat a Professor of Energy and the genius of Einstein is that fossil fuels represent the only viable source of energy for our immediate future. The message, too, encourages increased energy consumption except for the one line that we must “use it wisely.” But how education, knowledge, and expertise are treated is more than simply a sum of the substantive “lessons” Ellen learns.

“EEA” is unambiguous about the centrality of the scientific or technological “expert” in addressing contemporary problems, like the depletion of energy resources. So, in examining how this venue “works” rhetorically, we must inquire beyond the substance of the argument. The additional question that arises is how the attraction represents expertise and the acquisition of knowledge sufficient to become expert or at least “expert-ish,” as Ellen names her status at the end of the

ride. The narrative conflict – Ellen’s struggle to beat Judy – sets up the entirety of the remainder of the “Adventure,” making the acquisition of knowledge about energy obligatory and urgent.

At the beginning, Ellen concedes her lack of expertise regarding – indeed, her lack of interest in – energy. For Ellen, learning is not something to be sought. She describes it at various points as “scary.” She refers to her dream as a “nightmare,” she is embarrassed at her inability to answer Alex Trebek’s Jeopardy! questions, the dinosaurs are “scary,” and diving underwater in the search of offshore petroleum reserves is unsettling. However, Ellen discovers that learning is a journey, an “Adventure” in this instance, that promises both a quest to overcome obstacles and to attain technical expertise.

As the journey progresses, however, learning about energy is like everything else in Walt Disney World. It is fun, playful, easy and entertaining. Ellen clears the Big Bang for “take off,” imitating the ground crew moving an airliner onto the taxiway; she learns about climate change and biological evolution through lighthearted news, fashion, and sports reports; she plays in front of solar collector mirrors and hears the “Beverly Hillbillies” theme song as she learns about oil; and she delights in her victory over “Stupid Judy” in Jeopardy! What she learns is passively acquired in a dream, and she learns it in the time frame of a commercial break on television.

Several elements are important to Ellen’s journey. First, she, and by implication the rest of us, are not allowed the standard, distanced ways of learning we typically associate with education. Instead, the acquisition of knowledge in “EEA” requires immediate personal experience, as evidenced by Ellen’s journey through the jungle and dinosaur sequences and by investigating potential sources of energy. It is this reification of personal experience, and the knowledge gained from those experiences, that allows Ellen to “win” at Jeopardy! and to “defeat” those whose expertise is acquired in more standard academic pursuits and confirmed by academic credentials, whether the Professor of Energy or Albert Einstein himself, the cultural icon of scientific knowledge.

The audience’s participation in Ellen’s Adventure results in members also acquiring knowledge through personal experience. Like Ellen, we have “seen” the need for continued energy consumption (if civilization is to continue its progress) and witnessed the potential and obstacles to various forms of energy production. By affirming personal experience and the necessity for energy consumption, the

audience member's own individual histories are also affirmed. The underlying principle of consumption enacted by our own visit to Walt Disney World and Epcot and middle-class lifestyle is both acknowledged and confirmed. The "good life," founded on energy consumption is placed in a positive counter-stance to the irrelevance of technical expertise. Thus, when audience members encounter statements from those claiming expertise on energy matters that argue for conservation and alternative sources to fossil fuels, they can be confident that their understanding of energy "questions" is equal or superior to that of alleged "experts."

Interestingly, technical knowledge and its place within public discourse is both exalted and diminished. Clearly, having the Professor of Energy and Albert Einstein as Jeopardy! contestants grants them a kind of status. Judy's success in the first half of the game show also gives credence to the value of academic knowledge. She has a Ph.D., she is a Professor, and she is winning at the first commercial break by a daunting margin. Einstein's figure as a cultural icon is even affirmed when Bill Nye tells Ellen that the reason he came to the set was to "see Einstein." Finally, it is only through the acquisition of technical knowledge that Ellen is able to "win" the competition between competing energy experts. It is not just Ellen who "wins," of course, but also the ExxonMobil arguments.

Yet, Ellen's quest relies also upon the debunking of scientific and technical expertise. Both representatives of technical knowledge turn out to be unattractive and ineffectual figures. "Stupid Judy" ends up confirming the nickname when she loses in Jeopardy! Her personal behavior is condescending, whining, and boastful. Einstein is reduced to a bumbling, befuddled figure who cannot function in the competition of ideas. He says nothing throughout the show, cannot seem to make his signaling device work, and appears incapable of interaction. At the end, after signing in as Einstein at the show's beginning, his name is reduced to a mathematical formula, and his character to a cipher.

Ellen's victory is assured not by acquiring the kind of technical scientific knowledge represented by Judy Peterson or Einstein, but by the popular knowledge represented by Bill Nye. Bill Nye is a television personality who makes science easy to learn. He does not have a Ph.D. He does not need expensive equipment or laboratories to conduct his experiments, but requires only aluminum foil, a candle, and a clothes pin. Bill is an ordinary person. He is, after all, Bill Nye, the *Science Guy* who has the common, practical knowledge that is really all that is needed to prevail.

Certainly, no one questions the value, indeed the necessity, of technical knowledge in debate over important questions of public policy. Whether addressing issues over stem cell research, bioterrorism, or energy policy, technical expertise constitutes a critical component in informed discourse and deliberation. What concerns us, however, are the consequences that may emerge when the wealth and power of corporate voices combine with sophisticated multimedia presentations that divert audience attention from serious issues of public policy. "Ellen's Energy Adventure" is just one such example. While appearing to address one of the most vital issues of contemporary society, "Ellen" diffuses that issue's importance through that "special Disney flair" that Birnbaum so extolled. In doing so, we believe that public discourse is ill-served, that scientific and technical knowledge is diminished and made less important to such critical issues, and that the ability of citizens to participate in the broader public discussion is marginalized. In providing this critique of the "Universe of Energy" at Epcot, we seek to forestall that day when, as Goodnight feared, "deliberative argument may become a lost art."

As we leave Epcot to return to the Orlando airport in our rental car, we notice that the gas gauge hovers on empty and decide that we need to refuel as soon as possible. We are not certain if we can make it Orlando, and look for the first convenient gasoline station. We find it, of course, still within the confines of Disney World (where all needs are met in form or another); and it is, as are all of the service stations within the "Wonderful World of Disney," presented by ExxonMobil.

NOTES

[i] A tenth pavilion, under construction but not yet complete at the time of our most recent visit, in February 2002, will focus on space travel.

[ii] It should be noted that four of the top four themeparks in attendance were Disney parks, with only Tokyo Disneyland, the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, Disneyland in Anaheim, CA, Disneyland, Paris, and Everland in Kyonggi-Do, South Korea, besting Epcot. Seven of the top ten were Disney parks. See: "International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions."

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