Prospectus: Interpretive Meaning in Cartoon Network’s *Adventure Time*

**Introduction**

When I tell people that my favorite television show to watch in my spare time is the children’s cartoon *Adventure Time*, I often find that their knee-jerk reaction is surprise that a college aged man would spend his time and find so much enjoyment in a kid’s show. In my experience, however, these surprised or skeptical individuals usually have never actually watched the show for themselves. Many adults who take the time to watch some of the series realize quickly that there is something special about this show--there’s something to be appreciated which is much deeper than the childish narrative ostensibly expressed on the surface. Through the fantastical journeys of human boy Finn and his magical dog Jake in the fictional post-apocalyptic world of Ooo, the show is able to explore a shocking amount of deeper, darker, and generally more serious subtexts. As Zack Handlen writes, *Adventure Time* “fits beautifully in that gray area between kid and adult entertainment in a way that manages to satisfy both a desire for sophisticated...writing and plain old silliness.” (Handlen)

My inspiration for examining *Adventure Time* more closely came one day during an average personal viewing of the show. While I was watching it, I found myself relating the narrative that I saw to my own current predicaments. Specifically, this storyline helped me to better understand and sympathize with a mental health problem that I was suffering through at the time. The narrative, however, had nothing to do ostensibly with mental health concerns. The plot was an arc where a magic sword that contained Finn’s soul in it is ‘merged’ with a cursed grass sword to manifest a duplicate Finn made out of grass. How does this fictional fantasy plotline about a magical, cursed grass doppelganger relate in any way to a narrative of mental
health concerns? It is this question, in a broader sense, that inspires my deeper exploration into the rhetorical functions of *Adventure Time*.

From this inspiration I argue that *Adventure Time* is an important site to pay attention and analyse. This show is bizarre and interesting, but, as previously mentioned, it is not immediately recognizable as a rich cultural artifact if you aren’t familiar with the show. Careful examination, however, will reveal deeper significations hidden within the childish narratives. In this way, *Adventure Time* uniquely speaks to both child and adult audiences to convey important lessons about everyday living unlike anything else like it.

In the following prospectus, I will outline my intended course for my analysis of *Adventure Time*. Diving into this analysis, a few critical questions come to mind. How does *Adventure Time*, and cartoon television more broadly, attract and speak to dual audiences and achieve polyvocality? What aspects of the text construct it as a polysemous text that can be interpreted in multiple ways? How does *Adventure Time*, and more broadly cartoon television in general, explore complex issues through the use of allegory? When audiences read this text, or texts like it, as allegories, how do they utilize these allegories to help them navigate their real world? I will seek to explore these central questions in my analysis of *Adventure Time*.

**Literature Review**

**Equipment for Living**

Possibly the most central theoretical concept driving my exploration into *Adventure Time* is Kenneth Burke’s idea of equipment for living. He coined this term in his 1941 essay, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” explaining that, much like proverbs, works of literature can function as a sort of ‘medicine’ to help individuals navigate the anxieties of their everyday
lives. He posits that we should consider works of literature “as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation or vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another,” (304). Put more simply, he argues that the imagined situations read in works of literature, and the formal and symbolic resolutions to these situations, can function as a blueprint for navigating one’s own situations in the real world.

His idea was taken on and extended in 1985 by media scholar Barry Brummett, who applied the concept to the interpretation of cinema. Whereas Burke’s foundational theory was limited to the interpretation of literature in the traditional sense, in “Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films,” Brummett explores how films (i.e., *electric* literature) can have the same symbolic effect on its audiences that Burke posited about traditional literature. He argues that films “articulate...the concerns...of people...[and] provide explicit or formal resolution of situations or experiences similar to those which people actually confront,” (248). It is with this idea in mind that he turns to the haunted house film genre as an exemplar of films symbolically resolving people’s real life anxieties. According to his analysis, “if an audience suffers from anxieties stemming from conjunction of the disjunctive, then the haunted house film is a patent medicine for the alleviation of that problem,” (251). His work is groundbreaking for two reasons: first that it opened up the idea of equipment for living to account for a far wider variety of media forms than Burke’s original theory, and second, that it explored how audiences can accumulate these symbolic life-tools beyond surface narratives and through abstract subtexts found beneath the narratives, as he demonstrates through his interpretation of haunted house narratives. In the same line as Brummett, Stephen Young
continues this examination of cinema in “Movies as Equipment for Living: A Developmental Analysis of the Importance of Film in Everyday Life.” His analysis focuses on how using movies as equipment for living is intrinsically polysemic, and “different movies have different functions for different viewers, and the commonly cited functions of movie probably have many manifestations,” (452). Essentially, because films have many possible interpretations, they will help everybody differently. The importance of this intrinsic polysemy and hermeneutic depth is a topic that I will later take on more fully.

The topic of equipment for living has been taken up by a variety of scholars to understand how texts help audiences navigate their world through a number of different case studies. In “Cultural Interpretations of Fantasy Film: The Lord of the Rings as Christian ‘Equipment for Living,’” Brent Yergensen explores how the *Lord of the Rings* series, an exemplar of the fantasy genre, is used by Christians as an allegory to assist in their Christian exigencies. He argues specifically that “they analogize the story with their faith, and even use the films to strengthen their own walk,” (152) and that it helps them towards better understanding the themes of realization, repentance, being strengthened, and teaching others. (158-162) Looking at a completely different type of new media, Allison Burr-Miller examines how playing online fantasy baseball can function as equipment for living. She argues that “fantasy baseball gives its participants a way to interact with, and think about, baseball that sidesteps current concerns surrounding the sport--steroids, commercialism, free agency,” (444). Essentially, when baseball fans participate in fantasy baseball, they are able to confront and alleviate tensions about the current reputation of the MLB while also allowing them to construct their own new cultural meanings about the sport. In his essay, “Surviving the Corporate Jungle: *The Apprentice* as
Equipment for Living in the Contemporary Work World,” Daniel Lair articulates how reality television, as a unique mediated form, helps “individuals find models that make sense of the new subjects they are asked to become,” (78). Much like the previously examined case studies, Lair’s analysis of The Apprentice explains how media texts help audiences to confront their current anxieties (in this instance, pertaining to the corporate world) by displaying a model in which they can place themselves into. His exploration of The Apprentice focuses on how the nature of the show’s meaning is contingent on how the text is read—a “surface reading” and a “savvy reading” will elicit starkly different understandings of how the audience is to understand their own anxieties. (75) Through this brief but representative sample of case studies, it is evident that audiences use a variety of mediated forms in many different ways to help them navigate life, and this understanding helps to inform my understanding of Adventure Time.

Allegories and Hermeneutic Depth

Next I will dive into the specific rhetorical form, allegory, and its connection to equipment for living. Allegories, like fables or parables, are stories which “provide access to complex ideas through simple narratives…[by] layering...both literal and symbolic meaning in a text,” (Fawcett, 82). It’s a rhetorical tool that many of us are familiar with--from classical allegories like Plato’s cave to political allegories like Animal Farm. And with their layered meaning, allegories ask their audience to look past the diegetic meaning of the text into deeper meanings and symbolism.

As a rhetorical tool, the allegory has been examined extensively, and, either directly or unknowingly, tied to Burke’s concept of equipment for living. For example, in “Situated Ideological Allegory and Battlestar Galactica,” Milford and Rowland examine how the narrative...
within the reboot television show *Battlestar Galactica* can be understood by audiences as an allegory for the post-911 war on terror. They argue that the television show presents a classic form of an allegory that “references common rhetorical knowledge in order to reinforce, comment on, or subvert ideological meaning,” specifically the American landscape in the post-911 era in their case study. Milford takes on another analysis of allegory in his essay, “Veiled Intervention: Anti-Semitism, Allegory, and Captain America.” In this, he expands on the anti-semitic upswing in America following WWII, and he argues that the comic book *Captain America* acted as a response to this, functioning as an allegory to represent “a compelling case for America’s involvement and intervention in WWII,” (605). Although neither of these examples directly allude to Burke’s concept of equipment for living, their understanding that these allegorical texts help audiences to understand the situations and problems of their world falls right into place with equipment for living. Tying his analysis of allegory directly to Burke’s concept, Timothy Barouch examines the classic novel *Lord of the Flies* as a political allegory which helps its audience confront the challenges of liberal citizenship and political communication. (3) His analysis directly relates the allegory present in the book to the equipment for living that the audience cultivates through reading the novel. Additionally, as described in the previous section, Yergensen’s understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* as equipment for living pivots on the interpretation of the film as a religious allegory.

Importantly, I should add that a common phenomenon found in allegorical texts is polysemy, or “the basic idea that ‘multiple meanings’ exist for a single text,” (Ceccarelli, 396). Related, hermeneutics is the study of interpreting texts for their meaning, and hermeneutic depth is the capacity in which a text can be interpreted with a variety of meanings. My analysis of
Adventure Time as an allegorical text will focus not on a specific interpretation of the text, but rather will focus on the show’s hermeneutic depth with its audience.

Image, Metonymy, and Visual Semiotics

A large portion of my focus in examining Adventure Time allegorically will be on images found in the artifact, and how these images relate to visual semiotics and metonymy. The study of semiotics involves the examination of signs, and the signification of these signs imposed by humans, and visual semiotics focus specifically on how this “is realized in both static and moving images,” (Feng, 441). Related, metonymy is the “figure of speech that describes the process of strategic replacement…where abstract concepts are reduced to tangible forms,” (Goehring et al., 444). Metonymy can be extended past speech to encompass visual representations of abstract concepts. Visual semiotics focus on how meaning is inscribed into visual symbols, and visual metonymy focuses this into meaning inscribed in images which serve as “reductions of abstract concepts,” (444). Feng and O’Halloran theorize how these inscribed visual significations are realized, arguing that it occurs at “the configuration of processes (e.g. actions), participants (e.g. actors), and circumstances (e.g. locations),” which can be broken into “two types of structure in terms of representation: narrative and conceptual,” (322). We can reduce this to understand that visual images, through the intersection of textual and contextual elements, are constructed to trigger certain symbolic meaning. This exploration of inscribed meaning within visual images is taken on by Elizabeth Zauderer in her analysis of the frequent rose imagery found in the film American Beauty. She examines how through textual and contextual elements present in visual images, one can understand the meaning inscribed in visual images, innate polysemic quality of metaphorical imagery. (192) She examines the imagery of
the rose in relation to other symbols found in the mise en scene, as well as in relation to the
viewer of the film themself, to argue for the polysemic signification of the image within the film,
with the sign’s meaning being modified frequently throughout the narrative. (198) Goehring et al.
take on the task of analyzing the interpretation of symbolic meaning coded in images in relation
to visual metonymies in their article, “‘Abusive Furniture’: Visual Metonymy and the Hungarian
Stop Violence Against Women Campaign.” They posit that the reduction of abstract concepts
into a visual format is found in the Hungarian Stop Violence Against Women Campaign through
the imagery of furniture present in the composition, and that imagery’s relation to other images
in the artifact. They argue that the furniture is coded, through its positioning within the text and
the cultural capital that audiences bring to its reading, to signify and draw attention to the issue
of domestic violence towards women. (440) These two case studies serve as excellent examples
of interpreting signification found in visual images, and in my own analysis I intend to examine
the intersection of visual semiotics and visual metonymy present in the images found in
*Adventure Time*, and how these images contribute to the larger allegorical meaning of the text.

**Polysemy and Polyvocal Cartoon Television**

Lastly, I turn my attention to polysemy as it relates to the medium of cartoon television in
particular. John Fiske takes on this topic in his essay “Television: Polysemy and Popularity,”
where he contends that “in order to be popular a television program must be polysemic so that
different subcultures can find in it different meanings that correspond to their differing social
relations,” (391). Essentially, any successful television program will be polysemous so as to
appeal to multiple possible viewing audiences. This idea is extended to understand how cartoon
movies function as polysemous, and subsequently polyvocal texts, in “Agony and Avoidance:
Pixar, Deniability, and the Adult Spectator.” Here, Ellen Scott examines Pixar movies, and how they appeal to not only child, but also adult audiences. She posits that in *Toy Story* and *WALL-E*, seemingly “‘innocent’ animated films about objects,” in fact are deeply valuable for how they “complexly address human--and sometimes wholly adult--fears about meaninglessness, apocalypse, and oblivion,” (150). By creating this double meaning, films and other texts are able to achieve a level of polyvocality, or the ability to speak to vastly disparate social groups. On some level, it seems as though an increasing portion of cartoons are expected to have this polyvocal element to them, and I take on this critical perspective in my examination of *Adventure Time* as a polyvocal text speaking to both children and adults.

Taking the analysis of polyvocal television perfectly in line with equipment for living, Ott posits that television is an important media form because meaning is constructed at the level of the consumer, and through active viewership, television takes on “new and relevant symbolic forms...that equip individuals to confront and resolve these anxieties,” (171). Taking this understanding to his analysis of 1990s cartoon television, he argues that cartoons of that decade function as both hyperconscious and nostalgic texts. (x) Essentially, cartoons like *The Simpsons*, he contends, are inscribed with meaning that is both celebratory and critical of American culture and social reality. Taken further, Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman examine 130 humorous texts to understand how polysemy is constructed in mediated humor. They argue that the strategies of “narrative-valence discrepancies, unstereotypical stereotyping, debatable personality traits, self-deprecating humor, intertextuality, and centrifugal multimodality” all contribute to how polysemous a humorous text appears. Although my analysis is not centered around a humorous text, this idea that polysemy can be attained through specific strategies is central to my analysis.
Phil Silverman

of the polysemous allegorical meaning of *Adventure Time*.

**Proposed Methodology:**

Having examined a variety of scholarship to situate my analysis, I now turn to the methodology that I propose for this study. I propose that I closely examine how a specific narrative found within *Adventure Time* can be understood as a polyvocal and polysemous allegory that functions as equipment for living for its audience. I choose the wide-spanning narrative of Ice King, and his backstory as Simon Petrikov, as an exemplar of this phenomenon. Although the storyline spans 8 of the 10 seasons, arguably a difficult sample to confine to a study of this magnitude, through careful selection of specific episodes I have condensed this storyline into a concise sample which can be analyzed independently from the rest of the show. The selected episodes are: S:3 E:20, S:4 E:25, S:5 E:14, S:5 E:48, S:6 E:24, S:6 E:38, S:7 E:9; and S:10 E: 14. The analysis will examine specifically how polysemous allegory is inscribed and communicated through narrative and visual elements of the plot. In this examination, I will offer both a general reading of strategies/phenomena existing in the text as well as a personal reading of the symbolism I interpret in these elements in order to exemplify how this text might function for an audience. My personal reading of the text will not be understood as an authoritative all-encompassing reading of the text, but rather as a singular example which can serve as a jumping off point for the understanding of this show. To further this study, a more involved and deeper analysis would have to extend it to a reception study, perhaps through an ethnography or a focus group, that would examine how a variety of individuals approach and make sense of the text to more fully understand how *Adventure Time* truly functions as a unique media text for the application of equipment for living through allegory.
Bibliography


Zauderer, Elizabeth. “Is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose? Appropriating Polysemy in Film: The Case of Rose Imagery in American Beauty.” *Semiotica*, vol. 2015, no. 205, 2015, pp. 191-205.
I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. X Phil Silverman