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Study Guide for the film **James and the Giant Peach**, directed by Henry Selick.

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av)

Synopsis:

Directed by Henry Selick, **James and the Giant Peach** is a film adaptation of Roald Dahl's marvellously macabre 1961 children's book of the same name. The film presents a fairy-tale story about James Henry Trotter (played by Paul Terry) and about all his marvelous adventures to reach far-away New York together with his various strange fellow travelers he discovered inside a giant peach. The beginning of the film is set in a very artificial stage-like world - one where the characters are all played by real-life people. In the opening scenes, we see James happily celebrating his 7th birthday together with his mother and father by the sea. It's a wonderful sunny day. Lying on their backs on the warm sandy beach, they watch the clouds drift slowly across the blue sky, talking excitedly about their coming trip to New York - "a city where dreams come true". Suddenly, the clouds turn dark and nasty and a nightmarish rhinoceros appears in the sky. Galloping ever closer, it casts its ominous shadow over them, swoops down and gobbles up James' parents! Now alone on the beach, James finds himself forced to live with his two cruel grotesque aunts Spiker (Joanna Lumley) and Sponge (Miriam Margolyes) in their drab dungeon-like house. Saddled with doing all the arduous chores around the house, James dreams of a world far away from his mean-hearted aunts. His dream comes true when an uncanny stranger (Pete Postlethwaite) mysteriously appears, handing James his old hand-made paper balloon full of magic green crocodile tongues, which he later accidentally drops onto the roots of an old dried-up peach tree. Suddenly we see a beautiful peach growing on one of its branches. The peach quickly balloons into an enormous size as James, Spiker and Sponge look on in amazement. The aunts, however, quickly have a fence built around the giant peach, seeing it now merely as a money-making attraction. Greedily proclaiming it to be the new Eighth Wonder of the World, they avidly sell tickets to the eager crowds all wanting to see the wondrous peach, thereby turning something wondrous into a grotesque freak show. But something wondrous does occur when James takes a big bite out of the delicious giant peach, unknowingly eating a magic crocodile tongue. An opening appears in the peach, inviting James to come inside. He quickly climbs in.

Climbing up a round slippery orange passageway as if it were some kind of tunnel-like womb inside the giant peach, James begins to dramatically change. His head suddenly gets bigger, while the rest of his body shrinks in size. Hearing strange voices ahead, he crawls ever further inside. Now seeing the silhouettes of bizarre creatures, he feels curiously attracted. Wanting to touch them, he crawls closer but then slips down and falls right through these screen-like figures, landing bang in the middle of these huge bizarre creatures. In this way James is literally born into the new marvelous world of animation, leaving the old world of real-life people far behind. Surrounded by these huge rather unearthly earthy creatures, he cries out "Please don't eat me". Yet, far from wanting to eat little James, the huge creatures

courteously introduce themselves. Living inside the giant peach is an erudite English grasshopper (with the voice of Simon Callow), a Cockney earthworm (David Thewlis), a slinky Russian spider with two green irises in each eye (Susan Sarandon), a rough tough Centipede from Brooklyn (Richard Dreyfuss), a matronly Ladybug (Jane Leeves) and a rather hard-hearing Glowworm (Miriam Margolyes). Holding a mirror up to James, the Ladybug tells him "We have all changed. And so have you". Looking at himself in the mirror, James realizes that he too has become an animated figure just like all of them. Fearing that they may all be discovered by the nasty horrible aunts Spiker and Sponge, the Centipede quickly bites through the stem of the peach, freeing it from the tree. The giant peach rolls down with all of them tumbling inside it. It eventually splashes into the sea and floats away, taking them all on an exciting voyage to New York. They have a number of adventures along the way of course, including a fight with a mean mechanical shark who wants to eat the soft delicious peach with its gruesomely sharp rotating teeth. Working bravely together, they escape by harnessing a flock of sea gulls with a huge spider web. Flying through the air, they eat portions of the peach for food. Next they find themselves in the windy freezing north. Shocked and shivering, they look up at the sea gulls, whose wings are now all covered with icicles making them barely able to fly. Peering down they see a frozen graveyard of sunken ships. What are they to do? Needing a compass to find their way to New York, Centipede dives into the icy waters and swims to a nearby pirate ship to get one. The skeleton pirates, however, become alive and capture Centipede. Only with the help of James, the Spider and the others, do they save Centipede from certain death and get the compass. Once again at the helm, Centipede navigates the giant peach towards New York. Seeing the lights of New York City, they all jump for joy, thinking their ordeals are at an end - but not quite. A strong wind begins to blow them off course as huge dark clouds appear. Out of the clouds appears the horrible rhinoceros once again. Quickly telling the others to climb up the rigging and hold on to the sea gulls, James stands bravely alone on the peach and faces up to his nemesis. "You're not even a real rhino. You're just a lot of smoke and noise. I'm not afraid of you", he shouts. In response, lightning hits the peach sending James and the peach falling, while the others fly up with the sea gulls. It's a very scary moment.

Landing with a thud, James lies unconsciously inside the dark peach. Slowly coming to himself, he coughs out the magic crocodile tongue and miraculously turns back once more into a real-life boy. Climbing out of the peach through an orange passageway, he discovers the peach has landed directly on top of the Empire State Building. A huge crane brings both James and the giant peach down onto the street as a real-live crowd gather around in amazement. A policeman protects James from hounding reporters, telling him quietly "It's all right kid. No one is going to hurt you." But James is still not safe, for all of a sudden his two horrible aunts appear. Showing the policeman that they are James's rightful guardians as well as owners of the giant peach, they try and grab the boy, accusing him of being a naughty chronic liar. James, however, quickly climbs up a truck, saying that they are not the owners of the peach. Wanting to get to the bottom of this strange story, the stage is now set for the final courtroom scene, where the nasty aunts play the side of the prosecutors, the policeman is the judge, the crowd is the jury - and little James is the sole defendant. How is he to prove that his marvelous voyage was not just a dream? Yet, isn't New York "a city where dreams come true", he asks. Refusing to go back home with his aunts, they become furious and attack him with huge axes. Right at this precarious moment, all his animated friends come to his rescue, floating down from the sky and landing on the peach. "I told you they were real", James triumphantly shouts out.

While the crowds look on in amazement at these wondrous creatures, the aunts look on in horror. Now believing James' story to be true, the nasty aunts are quickly craned away. As for the wondrous peach, it is gleefully eaten up by all the children right down to the giant seed, which is then set up in Central Park as a home for James and all his friends. The tale ends with James now fully settled into his new happy home surrounded by eager children all wanting him to recount the fantastic story of **James and the Giant Peach**.

Questions:

bv: Which animation films do you already know? Were some of them ever scary?

Are animation films "kids stuff"? Explain. What about Manga films like "Sailor Moon", "Dragon Ball" and "Wedding Peach"?

av: Do you have a favorite character? What could the rhinoceros represent?

How does James change personally in the film? Does he become more self-confident? If so, how is this shown?

Does the film have a happy ending?

It is important to note that the animation film **James and the Giant Peach** has three unusual features. Firstly, the logistics lying behind the making of this film are quite extraordinary. Even by Walt Disney Studio's historically high standards, this film represents a huge, extremely expensive and very complicated undertaking. Henry Selick's role as film director was therefore crucial. Acting as a sort of project manager, he was responsible not only for assembling a vast array of animators, illustrators, set designers and camera operators, but also for ensuring the strict coordination of their work over a very tight three year production schedule on 22 different sound stages - a truly mammoth task.

Secondly, although **James and the Giant Peach** is clearly an animation film, it nevertheless begins and ends with real-live action scenes. The film is in effect divided into three sections. In the first nineteen minutes of the film, there is no animation at all. All protagonists are played by real-live people. This section ends, however, when James climbs up into the giant peach. Once inside the giant peach, James enters the wonderful world of animation. All characters - including James - are now played by animated figures. For reasons of continuity, however, James keeps his real-live voice. All the animated figures in this second section are in fact provided with real-live voices. This helps give the overall animation the realism it needs for us to believe in the characters. Indeed, giving every character a very distinct and credible personality heightens the dramatic effect, making each scene that much more gripping. For only when all the different characters work together are they able to overcome the many dangers they face on their marvelous journey to New York City. This section ends in a very dramatic moment when James and the giant peach come crashing down from the sky. Lying motionless inside the peach, we are left wondering whether James is alive or dead. Coming slowly to his senses, James coughs out the magic green crocodile tongue, transforming back into a real-live boy. This marks the beginning of the third and final section of the film. Climbing out the giant peach he sees a very artificial stage-like New York City inhabited by real-live people. Confronted with his real-live aunts, James is at first unable to convince the people, that he travelled across the Atlantic with all his bizarre friends in the giant

peach. Only when his animated friends come to his rescue, do the people finally believe his story. Thus, unlike in the first and second sections of this film, where real-live action and animation are strictly separated, here in this section they are mixed. The film happily ends with the real-boy James living together with his animated friends in Central Park.

Presenting real-live action scenes within an animation film is quite unusual. Inserting animated figures within a real-live action scenario is also uncommon. Interestingly, filmmaker Henry Selick uses both these approaches in his animation film **James and the Giant Peach**. While both approaches present their own particular problems, combining them into one single film is very risky. The reason for this lies in the fact that it may undermine the film's unity of design. A film's unity of design has to do with the coherence of a film and how it "feels" to the audience. One way of maintaining the coherence of a film is by ensuring it has the same look and sound. If, however, certain film sequences have a very different look and sound, audiences may experience this as a break. In the worse case the film may even lose its audience. To avoid this danger, Selick takes a number of important steps.

Firstly, Selick makes sure that all the real-live action occurring at the beginning and at the end of the film takes place in a highly artificial stage-like world. Buildings and interiors are overtly foreshortened. Studio lighting is explicitly used. As for the real-live performers, Selick insists they all wear cartoon-like costumes and strong makeup, thereby further enhancing the overall theatrical effect. Clearly, he wants us to believe we are already in a world of fantasy. Selick understands that the audience has to be carefully prepared for James's transformation into the world of animation, if it is to be believed. This is why the first nineteen minutes of real-live action are so important. Making us believe we are already in a world of fantasy literally sets the stage for us accepting James' transformation into the world of animation. That is, we accept James's fantastic journey into the world of animation because we see it continuing the story more than breaking it. Moreover, once the link between the real-live world and the world of animation is firmly established within the mind of the audience, going from the world of animation back into the real-live world is relatively simple. This is what we see at the end of the film.

Secondly, when watching the film **James and the Giant Peach**, one is struck by how cleverly Selick appeals not only to our sense of fantasy in the real-live action scenes, but also to our sense of realism in the animation scenes. This is best seen in the real-live voices given to all the animated characters. Giving real-live voices to all these bizarre figures of course adds to their realism, making them more credible to audiences. These real-live voices, however, also give these characters an important continuity in the film. Thus, for example, when James is transformed from a real-live boy into an animated figure, he keeps his real voice. This assures audiences we are dealing with the same boy. Similarly, when all of James' animated friends come to his rescue at the end of the film - despite now entering the world of the real-live action - they all keep their voices. Here again, we believe in these characters because they all look and sound the same. Selick's decision to have all characters keep their real-live voices throughout the film therefore not only adds an important realism to the animation, it also adds to the coherence of the film.

Another way Selick maintains the film's unity of design is by having all the characters in the film - whether animated or real - appear in a very strong three dimensional form. This provides all the different sections of the film with a similar look. Indeed,

there is only one short moment in the film when James and two other characters are not presented in the form of solid three dimensional figures. This is when the animated figure James has a dream. But how does an animated figure dream? How should it look? How can Selick show that James dream sequence is “not real” when he himself is an animated figure in an animated world? Selick finds a brilliantly simple solution. Moreover, one which is fully in line with the design of the film. James’ dream sequence takes place in a world of flat photography! That is, he presents James’ dream in the form of a photo-collage. The cold colored flatness of the photography contrasts sharply with the three dimensional “real world” of warmly colored animation. In short, in Selick’s animation film, round is “real” and flat is “fantasy”. James’ dream sequence is the exception which proves the rule.

Thirdly and finally, **James and the Giant Peach** is quite unusual, because it lacks the sentimental sweetness and amusing romantic subplots one often comes to expect from a Walt Disney Studio production. Closely following Roald Dahl’s original children’s story, the film is a sort of adventure story with some very dark moments indeed. Little James has to face some very tough and scary situations. By mastering these moments, however, both the character James and the film gain in depth. This is what makes the film so appealing. In short, Selick cleverly combines elements of the macabre with more light-hearted moments, thereby giving the film a nice emotional drive.

Questions:

bv: Voices, of course, have to be given to animated figures. They cannot speak for themselves. Why is it important to choose these voices very carefully?

Animation films tend to have extremely colorful imagery. Why is that?

av: Would you like to live the aunts Spiker and Sponge? How would you describe their characters and their world? Does their world look real or unreal?

When James changes from a real-live boy into an animated figure, how do we still know he is the same boy?

How would you describe the street scenes in New York City? Do they look like real streets? Why did Selick choose to show NYC in this way?

When does Selick first mix together real-live characters with animated figures?

Could you imagine this film in black and white? Would it still be the same? Why? Why not? What role do the colors play in the film? Gives examples.

Animation

Technically speaking, Selick’s **James and the Giant Peach** is a full animation film. This means it is a film where all the animated characters as well as all the objects they work with and touch move in a completely fluid and very realistic way. How is this realistic movement done in the film? Surprisingly, one begins with the sound. The real-live voices of all the characters as well as their singing and accompanying music are all first recorded in a sound studio. This is primarily done to make sure that the lip and eye movements of the animated figures are fully synchronized. Then there are, of course, the numerous animators all working together in various crews to make all

the necessary small model figures. It is important to note here, that these figures include not only the main characters James and his six travelling friends, but also for example the flying seagulls and the skeleton pirates. Moreover, exact replicas of these figures also have to be made available if the models happen to break or wear out over the long three year production period. Added to this all their clothing and other assorted objects as well as their needed replacement parts, and one begins to gain a sense of the enormous effort lying behind this film.

Then there are the set designers, who are responsible for ensuring that the background always fits the mood and action of the small model figures. Color and texture play an important role here. They also work closely together with the lighting and camera crews. A good example of all this is the musical scene when James and his friends are all gorging themselves on the delicious peach as they float in the sky. Shot within the shadowy inside of the giant peach, the enormous portions they all eat seem to glitter in a glowing orange, emphasizing the pure gusto of the moment. In short, set designers give the film a certain look and feel. They are in a privileged position to do this, because they are able to use the whole surface of the screen to create a mood - one which often highlights the dramatic actions of the characters.

After assembling all the numerous animators and set designers as well as lighting and camera crews in a studio, the actual animation can finally begin. In Selick's full animation film **James and the Giant Peach**, he uses the well known technique of stop-motion (also known as stop-frame animation). The best way to show how stop-motion works, is with an example. Let us take the moment, when James first realizes he has become an animated figure inside the giant peach. This happens early on in the film. An animator takes a model figure - let us say of James - and places it carefully within a production set - the interior of the giant peach. Then he places all the things or objects James needs for the scene also inside the set: for example, the hand-held mirror where James will first see himself as an animated figure. After thoroughly checking that the set is clear of all extraneous objects such as pencils, cables, studio tools etc. and that there is nothing out of place, the camera operator takes the first picture. After taking the picture, the animator returns to the set and slightly moves the model figure of James, giving him a slightly different facial expression and turn of the head. His hand with the mirror is raised slightly. Then another picture is taken. Going back to the set, the animator moves James slightly again. His hand now raised, he can just begin to see himself in the mirror. Then another picture is taken. The animator returns to the set and gives James the slim beginnings of a totally surprised facial expression. His eyebrows are raised slightly. His hand is given a slight twist. Another picture is taken. While this stop-motion process seems endless, it does in fact have a very precisely prescribed rhythm. The beat of this rhythm is 24 pictures or frames per second. In other words, in order to make one single second of full animation film, the model figure James, his mirror and even certain parts of the background all have to be slightly moved and photographed in accession a total of 24 times!

Why 24 times? Twenty-four frames per second is the standard *speed* today in which a film - whether real-live action or animation - is projected onto the cinema screen. (To increase the *frequency* of images on the screen, each frame is projected twice in succession, making it 48 frames (24x2) per second on the screen.) This has been the international standard speed for film since the emergence of sound film in the late 1920s. Before sound film - in other words, when films were silent - there was no international standard speed for film. Films could be projected onto a silent screen at

a number of various speeds. Yet, once the soundtrack was copied directly onto the film, a standardized film speed was required. If the film were projected too slowly, the sound of the film would also slow down and become distorted. If the film were projected too quickly, the sound would again become distorted, going up into a squeaky pitch. Only with 24 frames per second was the sound fine. Thus, this became the accepted international standard as sound film spread throughout the world.

In the film **James and the Giant Peach**, Selick also uses what is called computer-generated imagery (CGI). In principle, this works in the same way as stop-motion. There is, however, one major difference. With CGI, the model figures do not lie physically in the hand of the animator, they are in the computer. A software program first creates a sort of skeleton framework of let us say the mean mechanical shark. Then an electronic skin is put all around the skeleton framework, giving the figure a three-dimensional look. Then the texture, shininess, shading and colors are all systematically added onto the skin. Once this is done, the movements of the shark are carefully computed. The figure is then inserted into the seascape background.

Finally, Selick is also very adept in applying various different animation techniques in order to create a single figure. This is called compositing. A very good example of a composite figure is James' nemesis - the rhinoceros. This figure was created using stop-motion, actual ink tanks for the dark threatening clouds and some CGI effects for the lightning. Selick superbly combines these different animation tricks to create a very powerful dramatic moment. This is what makes the film **James and the Giant Peach** so much fun to watch!

Questions:

bv: Who has ever done a flipbook? How does it work?

Why is it that Charlie Chaplin walks in a jerky, robotic, funny way in his films while the movements of Superman flying in the air appear completely realistic, although he of course does not exist?

How many frames do you need for one second of film?

av: In the film, the animated figures talk and even sing! How is this technically done? What comes first: the recording of the voices, singing and music or the movement of the figures?

If James were to be awarded an Oscar, who should come to receive it? Should it be the actor Paul Terry or the animator?

Language

In animation films, language always plays an especially important role. It gives the animated figures their special character. **James and the Giant Peach** is a very ambitious film, because it has seven very important animated characters, each requiring their own personality. This is why the real-live voices of James and his bizarre friends are a little bit extreme. Their articulation and accents, however, are very clear.