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## Walt Disney World: Marxism and Myth Creation

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The Disney Corporation is a near-perfect case study in the power and profit that can accompany the harnessing and mobilization of modern society's relationship with media and spectacle. Rather than attempt the dizzying task of offering analysis of the entirety of Disney's offerings, this paper will focus exclusively on The Walt Disney World Resort theme parks: Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Animal Kingdom, and Disney's Hollywood Studios—collectively known as Disney World. These parks offer a useful case study in theories of media events and spectacle, because they combine aspects of media consumption with participation, encouraging visitors to not simply accept the values of the myths Disney creates but to feel like active participants in the creation of them. Classic mass culture theories, Marxist critique, and Barthesian concepts of the Myth can be taken together to gain greater understanding not only of the workings of Disney World, but of the motivations and participation of the millions of customers it attracts each year.

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In the 85 years since Walt Disney first created Mickey Mouse, his work has spawned a media empire so expansive it forms “a self-contained universe.” In addition to the animated films that are now a childhood staple, the Disney Corporation oversees multiple television stations, clothing lines, music labels, games, toys, and four of the world's most popular amusement parks, all of which “present consistently recognizable values through recurring characters and familiar, repetitive themes” (Wasko, 2001, p. 3). The Disney Corporation is a near-perfect case study of the way in which harnessing and mobilizing modern society's relationship with media and spectacle can create seemingly unlimited power and profit. Any of the company's undertakings, from their many successes to some embarrassing failures, are ripe for cultural critical analysis—a fact that has not escaped the many scholars who have produced countless pages on various aspects of Disney and its creations.

Rather than attempt the dizzying task of offering analysis of the entirety of Disney's offerings, this paper will focus exclusively on the relationship between visitors to Disney's theme parks and the practice of staging and purchasing souvenir photographs while there. These pictures offer a useful case study in

theories of spectacle because they combine aspects of media consumption with participation, encouraging visitors not to simply accept the values of the myths Disney creates but to become active participants in their creation and maintenance. While “the company and its supporters are typically defensive about any kind of interpretations of the park other than the obvious one of family entertainment,” it is important to note that “the *result* of Disney’s efforts is a value-laden environment, which extends and expands Classic Disney into a material or physical existence” (p. 153). An intersection of classic mass culture theories, Marxist critique, and Barthesian concepts of the Myth, demonstrate that visitors to Disney parks are not merely dupes of the corporation’s aggressive marketing tactics, but use the familiar and ready-made “magic” of the parks to reinvent themselves as mythic icons.

Disney parks fit easily into the category of the “often degraded Other” Brottman (2005) describes in her history of cultural studies. It is a part of the vast reserves of “the language, writing, and art that is not generally classed as ‘culture,’ against which the ‘self’ of culture ‘proper’ is formed” (p. xi). Although the early critics of mass culture traced the demise of “High” culture and the rise of kitsch primarily through popular literature, art, and films, there can be little doubt that if they had given Disney World their consideration it would have immediately earned their disdain. MacDonald’s (1998) lament of mass culture reads as an almost direct criticism of “The Happiest Place on Earth”:

It is a debased trivial culture that voids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple spontaneous pleasures, since the realities would be too real and the pleasures too lively to induce . . . a narcotized acceptance of mass culture and of the commodities it sells. (p. 34)

It is appropriate to question the value judgments that accompany MacDonald’s critique. Classifying certain cultural artifacts as inherently “good” or “High” and others as necessarily “bad” or “Low” too often finds Marxist scholars ignoring the evolution of those works. As King (2012) writes, “popular culture is our culture, just as Shakespeare’s plays were once considered a common, low-end form of entertainment that the elites felt should be (and were for a while) banned” (p. 693). However, it is difficult to argue with this passage as an accurate description of the experience Disney World sets out to create for its customers. From the beginning, “Disney was committed to mass culture. He explained, ‘I am interested in entertaining people, in bringing pleasure . . . rather than being concerned with ‘expressing’ myself or obscure creative impressions” (Wasko, 2001, p. 13). In serving this quest for entertainment over art, the Disney parks “blend low and

high culture into a colorful, seemingly ahistorical physical collage of various popular culture artifacts” (Sperb, 2005, p. 924).

Disney World promises all visitors a “magical” experience, invites them to “Celebrate A Dream Come True,” and trades in the creation of unforgettable family experiences. It does this by taking to extremes the very aspects of mass culture MacDonalld is criticizing; certainly, “sex, death, failure, tragedy” have no place in Disney World. It is a heavily sanitized and inaccurate to the point of impossible view of the world, the past, and the future. As Sperb (2005) points out, Frontierland “is not based on any aspect of the actual American Frontier, but on the twentieth-century perception of the American Frontier,” it is “filter through the cultural lenses of Fess Parker’s Davy Crockett and the films of Randolph Scott and John Wayne” (p. 928). Pirates sing catchy tunes and destroy cities without seeming to hurt anyone. Spaceships spin effortlessly around planets, promising gleeful adventure without potential risks. There are no displaced Native Americans in Frontierland, no poverty or tension among nations in Epcot, and the Carousel of Progress turns smoothly towards an inevitable and better tomorrow. Disney even goes beyond sanitizing the American past and into scrubbing its own. The popular ride Splash Mountain, follows the plot of the film *Song of the South*, a film so controversial for its depiction of black characters cheerfully serving their former masters in the years following the Civil War that it has been banned. However, “the absence of the Tar Baby does not highlight the racial tensions within Splash Mountain; instead, the deletion completes this particular theme attraction’s attempted emergence . . . as a racially sanitized commercial venture ready for popular consumption” (p. 936).

This all leads to the most salient question in any study of Disney: “How is it possible to understand the significance and meaning of this phenomenon? What is it about the Disney theme parks in particular, but Disney in general, that attracts so many children as well as adults?” (Wasko, 2001, p. 1). It is all too easy to take the view that cultural institutions such as the Disney Corporation are insidious and manipulative forces wielded by the hegemonic elite. Brotzman points to Marxist scholars who “interpreted capitalist culture and its artifacts as commodities, their function to entertain, divert, and reduce consciousness to a state of total passivity” and others that “interpret popular cultural artifacts . . . as purposely ‘reconciling’ the listener, reader, or audience to the dominant ideology or status quo, and making their role one of absolute passivity” (p. xviii). These scholars would see Disney World as a negative force not simply for detracting from attention to more worthwhile cultural experiences, but because it teaches people to believe the sanitized manufactured version of the world it offers is the best one. By eliminating narratives of resistance and reality from its creations, it is seen as working towards purging these concerns from the population at large.

These criticisms are worthwhile, but fail to fully explain the draw the Disney holds for its devotees. While a Marxist critique is highly useful in situating Disney World within theory of popular culture criticism, it portrays the millions of individuals who visit the theme parks each year as undiscerning, passive, and undifferentiated masses. They can only be the victims of commodification and hegemony, their experiences handed to them from on high. The view oversimplifies and skims over the potentially complex relationship between Disney World's visitors and different aspects of their experiences. Lancaster (1997), in describing immersive entertainment experiences like the Disney parks, writes "the popularity of what can be termed performance-entertainment indicates that traditional theater productions are providing for many . . . social interaction or catharsis" and argues "by combining ritual and entertainment, performance-entertainments provide for many liminal flow experiences for spectator participants" (p. 77). If Disney World provided nothing more than the simple distraction of mass-produced low culture, the teeming crowds eager to spend hundreds of dollars to claim some piece of its power for themselves would surely be much thinner. A trip to Disney World is expensive, and to experience the true "magic," costs continue to mount throughout a family's time in the parks. Little girls are promised they can become princesses at the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique inside Cinderella's castle (for \$189.95), and gift shops full of toys tempt little boys who hope to be pirates or adventurers. Souvenirs are sold at every turn. And of particular interest here, professional photographers are stationed near predetermined "photo-op" spots, so the company can sell families pictures of themselves and discourage them from taking their own. But rather than condemning Disney's visitors as dupes of a well-oiled capitalist enterprise, examining this practice in terms of spectator-participants collaborating with the parks on the creation of a cathartic experience provides a glance behind the veil of the "magic" of the experience of Disney parks.

Although the role Disney guests are encouraged to play during their time at the parks is largely prescribed for them, they are active in creating themselves as the stars of the myths Disney World promises to create for them. This interplay between customers and the experience of Disney World is best explained by Roland Barthes' (1957) essay "Myth Today." Many of the Marxist critiques of popular culture already discussed here are actually critiques of the method of myth creation that Barthes details in his essay. Myth, he argues, "does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them." However, the mythic discussion is simplified, and when faced with complex subjects, "it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (p. 143). The various myths presented in Disney World: of progress, magic, family closeness, happiness, adventure without danger, and so on, are—from a

Barthesian perspective—not by nature the lies Marxists see them as. Though a myth may be manipulative, it “hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection” (p. 129). As Hedges (2010) writes in his discussion of professional wrestling, these myths’ success “lies not in fooling us that these stories are real. Rather, it succeeds because we ask to be fooled. We happily pay for the chance to suspend reality” (pp. 5-6). In Lancaster’s (1997) terms,

Tourists don’t go to movie theme parks to watch a favorite movie star in an unfolding story . . . they go instead to experience the excitement generated by the fact that they, as ‘average’ people have the opportunity to . . . become the heroes that, perhaps, they never were or wish to become. (p. 79)

Barthes makes no attempt to argue that myth is not powerful or potentially harmful; he says, “the mythical signification . . . is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated” (p. 126). However, introducing a Barthesian interpretation of myth creation to the discussion allows greater insight into the participatory elements of the Disney World experience.

Boorstin argues that the Will Rogers quip, “The movies are the only business where you can go out front and applaud yourself,” is no longer true thanks to the advent of televised news. He writes, “Nowadays, one need not be a professional actor to have this satisfaction. We can appear in the mob scene and then go home and see ourselves on the television screen” (p. 30). However, Disney World taps into this urge to see oneself on screen in quite a different way. Customers at the parks are photographed often, and constantly posed—either by the “adventure” rides they are on, or the professional photographers staked out at the most scenic spots. But the images of themselves Disney World offers to sell to its customers are not the “mob scenes” Boorstin describes people joining in the hopes of later catching a glimpse of themselves on television. They are Barthesian myths.

By capturing, for customers, their engagement with the simulacra and engineered experiences of the theme parks, Disney World invites them to design and star in the myths they desire for themselves. A little girl dressed up as a princess, smiling in front of Cinderella’s Castle instantly becomes a myth of childhood innocence, happiness, and (yes) magic. A couple holding hands and yelling with exhilaration on the Expedition Everest roller coaster offers a myth of adventure, excitement, and camaraderie. These mythic images, and countless others with similar significations, beam happily at potential visitors on Disney World’s web site and in all of its advertisements. The promise of Disney World is the promise to make those myths personal. Your daughters will be “magically transformed into little princesses!” (<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/tours-and-experiences/bibbidi->

bobbidi-boutique/) The words are revealing. She will not simply “feel like” a princess or “look like” a princess. She will transcend the reality of the world she inhabits and be “magically transformed.” It is a promise familiar to park visitors who are also fans of Disney movies as many “plots revolve around characters wishing to escape from their current setting or situation . . . And, of course, the wish is most often granted or made possible by a fairy or magical being” (Wasko, 2001, p. 117). The fact that this promise is not, strictly speaking, true is irrelevant. Barthes writes that because “myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi . . . the meaning is always there to *present* the form: the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning” (p. 123).

By effectively personalizing and packaging myths for consumption (e.g. a child is simultaneously a patron’s daughter and a “transformed” magical princess and all the happiness that stands for), Disney World becomes more complex than the everyday “kitsch” that is so often derided by cultural critics. Though the proprietors of Disney World would likely argue that the park’s experiences are rooted in Old World fairy tales and adventure stories, Disney mines its own history for new ideas, and has evolved into a unique and highly recognizable brand; it offers an impossibly sanitized, mass produced, and commodified view of culture. However, it eschews the kitsch ideals of celebrity culture in favor of packaging myths for patrons to position themselves in. Boorstin lamented the loss of “the hero made by folklore, sacred texts, and history books” in favor of “the celebrity [that] is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers, and the ephemeral images of movie and television screen” (p. 63). Thus it is of particular interest that Disney World promises to transform guests into a “heroic” version of themselves (or their children) rather than a celebrity. The Disney “transformation” certainly would not meet the Boorstin definition of “hero”—it is manufactured and inorganic. However, that in no way impedes the company’s ability to create the desired myths of heroism and magic for its patrons. Disney World also mobilizes the myths at its disposal to justify its sanitized vision of the world. As Barthes writes,

[This is] the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural: it is not read as a motive, but as a reason (p. 129).

Through this tautological logic, Disney World’s constant mobilization of mythic images means the parks are seen as being and representing what they do because

that is what they *should* do. This makes the naturalizing power of myth particularly potent, since, as King (2012) writes,

Starting with the way we learn about the world and see ourselves in it—from our personal circle of life to the national political universe—virtually all domains are sculpted and managed by our shared subconscious assumptions about how things ‘should’ be. (p. 691)

MacDonald writes, “There seems to be Gresham’s Law in cultural as well as monetary circulation: bad stuff drives out the good, since it is more easily understood and enjoyed” (p. 41). Certainly, he could point to Disney World as an example of that. But the success of Disney World is not merely the triumph of kitsch. It is a democratizing of heroism, allowing patrons (for a fee) to cast themselves in idealized myths (e.g. family happiness, fairy tale magic, adventure, the Golden Age of film, etc). The success lies not merely in a decline of taste, a surge of kitsch, or a manipulation of the masses. Rather, a significant part of Disney’s success lies in its promise to customers that their time at the parks will allow them to reinvent themselves as mythic figures. It is important to give a thorough examination of that which is most popular in our culture serious readings, even when on their surface they may appear trite and contrived. After all, “the middle is the measure of the margins: knowing what is centrally implicit (but too rarely explicit) defines the edgy, eccentric, and innovative” (King, 2012, p. 3). An examination of Disney practice demands an interplay of theory to achieve a rounded perspective. After all, “in a shrinking world with a global economy, it is essential to understand the worldviews of other cultures . . . But before you can understand someone else’s culture, you first have to understand your own” (p. 6). Regardless of what anxiety it may stir in some theorists, Disney is a massive force in modern American culture. By granting its visitors more agency in their experience, we gain far greater insight into the needs it fulfills for them as well as what costs it comes at.

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