

Dissecting Disney's Worlds

To all who come to this happy place: Welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past . . . and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future.

— dedication plaque at Disneyland

"I'm going to Disneyland."¹

In 1967, Schickel observed that the "aesthetic content of Disneyland has been endlessly debated by intellectuals."² That was more than 30 years ago. Since then, a deluge of studies have attempted to interpret not only the aesthetics of the Disney theme parks, but their meanings and significance as sites of contemporary American culture. As Wilson observes, "Among Walt Disney's many contributions to American popular culture, his theme parks call for special attention, because they form the landscape against which Disney's visions met the historical and political realities of America."³

While many would agree with Wilson's sentiments, the company and its supporters are typically defensive about any kind of interpretations of the park other than the obvious one of family entertainment. However, in spite of official intent, the *result* of Disney's efforts is a value-laden environment, which extends and expands Classic Disney into a material or physical existence, as well as providing a strong dose of all-American ideology.

As noted previously, much recent Disney scholarship has focused on the

theme parks, which have been interpreted in a myriad of ways. This chapter will not offer yet another guided tour of the parks, but will present an overview of the approaches that have been used to understand how Disney's worlds have contributed to the Disney phenomenon, as well as to American culture in general. First, it will discuss briefly the historical development of the Disney parks, followed by a summary of the major themes identified by park analysts. It will conclude with a look at the Disney community of Celebration, as an extension of the Disney theme park concept into at least some people's everyday lives.

History of Disney's worlds

The creation of the first Disney world – Disneyland – is often identified as the beginning of the concept of theme parks. But, as many commentators have pointed out, the historical precedents can be seen in popular amusement parks or urban resorts, such as Coney Island in the USA and Tivoli Gardens in Europe. In the early years of the twentieth century, such amusement sites provided recreation and pleasure for throngs of workers, immigrants, and young people. Adams reports that there were between 1,500 and 2,000 amusement parks in the USA by 1919. Following a decline during the Depression, amusement parks again became popular in the post-World War II period, when American families with higher incomes discovered leisure-time activities.⁴

Disneyland was also especially reminiscent of world fairs, which combined a celebration of the past with visions of the future. Bryman describes the Disney parks' uniqueness as "the combination of the transformation of themed attractions into one of themed environments with the transformation of the world's fair/exposition concept into a permanent site."⁵ Davis argues that Disney's important contribution was the concept of a fully designed themed environment, or "land," with all services provided in-house.⁶

The popular story of Disneyland's conception is part of the constructed Disney history and connected closely with the image of Walt Disney as a creative genius, as well as a loving and devoted parent. Most often the story involves Walt's dream of building for his daughters a clean and safe amusement park that adults also would enjoy. However, it appears that plans for a back-lot tour of the Disney studio, featuring a train ride and specific themed areas, were discussed at the company as early as the 1930s and especially during the 1940s. Furthermore, in the early 1950s Walt

worked on a project that included miniaturized scenes or tableaux with automated characters that extolled America's past and was called Disneylandia.⁷ At the time, he was involved much less in the studio's filmmaking and more with his own projects, especially his railroading hobby.⁸ In fact, Marling presents an interesting account of how Walt Disney's plans for Disneyland were influenced specifically by the 1948 Chicago Railroad Fair, which featured dramatizations of the past and future of railroading, themed restaurants, etc.⁹

Thus, Disney's motivations for building Disneyland were undoubtedly much more complex than the simple paternal urges implied in the official story. As Mills speculates:

Disney recognized a novel opportunity to create not just a profitable enterprise but an heroic agency to promote US values far beyond the limitations inherent in the movies. He saw a window of opportunity to create not a sterile monument to American values but a dynamic agency by which he could promote them, helping to resolve what he saw as a crisis in US society. Whereas the Depression had been resolved by the collectivist activities of mass mobilization, Disney sought to write both the cure and the disease out of the public memory by re-establishing popular faith in both the individualist myths of the past and the technological possibilities of the future.¹⁰

Thus, the parks also gave Disney the opportunity to expand upon Classic Disney themes and to emphasize and promote American values, or at least those that Disney believed in. Furthermore, Disneyland was designed to recycle existing Disney stories and characters in another commodified form. While the company embellished its later parks with a multitude of vacation and resort attractions (especially at Walt Disney World), Disneyland, as the first Disney park, exemplified the essential philosophy, as well as establishing most of the specific themes for the Disney worlds that followed.

The parks and resorts have been introduced in chapter 3 and are described in great detail in many other studies.¹¹ (See table 6.1.) Since visits to the Disney worlds are commonplace, the following discussion assumes some familiarity with the parks by readers, while offering apologies to others who may have escaped or avoided the experience. (Reference to these types of individuals is included in the next chapter.) Further, the discussion will be directed mostly to Disney's theme parks, not more recent resort facilities, as most of the analytical commentary has focused on the parks.¹²

Table 6.1 Disney theme parks

Park	Opening date	Admissions, 1998
Disneyland Anaheim, Calif.	July 1955	13.7 million
Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida		
The Magic Kingdom	October 1971	15.6 million
EPCOT	October 1982	10.6 million
Disney-MGM Studios	May 1989	9.5 million
Disney's Animal Kingdom	April 1998	6.0 million
Disneyland Paris	April 1992	(unavailable)
Tokyo Disneyland	April 1983	(unavailable)

Source: Mark Albright, "Theme Park Attendance Nationwide Drops," *St. Petersburg Times*, 23 Dec. 1998.

Analyzing Disney worlds

Over the years the Disney worlds have attracted criticism as well as praise from the intellectual world. One of the first critiques, by novelist Julian Halévy in 1958, is often cited as an example of the condescending tone of Disney critics.¹³ Halévy compared Disneyland with Las Vegas, concluding that Disneyland offered "cheap formulas packaged to sell," and that even Las Vegas was a more reasonable source of satisfaction.¹⁴ Of course, Schickel's well-known study of Disney in the late 1960s included commentary on Disneyland, and especially strong objections to the Audio-Animatronic version of Abraham Lincoln.¹⁵

In 1973, Schiller and Real both focused on Disneyland in their broader investigations of mass media's role in society.¹⁶ A few other pieces appeared during the 1980s, including an entire issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture* devoted to the parks, plus brief commentaries by Eco and Baudrillard, setting the pattern for further postmodern musings during the 1990s.¹⁷

The company's theme park expansion during the Disney Decade was met with a deluge of academic studies from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, art, architecture, business, ethnic studies, film and

media studies, cultural studies, gender studies, geography, history, marketing, political science, popular culture, rhetoric, and urban planning.¹⁸ It is not possible here to explore all the issues presented in these wide-ranging studies; however, some of the common themes should be helpful in understanding the Disney phenomenon.

Bryman presents a commendable discussion of the many textually based studies of the Disney worlds, noting that the approaches range from Marxist analysis to postmodern critiques. Despite the diversity, he points out that analysts seem to agree on what the parks represent, as noted in the introductory comments to his study:

although quite a wide range of themes have been extracted in the analysis to be presented here, writers have often contributed to each theme independently of their theoretical positions or of their individual projects when examining the parks. This commonality is interesting in itself since it means that writers working within frameworks as diverse as Marxism and semiotics can generate conclusions which are consistent, if not almost identical. Perhaps the power of 'theming' exerts greater influence over writers than they or we as readers are aware.¹⁹

The discussion that follows draws on Bryman's organization, but especially emphasizes themes that express the interaction of economic and ideological characteristics represented by the parks. While there are a variety of textually oriented studies, it is essential to understand the parks within the context of their role as key components of the Disney empire. In other words, the theme parks represent a profitable and lucrative business for the Disney company, as well as supporting conservative, corporate, and consumerist ideologies. To appreciate more fully this interweaving of the economic and the ideological, it is helpful to first recall how the theme parks actually work within the Disney empire and why they are so important to the primary corporate mission. Therefore, the discussion will begin with the themes or motifs that seem most closely related to the economic dimensions of the parks and then move on to other prevalent themes identified by theme park analysts.

Themes from a theme park

Synergy

In the mid-1950s, the combination of Disneyland—the theme park and *Disneyland*—the television program was a model of media cross-promotion.²⁰

As noted in chapter 2, ABC bought stock in Disneyland, Inc., and Disney agreed to produce a weekly television program on the network. The park was featured prominently on the one-hour program, which also included episodes corresponding to the various lands (Frontierland, Tomorrowland, etc.), thus further promoting the theme park.

As noted previously, these arrangements have been called a systems approach. By the 1990s, however, the same concept was called synergy, and theme parks had come to represent the ultimate synergy, bringing together media products and merchandising at one site. Davis explains that theme parks are major vehicles for merchandising, and "the potential of the theme park industry to sell and support licensed products is central to synergy."²¹

For Disney, theme parks and resort activities contribute significantly to overall corporate goals, providing ongoing revenues and promotion for other parts of the corporate empire, as noted in chapter 3 and demonstrated in chapter 4. Indeed, it is difficult to think about the Disney brand without reference to the theme parks.

Commodification/consumption

The Disney parks can be described as a careful integration of entertainment and fun with commodification and consumption. For Fjellman, this is the fundamental description of Disney's overall business: "The Company - especially at its theme parks - produces, packages and sells experiences and memories as commodities."²²

The "experiences" and "memories" of visits to the Disney worlds are ultimately wrapped up with consumption. First of all, the parks are commodities themselves, amassing sizable revenues just from entrance fees. While it is difficult to obtain accurate figures on revenues from admissions, Davis estimates that 50 percent of theme park revenues generally are from admission fees.²³ Overall revenues from the Disney Theme Parks and Resorts Division were \$6.1 billion in 1998.

Visitors are encouraged to stay longer at the parks because of entrance fee pricing, thus boosting revenues from hotel and other resort activities, as well as from additional food and merchandise purchases. Further consumption beyond the admission price is difficult to avoid because of the basic design of the parks, which are skillfully arranged to constantly lead visitors to gift shops and kiosks featuring a wide range of appropriately themed Disney merchandise. Schickel observes that "The park's general design further enhances one's willingness to contribute to its economic well-

Table 6.2 Number of shops at Walt Disney World, 1991

Park	No. of shops
Magic Kingdom (including Main Street USA 16)	55
EPCOT Center	65
Disney-MGM Studios	22
Hotels	29
Disney Village Marketplace	20
Typhoon Lagoon & Pleasure Island	13
TOTAL	204

Source: Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, pp. 178–83.

being. The layout encourages a sense of discovery that, in turn, encourages impulse buying.”²⁴

In his 1992 study, Fjellman prepared “The Mall Register” – a list of the 204 stores at Walt Disney World, not including restaurants or other food concessions. (See table 6.2.) Not only do the theme parks provide opportunities to sell merchandise based on continuing and new characters and stories, but the parks themselves generate merchandise, such as T-shirts, hats, and publications, identified with specific areas of the park or the park as a whole. As Willis notes, there are even shops that feature Disney villains, for those who want to avoid the typical Disney consumerism. However, in the end, Scar plush figures and Ursula dolls still contribute to the company’s proceeds.²⁵

Indeed, some observers have pointed out that certain attractions at the parks are *mostly* about consuming. For instance, the World Showcase might better be renamed the World Shopping Mall, with 52 stores included in the 11 international pavilions.²⁶ Main Street USA is also a sort of mall, with all of the individual shops connected. As Bryman notes, “consumption is presented as an aspect of the fun and fantasy. To become a full participant, the visitor needs to consume.”²⁷

Many of the theme park commentators have discussed this interweaving of consumption and entertainment, sometimes “called dedifferentation,” or “a tendency for shopping, eating, hotel accommodation and theme park visiting to become inextricably interwoven.”²⁸ Wilson calls it: “An Architecture of Merchandising . . . the fullest representation of commodified space we have in North America. . . . [It] organizes public space according

to the market; it understands private space as an architectural adjunct of individual consumption."²⁹

Commercialization/corporatism

Long before the notion of "strategic alliances" came into vogue, Disney enlisted other corporations as its partners. The original Disneyland involved 32 companies that sponsored exhibits or restaurants at the park, including Carnation, General Electric, and Monsanto. And, of course, visitors' impressions were better remembered if captured at the designated Kodak memory spots around the park.

Corporate involvement continues throughout the parks, especially at EPCOT, where attractions are sponsored by AT&T, General Motors, Kraft, and Eastman Kodak, and the World Showcase pavilions feature national companies, such as Japan Airlines, Labatt Beer, etc. The involvement of outside corporations lessens the risk for the Disney company and also promotes and reinforces corporate ideals and values. Indeed, the very essence of EPCOT is to promote these values. In the company literature, EPCOT is described as "a community of ideas and nations and a testing ground where free enterprise can explore and demonstrate and showcase new ideas that relate to man's hopes and dreams." As Fjellman concludes, "WDW is the teaching shrine for the corporate world of commodities."³⁰

Beyond EPCOT are numerous examples of corporatism that have been referred to by park analysts, but a favorite one is the Carousel of Progress sponsored by General Electric. The original Carousel debuted at the 1964 New York World's Fair, moved to Disneyland with General Electric as the sponsor, and then to Walt Disney World (with some updating) in 1975. The exhibit portrays the "improvements in American life that have resulted from the use of electricity" and depicts four scenes featuring a "middle-class robot family" from around 1900, the 1920s, the 1940s, and the present. The family members celebrate the various labor-saving devices in each scene, looking forward to even further improvements, thanks to "those research people at General Electric." The exhibit is not simply a commercial for General Electric but, as Wallace points out, a "paean to Progress – defined as the availability of emancipatory consumer goods."³¹ As with many of the EPCOT attractions, the Carousel blatantly promotes corporate ideals but also links them strongly to other park themes, especially those relating to representations of the past (which will be discussed later). It is no wonder that the sponsors are pleased with the results of these efforts. As a GE representative remarked, "the Disney organization is

Table 6.3 Top ten US theme park attendance, 1998

Park	Attendance
Magic Kingdom (WDW)	15.6 million
Disneyland	13.7 million
EPCOT (WDW)	10.6 million
Disney-MGM Studios (WDW)	9.5 million
Universal Studios, Florida	8.9 million
Disney's Animal Kingdom (WDW)	6.0 million
Universal Studios, Hollywood	5.1 million
Sea World Florida, Orlando	4.9 million
Busch Gardens, Tampa Bay	4.2 million
Sea World California, San Diego	3.7 million

Source: *Amusement Business*, Dec. 1998.

absolutely superb in interpreting our company dramatically, memorably and favorably to the public."³²

So not only are the Disney worlds cultural products in themselves, they actively promote and legitimize the capitalist system as a whole. Fjellman explains:

As the commodity form becomes a central part of culture, so culture becomes available for use in the interest of commodification as particular cultural items, as a source of commercial arguments, and as symbolic legitimation for the entire system. Culture and the commodity form become dialectically intertwined.³³

"I'm going to Disneyland."

Who goes to the Disney theme parks and why? Although the Disney company does not release attendance figures, trade sources reported that the Disney parks attracted 55.4 million visitors in 1998. Total attendance for the top 50 parks in the USA was 165 million in 1998, representing a 1 percent decline from 1997. As indicated in table 6.3, not only do Disney parks lead all other US theme and amusement parks in terms of attendance, but the Walt Disney World Resort as a whole is claimed to be the biggest tourist attraction in the world.

As Adams points out, Disneyland's initial success was possible to some

Table 6.4 Prices at Disney theme parks, 2000

Park	Price of pass
<i>Disneyland</i>	
1-day pass/adult	\$41
/child (3-9)	\$31
3-day flex passport/adult	\$99
/child	\$75
<i>Walt Disney World</i>	
1-day/1-park pass/adult	\$48
/child	\$39
4-day park hopper/adult	\$196
/child	\$158

Prices above represent only a few of the wide variety of passes sold by the parks.

extent because of the baby boom after World War II, which became the "children boom" of the 1950s. The popularity of theme parks also grew with the increase in disposable income for leisure activities and the growth of tourism, as well as advances in transportation. By 1997, the average American household was spending \$1,813 each year on entertainment.³⁴

By 1989, it was claimed that 70 percent of all Americans had visited either Walt Disney World or Disneyland.³⁵ Even when the number of children decreased, adults became more prevalent than children at the parks by a ratio of four to one.³⁶ Moreover, Team Disney continued to add features specifically aimed at adults to the parks and resorts, including Pleasure Island, a profusion of recreational and spectator sports activities, and the Disney Institute (offering educational workshops for elderly tourists).

Nonetheless, the Disney parks still revolve around the theme of families. Promotional and advertising material features families, and they are depicted in various ways throughout the parks (for instance, the robot families mentioned above in the Carousel of Progress). More specifically, middle-class families are portrayed, for, as most analysts point out, the ideals and values depicted in the parks are decidedly middle class.

With entrance fees (see table 6.4) and transportation expenses as barriers for some families, it has been reported that three-quarters of WDW adult

visitors are professionals, technical personnel, or managers, with only 2 percent representing laborers. And despite their frequent representation in Disney's advertising campaigns, only 3 percent of WDW visitors are Black, and only 2 percent are Hispanic. As Fjellman states, Walt Disney World "is the major middle-class pilgrimage center in the United States."³⁷ The idea of visits to Disney worlds as family pilgrimages is a major theme for other park analysts as well and has been discussed both in the sense that the parks have become "sacred centers" that people feel compelled to visit and as rituals in which pilgrims encounter liminal states in unfamiliar and unstructured settings.³⁸ Although Moore and others contend that a pilgrimage to one of the Disney worlds has become a pseudo-religious experience, Bryman suggests that the pilgrimage metaphor is limited by the controlled nature of the park experience. He contends that park visitors return home not with a new sense of reality, but with "a renewed sense of their roots."³⁹ (Disney's presentation of the past will be further discussed later.) Meanwhile, Adams uses the pilgrimage metaphor to emphasize some of the key themes discussed previously:

Just as a journey to Mecca, Canterbury, Lourdes, or Rome represents a rite of passage that sanctifies a pilgrim as a member of a holy community, a visit to Walt Disney World ratifies the values of corporate culture and allows the 20th-century pilgrim to reaffirm faith in capitalist scriptures of progress through technology, control through managerial hierarchy, and consumerism.⁴⁰

"Backstage magic"

For some visitors, the appeal of the Disney parks is experiencing the amazing creations that have been designed by those crafty Imagineers and trying to figure out how it all works. Other visitors appreciate the parks' cleanliness, efficiency, and organization.⁴¹

Numerous writers have commented on the meticulous planning that contributes to this distinct aesthetic appearance, including carefully concealed utilities and service entrances, as well as a complete underground complex at Disney World that includes power facilities, employee transportation, storage, etc. The underground system is called the Utilidor (or utility corridor) and includes a mile of tunnels, which provide easy access for employees, as well as concealing the "non-magical" aspects of the park, including garbage collection, wiring, utilities, vents, fiber-optic lines, and computer operations.⁴²

Park operations are impressive, state-of-the-art technology. For instance, trash is collected on the surface and transported via pneumatic tubes directly to garbage trucks in the basement. The park is operated with the assistance of computers, which monitor and control energy consumption, refrigeration, reservations at the park and resorts, and sound systems. Maintenance is a nightly activity, and involves not simply sweeping the streets and tidying up the grounds, but repainting and refurbishing countless features around the parks. For example, Birnbaum's guidebook to WDW introduces Main Street USA as follows:

Inside and outside, maintenance and housekeeping are superb. White-suited sanitation workers patrol the street to pick up litter and quickly shovel up any droppings from the horses who pull the trolley cars from Town Square to the Hub. The pavement, like all in the Magic Kingdom, is washed down every night with fire hoses. There's one crew of maintenance workers whose sole job is to change the little white lights around the roofs; another crew devotes itself to keeping the woodwork painted. As soon as these people have worked their way as far as the Hub, they start all over again at Town Square. The greenish, horse-shaped cast-iron hitching posts are repainted 20 times a year on the average – and totally scraped down each time. . . . Some visitors find all these details so fascinating that it takes them a good deal longer than the 40 minutes spent by the average guest to get from one end of Main Street to the other.⁴³

The overall management and operation of the park have been acclaimed by experts over the years. In fact, the Disney company is so well known for its managerial strategies (as mentioned in chapter 3) that the company now offers its own brand of business and management programs at the Disney Institute, including courses focusing on people management, leadership, customer loyalty, quality service, creativity and innovation, and human relations management. Walt Disney World serves as a model, or "living laboratory," for the courses, as well as an enticement for potential students. (Theme park admission is included in the program fees.)⁴⁴

The strict management of the parks is consistent with a number of themes identified by park analysts and represents an especially obvious example of the control themes that will be explored in much more depth below. As a Disney representative once explained: "The cleanliness of the park, the safety of the park is far more a search for excellence and quality on our part in entertaining people than some ivory-tower, ideological exercise."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the obsession with cleanliness just happens to be one of those Classic Disney themes that is represented in the look of the

park, as well as the appeal to visitors. As Hunt and Frankenberg conclude, linking this issue to the type of guests at the parks, "Disneyland provides good clean fun for good clean families. Trash, literally, and in terms of undesirable people, is excluded."⁴⁶

Predictability and expectations

The design and organization of the parks have led to a kind of predictability that people have come to expect, based on the company's promotion, visitors' previous experiences, and the reputation that the parks have built over the years. Commentators have pointed to the safety and reliability of the Disney experience, which is designed to avoid the usual dangers and concerns of everyday life in the real world. As Hiassen observes:

nobody provides a safer, more closely supervised brand of carefree than Team Rodent. Whether you're on a Disney ocean liner or a Disney log flume or the eighteenth fairway of a Disney golf course, you can be pretty sure nobody's going to sneak up and stick a real .45 in your back. That's not just a perception, it's a fact – and one reason that Disney's image as a benign enchanter-protector is now embedded in the collective parental psyche.⁴⁷

But there are also expectations that involve the themes represented by the parks. Visitors come to *expect* that they will have a happy time in this magical place, that all of the "cast members" will be courteous and polite, that the streets will be clean and uncluttered, that the themes and the fantasies will be complete and consistent.

There are numerous stories that illustrate these expectations. For instance, during a recent interview, a business reporter recalled a visit to Disneyland, where she observed one of the costumed characters being assaulted by unruly teenagers. The incident attracted the attention of the crowds, as well as park officials, as the character finally started slugging back. Later that day, while visiting the main desk at the park, the reporter witnessed a number of guests demanding their money back because the slugging episode had ruined their expectations of the park as "the happiest place on earth."

In a more publicized incident, a former Mouseketeer sued Disney in a 1995 incident which involved an armed robbery of her and her grandchildren in the Disneyland parking lot. She was not as upset at the attackers as she was at the Disney employees after the incident, when "the children were rudely disillusioned" upon encountering a few of the disassembled

characters backstage. The suit alleged that the company exposed the children to "the reality that Disney characters, were, in fact, make believe."⁴⁸

Control, control, control

The predictability of a Disney park visit is possible because of the vigorous control exercised in managing the parks. In fact, nearly all of the park analysts identify control in one way or another as one of the fundamental themes of the Disney worlds.⁴⁹ Bryman identifies six levels of control at the parks, which helps to organize the numerous interpretations of this concept.⁵⁰

1. Control of the theme park experience The parks' layouts, as well as most rides and exhibits, are designed to control the visitors' activities and experiences – an observation that is nearly unanimous among theme park analysts. It begins with the obligatory stroll down Main Street USA – the only entrance to the Magic Kingdom. Carefully landscaped paths lead visitors to specific destinations and Kodak Memories spots. Appropriate sound effects, music, and even aromas are carefully manipulated throughout the park.⁵¹ The attractions and rides are usually "programmed shows," with visitors transported in either cars, boats, or trams through prearranged, unchangeable views, and carefully planned sounds and movements. As Bryman notes, "Each person will see the same as everyone else so that the experience of many theme park attractions is controlled and thereby standardized."⁵²

2. Control over the imagination But it is not only visitors' movements and experiences that are controlled. An irony not often overlooked by theme park analysts is the passivity that is involved in most of the parks' activities, thus undermining the imagination motif that is prominently promoted in the company literature. Eco states it bluntly: "An allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism, Disneyland is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots."⁵³

As Tom Carson, an *LA Weekly* journalist, writes:

I love pop most for the democratic way it enlists its fans as collaborators. But Disneyland forbids this. Disneyland is unilateral, literally a control freak's paradise. It can't be experienced in any way, or yield any meanings, other

than those Walt meant it to. If Walt had really wanted our imaginations to soar, he would have given us wings, not mouse ears.⁵⁴

Many critics have expanded on this theme, noting that activities and even thoughts are "channeled" and "controlled." As Hunt and Frankenberg explain:

Disneyland operates through controlled imaging aimed at controlling controlled imaginations. . . . Ours is but to laugh at the jokes and to marvel at the genuine technical achievements of modellers and engineers. We too are reduced to the "ideal" child-like condition of being acted upon rather than acting. The excitements of reading (or being read to) have truly been doubly translated and betrayed.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, Steve Nelson offers the following critique:

In an age where the manufacture of concretized fantasy has reached new heights, Disney is certainly in the forefront. Films such as *Roger Rabbit* and *Indiana Jones* and parks like Disney-MGM Studios simulate the actuality of movie fantasies with great precision. But somehow they do it too well, leaving little room for the visitor's own imagination and personal sense of fantasy. Instead of having to wish upon a star, you may now see one from an orbiting spaceship. The technical prowess and complexity of Disney entertainment is in danger of overwhelming the humans they were designed to beguile.⁵⁶

Furthermore, while the parks avoid any references to work or labor (to be discussed later), there are not any opportunities for real play either – no slides, swings, or other facilities that allow children (and others) to play independently or spontaneously. Hunt and Frankenberg conclude: "Here forms of play are, for both economic and ideological reasons, inseparably combined, served up prepackaged, timed, priced, and valued."⁵⁷

3. Control as a motif Many of the park's attractions emphasize the theme of control, as well, and there is often little subtlety in the presentations. One of the attractions frequently cited to exemplify this point is *Living with the Land*, sponsored by Nestlé (previously, *Listen to the Land*, sponsored by Kraft Foods). Visitors are treated to a boat ride through displays that demonstrate how difficult nature can be unless tamed by technology and science. In discussing the attraction, Fjellman observes,

"The land is to be manipulated, tricked and beaten into submission, told what to be, and certainly not listened to."⁵⁸

The control motif can be seen plainly at other sites around the parks, including the taming of the American West in Frontierland and the subjugation of the rest of the world in Adventureland. Bryman concludes his discussion of control as a motif by noting how it connects quite well with other park themes, such as corporatism and technological progress.⁵⁹

4. Control over the behavior of employees Disney's control of employees was discussed in chapter 4. However, it is worth recalling the company's near obsession with theme park employees' appearance through the company's "Aryan-android dress code" (as Hiassen calls it), as well as the carefully monitored and structured behavior and the focus on "emotional labor," discussed previously. Obviously, this influences the park experience and its meaning, as the Disney Look and Disney Behavior contribute to the predictability that visitors expect, as well as reinforcing the all-American theme of the parks.⁶⁰

The company is so concerned about the image of the park that employees are instructed to handle emergencies in precise ways, as discussed previously. For instance, the company goes to extreme lengths to avoid reporting any deaths in the park. One employee claimed that the medical staff is instructed to wait until they are off of the company's property to pronounce a person dead. Thus the official policy is that no one has ever died in the park.⁶¹

5. Control over the immediate environment As Kuenz observes, the company policy is to "let nothing enter or exit the property unregulated or uncontrolled."⁶² But the parks and resorts themselves represent the company's ability to control the land, by "creating fantasy worlds out of orange groves or swamp lands."⁶³ Details about the construction of the parks and their attractions have been presented by many writers, as well as by the company itself. In particular, the construction of impossible or unnatural landscapes is a distinct feature of the parks and part of their appeal to visitors. A recent example is the new Animal Kingdom, where *unnatural* environments for *nonnative* animals have been constructed and then promoted as *natural*, as in the following promotional piece: "Celebrating man's enduring fascination with animals of all kinds, the new park provides natural habitats for more than 1,000 animals. . . . Rare and wonderful creatures, native to far-off lands . . . roaming freely. Natural barriers for safety are nearly invisible."⁶⁴



Plate 5 Meet Mickey. One of the attractions of the Disney theme parks for both children and adults is meeting "live" Classic Disney characters. Here, Mickey Mouse greets a group of "guests" at Disneyland.

Photo by Jeremy Alden.

Even those features that are indigenous receive special treatment, so that the appropriate image is maintained. For instance, Hiassen explains how Disney World's Bay Lake was an inappropriate tea-color because of the bark from surrounding cypress trees. The company removed the trees, replaced the muck with imported sand, and refilled the lake with the bluish water that tourists expect.⁶⁵ More widely reported was the black buzzard incident in 1988, when the company was accused of killing the federally protected birds because their (natural) behavior was inappropriate for the desired Disney ambience. The company handled the resulting public relations fiasco by donating funds to Florida's game commission.⁶⁶

Part of the allure of the Disney worlds is the carefully controlled environments that separate visitors from the "real world." But the company's control also extends far beyond the park gates, especially at Walt Disney World. The limitations of the original size of Disneyland alerted the company to the need to control much more than just the land for the

Florida park, so the company managed to purchase 24,000 acres for the Disney World complex, which now includes a wide range of hotels and other resort attractions. The connection between the hotels and the parks is fundamentally financial, but also (as Bryman points out) contributes to the control of the basic appearance of the entire area, as well as controlling Disney's competition.

6. Control over its destiny The Disney company has been successful generally at getting what it wants from governments, whether local, state, or national. As discussed in chapter 4, deliberate efforts are made to influence political decisions to favor the company's businesses, whether it be over copyright protection, import quotas, or tax exemptions. As noted previously, Disney has also been able to convince governments to contribute to the construction of its parks. In Florida, government-funded road improvements were made, while the French government contributed improved transportation links to Disneyland Paris.

However, the Reedy Creek Improvement District is the most appropriate symbol of the company's ability to control its own affairs. In 1967, the Florida legislature gave the Disney company "special treatment" through the creation of Reedy Creek, which meant that the company no longer needed to obtain building permits or pay certain government fees, but could maintain its own utilities, create its own building codes, and even levy taxes. In essence, Reedy Creek represents the company's ability to set up a private government. The company owns its own water supply, telecommunications facilities, fire department, and could even operate its own nuclear energy facility, if desired. Overt control over the facilities is provided by a security force of 800 uniformed "hosts" and "hostesses," otherwise known as security guards.⁶⁷

While theme park analysts – especially Bryman – are quite perceptive in their discussions of various ways in which control is exemplified at the parks, they still underplay the point that control is a recurring theme *throughout* the Disney empire. Though Wilson makes this connection, he is still referring mostly to the parks: "The organizing principle of the Disney Universe is control. . . . This sort of thematic and directed space is a common one in our society [shopping malls, supermarkets], though seldom is it so systematically applied."⁶⁸

It needs to be stressed more emphatically that the control visible at the parks is also characteristic of other aspects of the company's activities, as well as being represented in Classic Disney texts.

Classic Disney and beyond

Many commentators have observed that the parks are organized around narratives with distinct cinematic characteristics.⁶⁹ Thus, it is not surprising that the parks recycle the stories and characters in Classic Disney entertainment products, especially the animated films, contributing in important ways to the synergy mentioned previously and outlined in chapter 4. Stories and characters, especially from animated features, are recreated at the parks in new formats, such as rides, costumed characters, and parades, adding even further dimensions to Classic Disney themes and values. As Fjellman notes (referring specifically to Walt Disney World): "The ideological messages at WDW are wide-ranging and intricately woven and cross-referenced."⁷⁰

A park visit itself is yet another representation of Classic Disney themes, as the following description of Disney World from the company's website stresses:

Welcome to the most magical place on earth! Here in this incredible fantasy world, imagination takes flight and spirits soar as your favorite characters and lands of make-believe come alive just for you. Wondrous attractions thrust you into enchanting adventures. Lavish parades and shows leave you laughing along with characters from your favorite Disney classics. It's a kingdom where once upon a time is now, and a place to create cherished memories that last forever.

Many of the Classic Disney themes are celebrated here – fantasy, magic, escape, happiness, fun. The happiness theme is reiterated and expanded and, as noted above, becomes part of the parks' predictability. As Hunt and Frankenberg observe:

You have seen the films, are familiar with the cartoon characters, and know that their trials and tribulations are humorous, and will eventually resolve into happy endings. You expect (and know that an omnipresent but unobtrusive management intends) a similar ending from the thrills and spills of your own visit.⁷¹

Still other themes are incorporated in attractions throughout the parks. For instance, many observers have noted that the parks celebrate the notion of individualism – overtly in the American Journeys and American Adventure attractions, but also by implication in the spirit of Frontierland and Tomorrowland. Adams has noted that everything is designed to promote a

sense of optimism, "a belief in progressive improvement toward perfection."⁷² (Recall the previous discussion of the Carousel of Progress.)

The theme of escape, already discussed in Classic Disney films, is strongly accentuated at the parks, where one is encouraged to forget everyday cares and worries. As Lawrence Taylor, a former defensive linebacker for the New York Giants, once commented, in explaining his well-known problems with drugs, etc.: "We'd all like to go through life without any trials or tribulations, but we don't live in Disneyland."⁷³ This kind of thing is often said in everyday conversations, as Disneyland has come to represent something that is unreal, escapist, or overly romantic.

Above all, the messages incorporated in the parks are clear and straightforward, as in Classic Disney films. "Its images, however complex the network of representation and illusion involved, are clear and self explanatory living up to Disney's own continuing advice: 'Make it read!' meaning, making the action distinct and recognizable. No contradictions, no ambiguities."⁷⁴ The meaning of the Disney worlds seems to be generally understood by all and is tied rather neatly to Classic Disney themes. For Hunt and Frankenberg, this means that:

A good time can be had because all the visitors, courting couples, parents and their children are out of time: out of the routine, demands and conflicts of the daily timetable. What goes on here is not really serious; it does not count in the workaday world. At the same time, like other leisure activities, it carries a more or less concealed philosophical socialization for the family and for the ethnocentric white Anglo-Saxon tradition which masquerades as American values.⁷⁵

While Classic Disney themes are evident, certain Disney ideals and values have been accentuated and expanded at the parks, especially those that pertain to the representation of the past and the future. As noted previously, Disneyland provided Walt Disney even further opportunities to depict his own version of America's past, as well as his vision of the future. The next sections will expand upon these themes.

The past: Walt Disney's America

The original, overarching theme of Disneyland – as expressed in the dedication plaque quoted in the first epigraph to this chapter – is the celebration of the past and the promise of the future. The past is strongly emphasized in many attractions in the Magic Kingdom, including Main

Street USA, Liberty Square, Frontierland, and Adventureland. Meanwhile, EPCOT's Future World and American Adventure feature explicit views of the past, even though they are often included in exhibits that are meant to be about the future.

The nostalgic appeal of the parks is highlighted by most writers, who often point out that Disney's version of the past never really existed. And, indeed, park designers agree. As one Imagineer explained, "What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements."⁷⁶ So, the Disney past is clean, happy, and, above all, organized. This is especially emphasized in discussions of Main Street USA, which is said to represent Walt Disney's turn-of-the-century hometown of Marceline, Missouri. Despite the irony that Walt's boyhood was apparently not so happy, Main Street USA represents the essence of small town USA that grounded his overall philosophy.

Some writers connect the presentation of the past directly with another major theme at the parks: namely, consumption. As Bryman explains: "The past is subject to heavy doses of nostalgia which not only results in a skewed account of the past, but also serves to link the warm feelings inspired by nostalgia to consumption." As Eco observes: "The Main Street façades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing."⁷⁷

Other commentators note that the parks' presentation of the past is typically portrayed in a comical, lighthearted, and, above all, entertaining manner, a style that Disney used in representations of the past in films and television programs.

In other ways, the historical detail in Disney's presentation is meticulous, as the company goes to extreme lengths to "get it right." For instance, for American Adventure, historians were consulted on how historical figures actually spoke; costumes for the robot impersonators were made in the exact manner as the originals, and the exact size of the cannon balls was calculated. The Imagineers' remarkable technology is employed to bring history to life.

However, the most common critique of the Disney version of history – which Wallace and Fjellman call "Distory" – pertains to what is *not* presented, especially in those attractions that feature sketches of American history. Bryman categorizes these omissions as those that deal with (1) problems created by industry and corporations; (2) issues pertaining to class, race, and gender; and (3) situations involving conflict.

Wallace points out how Disney's "selective reconstruction of the past" is reminiscent of other forms of historical representation found in nineteenth-century wax museums and industrial expositions, where science and industry were hailed as the keys to progress in the future.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the various Disney exhibits have been influenced by specific historical contexts. The attractions created in the 1950s and 1960s (specifically, the Carousel of Progress and the Hall of the Presidents) represent a kind of corporate boosterism and patriotic fervor that was less acceptable in the 1970s, when EPCOT was built. The latter's attractions (especially Future World) actually acknowledge a few problems in the past (mostly relating to the environment), but find that the answers have been – and will continue to be – provided by corporations and technology. Thus, Disney embraces modernization to assure its middle-class visitors that all is well.

Wallace argues that by the 1980s, changes in public opinion influenced the presentation of EPCOT's American Adventure, where Frederick Douglas, Chief Joseph, and Susan Anthony are represented among the 35 Audio-Animatronic robots. The 29-minute presentation is explained in Birnbaum's guidebook:

The idea is to recall episodes in history, both negative and positive, which most contributed to the growth of the spirit of America, either by engendering "a new burst of creativity" (in the designers' words) "or a better understanding of ourselves as partners in the American experience." The presentation is hardly comprehensive; instead, it's "a hundred-yard dash capturing the spirit of the country at specific moments in time."⁷⁹

Nevertheless, as Wallace explains, it is still Disney history, which reinforces some of the Classic Disney values. It is upbeat, positive, optimistic, and relies on individualist explanations. Martin Luther King, for instance, is acknowledged "as an icon, not spokesman for a movement."⁸⁰ And the omissions are still glaring, including those social movements that are difficult to depict without attention to collective efforts (the labor movement) and those wars that cannot be portrayed optimistically (Vietnam). As Michael Smith notes, it is "decontextualized history" which reduces reality to nostalgia and magic.⁸¹

For some critics, it is not that education (specifically, history) cannot and should not be conducted in more interesting and entertaining ways, as Wallace observes; but it becomes especially problematic when the past is presented selectively and unrealistically for the sake of entertainment. Perhaps it is more understandable now why many intellectuals and others

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were skeptical of Disney's proposals to create a park specifically designed to represent American history, as discussed in chapter 3.

Back to the future?

In addition to the nostalgic past, the Disney worlds claim to offer "the challenge and promise of the future." Tomorrowland includes fantasy adventures, such as Space Mountain, as well attractions, such as the Carousel of Progress, The Timekeeper, and Dreamflight. At EPCOT's Future World, Disney and its corporate partners present visions of the future in pavilions focusing on agriculture, communications, the ocean, energy, health, and the imagination.

Many Disney analysts have pointed out that attempts to envision the future are reminiscent of the world fairs, with unimaginative presentations that rarely compare to the fantasies and visions that science fiction writers regularly capture in their written work. The difficulty in presenting the future at a relatively permanent site is the obvious one of needing to constantly keep ahead of the present.

For the most part, Disney's efforts have not been all that successful. One of the main problems has been the overt connection with the corporations that sponsor the exhibits. While the Imagineers are responsible for the design of the exhibits, analysts have observed that the visions of the future are firmly tied to the sponsor's current products. The exhibits suggest that citizens of tomorrow can count on the technological solutions that corporate America will provide. As Jane Kuenz observes, "the future is simply presented; the social mechanisms producing it and the social consequences thereof are not."⁸²

Most of the theme park analysts suggest that the future seems mainly to reflect the past, or Disney's version of the past, and thus celebrates a reification of existing social relations and the status quo, or, in other words, the present. Indeed, a conservative message seems clear and unmistakable. Although visitors do not actually confront the present at the parks, the representation of the past and the future serves as confirmation – more specifically, a class confirmation – of the ways things are. As Bryman concludes: "the suppression of the present has the effect of making visitors feel better about the world that they currently live in. By presenting rosy pictures of the past and the future, the problems of the present can be played down."⁸³ Again, it is an entertaining escape to an optimistic, comfortable future, a future that reaffirms the status quo.

noting the Disney parks' perfection of pastiche and that they are among the most common contemporary references to the concept.

The tendency of boundaries between institutional settings to collapse is called "dedifferentiation" by postmodernists and is represented in several ways by the Disney parks. The merging of theme park with shopping has already been mentioned, but it is also evident in the other direction, with the increased theming of shopping malls. Other examples are the distinct themes that characterize the Disney hotels, especially at Walt Disney World. Analysts have noted that recent developments in Las Vegas represents a similar dedifferentiation between hotels, casinos, and theme parks.

Further instances of dedifferentiation are the merging of work/play, actor/audience, entertainment/education. Perhaps the most fitting example is the dedifferentiation of reality and unreality, or representation, which has attracted a good deal of attention from Disney analysts. Harvey cites the Disney worlds as instances of experiencing the world as a simulacrum, while Baudrillard describes Disneyland as "a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation."⁸⁹ In this sense, Disney worlds aptly exemplify Jameson's characterization of postmodern culture as a breaking down of the signifying chain, or the relation between the signifier and the signified.⁹⁰ As Bryman observes: "There are real trees and flowers. There are real entertainers. But in the main, it is the unreal, the fabricated, that tends to be the most memorable."⁹¹ The title of Fjellman's study – *Vinyl Leaves* – refers to the fabricated tree that (before 1999) held the Swiss Family Island Treehouse and is covered with 800,000 vinyl leaves. For Fjellman, then, reality/non-reality is a key theme of the Disney worlds.

Other analysts have pointed to the Disney parks as synthetic experiences, representing what Eco and others have called "hyperreality." Baudrillard writes that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation."⁹² Bryman argues that this has been postmodernism's greatest contribution to understanding the parks, contributing "a sense of models as standing for themselves rather than for a reality that prompted them into being."⁹³

Disneyfication/Disneyization Postmodern discussions of the theme parks also refer to "Disneyfication," a term which has been applied both to literary works subjected to the Disney treatment (as discussed in chapter 5) and to an approach to urban planning.⁹⁴ While Isozaki notes that theme parks provide some of the only possibilities left for community planning,⁹⁵

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Accordingly, Bryman and others have offered a more expansive frame of reference called "Disneyization": "the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world."⁹⁷ Bryman identifies four dimensions of Disneyization – theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor – all themes that have been discussed in either this or previous chapters. He explores numerous examples of the applicability and prevalence of these themes, noting that the Disneyization trend is growing and may become even more significant in the future.

Celebration: Living in a Disney world

Walt's dream

The ultimate Disney park might be one in which people would actually live, rather than merely visit. Although not a theme park, the community of Celebration may be the closest thing to a live-in Disney world and could well serve as the quintessential example of Disneyization.

The original idea for EPCOT was Walt's dream of the perfect community: "EPCOT will be an experimental prototype community of tomorrow that will take its cue from the new ideas and new technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of American industry." The futuristic community would be home to 20,000 residents, and include high-speed trains and even a massive umbrella that would protect residents from rain. However, plans for the project were dropped after Walt's death, and, as we have seen, another version of EPCOT became part of Walt Disney World.

But the idea of a perfect community reemerged at Disney in the early 1990s, and Celebration opened on 4 July 1996. The town is located on 4,900 acres, five miles from Walt Disney World. By the end of 1997, 1,500 people were living in the community, with plans to grow to a population of 20,000, as Walt originally envisioned.

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to the problems of the suburbs. The company insists that Celebration is "not just a housing development, but a community." Indeed, some commentators have noted that it is actually Disney's answer to the perceived lack of community in America.

Celebration includes a state-of-the-art school, pedestrian-friendly streets, attractive public spaces, a convenient downtown, etc. The choices of living accommodations include six types of home, with prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$1 million, as well as town house apartments renting for \$600 per month and up. Home prices are reported to be 25–40 percent above comparable real estate in the area.⁹⁸ It is clear that Celebration does not include poor Americans, and obviously there are no homeless citizens. The town has also been described as "extremely white."

Disney's publicized goal was to create a community, but another goal has to be selling real estate. Claims have been made that the larger corporate strategy was a \$2.5 billion real estate deal, or a "creative way of packaging and selling Florida swampland." Apparently, the company paid about \$200 per acre in the 1960s for land that was sold for Celebration in quarter-acre lots at \$80,000 each.

Celebration can also be viewed as a clever political move that may help Disney's government relations in Florida. It seems that the state-chartered, virtually sovereign municipality, the Reedy Creek Improvement District (discussed previously), contributes relatively little in the way of taxes to Osceola County, where Disney World is located. The addition of Celebration provides ready-made taxpayers, which may actually endear Disney to the state government.

Controlling Celebration

The power structure in the town of Celebration will probably not come as a surprise to those familiar with the Disney ethos. Michael Pollan, a *New York Times* journalist, wrote after his first visit to Celebration:

From my research I knew that every last visual detail my eyes had taken in during my two-hour walk, from the precise ratio of lawn to perennials in the front yards to the scrollwork on the Victorian porches to the exact relationship of column, capital and entablature on the façades of every Colonial Revival, had been stipulated – had in fact been spelled out in the gorgeous and obsessively detailed "Pattern Book" that governs every facet of architectural and even horticultural life at Celebration. I knew all that, yet

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Walt's dream

The ultimate Disney park might be one in which people would actually live, rather than merely visit. Although not a theme park, the community of Celebration may be the closest thing to a live-in Disney world and could well serve as the quintessential example of Disneyization.

The original idea for EPCOT was Walt's dream of the perfect community: "EPCOT will be an experimental prototype community of tomorrow that will take its cue from the new ideas and new technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of American industry." The futuristic community would be home to 20,000 residents, and include high-speed trains and even a massive umbrella that would protect residents from rain. However, plans for the project were dropped after Walt's death, and, as we have seen, another version of EPCOT became part of Walt Disney World.

But the idea of a perfect community reemerged at Disney in the early 1990s, and Celebration opened on 4 July 1996. The town is located on 4,900 acres, five miles from Walt Disney World. By the end of 1997, 1,500 people were living in the community, with plans to grow to a population of 20,000, as Walt originally envisioned.

Celebration is an example of New Urbanism, a planning movement which has attempted to rediscover the "lessons of Main Street" as solutions

to the problems of the suburbs. The company insists that Celebration is "not just a housing development, but a community." Indeed, some commentators have noted that it is actually Disney's answer to the perceived lack of community in America.

Celebration includes a state-of-the-art school, pedestrian-friendly streets, attractive public spaces, a convenient downtown, etc. The choices of living accommodations include six types of home, with prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$1 million, as well as town house apartments renting for \$600 per month and up. Home prices are reported to be 25–40 percent above comparable real estate in the area.⁹⁸ It is clear that Celebration does not include poor Americans, and obviously there are no homeless citizens. The town has also been described as "extremely white."

Disney's publicized goal was to create a community, but another goal has to be selling real estate. Claims have been made that the larger corporate strategy was a \$2.5 billion real estate deal, or a "creative way of packaging and selling Florida swampland." Apparently, the company paid about \$200 per acre in the 1960s for land that was sold for Celebration in quarter-acre lots at \$80,000 each.

Celebration can also be viewed as a clever political move that may help Disney's government relations in Florida. It seems that the state-chartered, virtually sovereign municipality, the Reedy Creek Improvement District (discussed previously), contributes relatively little in the way of taxes to Osceola County, where Disney World is located. The addition of Celebration provides ready-made taxpayers, which may actually endear Disney to the state government.

Controlling Celebration

The power structure in the town of Celebration will probably not come as a surprise to those familiar with the Disney ethos. Michael Pollan, a *New York Times* journalist, wrote after his first visit to Celebration:

From my research I knew that every last visual detail my eyes had taken in during my two-hour walk, from the precise ratio of lawn to perennials in the front yards to the scrollwork on the Victorian porches to the exact relationship of column, capital and entablature on the façades of every Colonial Revival, had been stipulated – had in fact been spelled out in the gorgeous and obsessively detailed "Pattern Book" that governs every facet of architectural and even horticultural life at Celebration. I knew all that, yet

now I felt it, too, and how it felt was packaged, less than real, somewhat more like a theme park than a town.⁹⁹

The rules are spelled out in a document called "Covenants, Codes and Restrictions," the quasi-constitution that all home buyers are required to sign. Some examples:

- All visible window coverings must be either white or off-white (colored or patterned curtains look "icky", says a community newsletter).
- The proportion of perennials to grass is prescribed.
- Residents may hold only one garage sale in any 12-month period.
- A single political sign (measuring 18 by 24 inches) may be posted for 45 days prior to an election.
- Any activity that "detracts from the overall appearance of the properties" is prohibited – including the parking of residents' pickup trucks on the street.¹⁰⁰

Political control of Celebration is firmly entrenched in the hands of the Disney company. As with other master-planned communities in the USA, the responsibility for the community is technically in the hands of a home-owners' association, whose board is elected by the residents. As Pollan observes, home-owners' associations represent "the fastest-growing form of political organization in the country, forming a kind of alternative political universe in which one of every eight Americans now resides."¹⁰¹ However, even though Celebration residents elect the directors of the home-owners' association, the covenants dictate that the association cannot change any rule or restriction in Celebration "without prior notice to and the written approval of the Celebration Company." In addition, Disney maintains the right to control every aspect of the physical character of the community. As a lawyer and home-owners' association expert says: "It is absolute top-down control. The homeowners are powerless against the association and the association is powerless against Disney. I can't imagine anything more undemocratic."¹⁰²

In addition, the community is organized around privatized municipal services, including garbage pickup, recreational facilities, public safety, and lighting. Celebration's town hall is privately owned by Disney. In other words, rather than being citizens of Celebration, residents are more like Celebration consumers. As Pollan concludes:

It may be Disney's boldest innovation at Celebration to have established a rather novel form of democracy, one that is based on consumerist, rather than republican, principles. For many of the people I met at Celebration, the measure of democracy is not self-rule but responsiveness – they're prepared to surrender power over their lives to a corporation as long as that corporation remains sensitive to their needs. This is the streamlined, focus-grouped responsiveness of the marketplace, rather than the much rougher responsiveness of elected government – which for many Americans was discredited a long time ago.¹⁰³

Celebration defectors

Many residents have only positive things to say about living in Celebration, and the development has been one of the fastest-selling in its price range in the area. For instance, residents Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins write about their experiences in *Celebration, U.S.A.*, concluding that the town is an exciting place to live, although "We would insist on more racial and economic diversity, not because it's morally right or politically correct, but because for us it makes life better, more interesting."¹⁰⁴

Still other inhabitants have become disillusioned and have moved out, complaining about building problems, and the lack of suitable shops and amenities. For some residents, the utopian vision of a perfect community has definitely faded: "Celebration has indeed become a community: a messy, ever-changing and inevitably political town where some residents complain that the Disney company has failed to keep its promises and runs its settlement like a benign dictatorship."¹⁰⁵

The community's school been especially problematic for some residents. The facility is described in promotional material as "a school of tomorrow" and "a model for education into the next century." Since Florida schools are notoriously impoverished, the promise of a "state-of-the-art school" in central Florida has been one of the town's strongest selling points. The Celebration school abounds with the latest information technologies and has been claimed as "the most wired campus on the planet."¹⁰⁶ However, some parents have had strong reactions to the progressive curriculum, multi-age classrooms, narrative assessments rather than grades, and few exams.

When a group of Celebration parents began organizing for school reform, they found little interest from Disney representatives, who (residents claimed) were not interested in the school, but only in selling real estate. Focus groups were held, rather than public meetings, and many

residents began to defect. In 1997, it was reported that 16 percent of the children in the school withdrew, many enrolling in private schools in Orlando.

Leaving Celebration also became an eye-opener for disenchanted residents. According to the buyers' contract, a home owner is not allowed to make a profit if he or she has not lived in the house for more than a year, unless hardship is proved. At one point, the company offered to disregard the provision if departing home owners would not reveal why they were leaving the community. The defections and dissension may have accentuated the difference between consumers and citizens, as well as Disney's ability to manage reality. In other words, Disney may be able to create fantasy, but it is far more complex to create community. It is not clear whether the company has understood any of these problems, as the community continues with the same rules and regulations.

The future?

Disney executives say they have abandoned plans to adopt the Celebration model elsewhere in the USA. But even though there may be no future Celebrations, there will be more Disney-themed environments. Disney has made a major impact in Manhattan, with the transformation of a two-block area of Times Square into a Disney-themed location. Furthermore, DisneyQuests and ESPNZones are popping up around the country, joining the trend towards more and more location-based entertainment.¹⁰⁷

In the next chapter, we move from Disney worlds to the people who make the Disney phenomenon possible – the fans, consumers, and audiences who inhabit the Disney universe.

7 *Disney and the World*

An adult cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does the naiveté of the child not give him pleasure, and does he himself not endeavor to reproduce the child's veracity on a higher level?

Karl Marx¹

Truly all ages – from children to the elderly, all nationalities, all races and all types of social systems are intoxicated by him with the same delight, surrender with the same fervor to his charm, with the same ecstasy allow themselves to be carried away by Disney's living drawings.

Sergei Eisenstein²

It has been claimed that "Disney is a primary force in the expression and formation of American mass consciousness" and that Disney characters "have a universal appeal."³ While these and other assumptions may be broadly accepted, it is certain that there are far more complex responses to Disney's products and messages. A closer look raises some tough questions: What is the audience for Disney products? What do people actually think about the Disney universe? What do these products mean to consumers? And why are Disney products and characters still popular after all these years?

This chapter will consider some of these questions, first, by attempting to define the Disney audience and then by discussing the ways in which Disney audiences have been studied. The final section will present a range

of Disney audience archetypes, as well as discussing various types of resistance to the Disney universe.

Defining Disney audiences

Just as it is difficult to generalize about the reach of the Disney empire, so it is difficult to assess the "audiences" for, and thus the "effects" of, Disney messages/products. In considering the notion of a "Disney audience," we must ask what we mean by "Disney," as well as what we mean by "audiences."

The Disney brand As noted in the first few chapters, the Disney universe covers an extremely wide range of media/entertainment activities, from traditional television and film viewing, to theme park visits and sports event attendance. While audience reactions to specific examples of Disney products (especially Classic Disney films and theme parks) have been studied, it is also necessary to look at *Disney as a brand* and what meanings people associate with it.

Indeed, "Disney" represents an example of the kinds of brands that are being formed around media and entertainment products – that is, multi-dimensional products that cut across media and other forms of entertainment. Recall the quote from *The Economist*, cited in chapter 4? "The brand is a lump of content . . . which can be exploited through film, broadcast and cable television publishing, theme parks, music, the Internet and merchandising."⁴ Kodak, Nike, and Coca-Cola may have explicit (or even covert) meanings attached to their products and/or their brand which are promoted through their advertising and public relations efforts. However, it might be argued that brands based on media products, such as Disney, present far more overt and often more complex values and forms of signification than these non-media-related brands.

It is also generally agreed that Disney is the most immediately recognized of any of the media brands. So, while audience reactions to specific Disney products or characters are certainly worth examining, it is also important to understand what audiences think about Disney, the brand.

Audiences or consumers? The concept of "audience" has been challenged recently by Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye, who point out that the notion is directly related to marketing research and should be used more carefully by critical researchers.⁵ The relevance of their argument

notwithstanding, how do we go about defining the people who experience and consume Disney products and services? While the term "audience" will be used in this discussion, it is probably more appropriate to refer to "consumers." It is almost always the case that individuals experience Disney via the consumption process, whether they are being bought and sold as audiences for advertising, or purchasing Disney products/services.

"Children of all ages." So who is included in the "Disney audience"? While exposure to Disney products is typically strong during childhood, some of the same products are still enjoyed by adults, while other products are specifically designed for adults. Despite the oft-cited emphasis on children, Disney's products cut across age groups in assorted ways and thus may have multiple meanings. It is generally recognized that the theme parks, in particular, were designed not only for children but, to a great extent, for adults, as discussed in chapter 6. In fact, the ratio of adults to children who visit the parks is estimated at 4:1.⁶

As discussed in chapter 5, when we refer to "Disney," the association is ordinarily with those clearly labeled Disney products aimed at the "family" market and, more specifically, those products representing Classic Disney. Nevertheless, the point is that targeting families means attempting to appeal to *different* age groups, not just children. In addition, we need to remember that the company's diversified products reach, and thus potentially influence, a much wider audience or number of consumers than the "family" audience.

In other words, Disney's diversified activities are aimed at a variety of consumers, not just parents and children. This is especially the case for the theme parks and resorts, where a range of attractions are featured. For instance, the company has been especially active in hosting sporting events, such as marathons, auto races, and an assortment of sports tournaments (golf, football, volleyball, as well as in-line skating and skate-boarding). The industry publication, *Brandweek*, explains: "Disney has started hosting events to try to appeal to everyone from empty nesters and senior citizens to honeymooners and post-college singles."⁷

Another example is Disney's Winnie the Pooh franchise, which the company acquired in the 1960s.⁸ Disney's products featuring Winnie the Pooh characters are pitched to a wide range of consumers. A Disney spokesman explains:

Disney now has three distinct Pooh lines, each targeted at a different market. Each line is aimed at a distinct demographic and market, but even within a