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Disney: Delights and Doubts

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### ABSTRACT

Disney and its spectacularly successful theme parks are analyzed through the lens of its consumers. We focus on how Disney manages the consumption experience and discuss Disney strategies from several perspectives. Disney provides a paradigm for contemporary consumption. A framework is presented to understand consumption in Disney and Disneyesque settings. Finally, we offer cautions and critiques regarding such strategies—a guide for the informed consumer.

### ARTICLE

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**Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom is "the happiest place on earth." There is no doubt about it. *Or is there?***

The rendering of these sentences - the message of delight in bold, large print followed by a small nagging doubt captures, in our view, the essence of consumer response to Disneyesque strategies that are being unleashed in the contemporary markets. In the Disney theme parks and in other marketing environments that have successfully emulated or adapted Disney-like strategies, the overwhelming consumer response is of delight, of happy abandon and escape, of immersing in a childlike fantasy experience. There is, however, that tiny, residual doubt, the minuscule but nagging feeling that responding to the happy manipulations with abandon and delight somehow may not be right, the trace of guilt about the unabashed hedonism implied in the environment and the ensuing behaviors.

Disney has attracted considerable interest from popular media, social scientists, and management experts. We want to analyze

Disney through the lens of its consumers, or "guests", as they are referred to in the Disney theme parks. How does Disney manage the consumption experience? What do Disney strategists provide that matches consumer needs and especially desires? What conclusions can we draw from Disney practice for those providing goods and services outside the Magic Kingdom?

Based on our own experiences at Disney's theme parks, combined with a brief review of the growing literature on travel and consumption, we describe key marketing practices evident in Disney environments. Then we present a framework to understand consumption in Disney settings-setting that are being widely emulated and becoming a paradigm for contemporary consumption. Next, we discuss the generalized learning from such strategies that is permeating business enterprises in general, but with a focus on how consumers themselves gain insight from such analyses. Finally, we offer cautions and critiques regarding such strategies-a guide for the informed consumer. Our goal is not to ruin the Disney experience; rather we offer consumer-based insight into those nagging doubts about how Disney manages consumers inside and outside their famous theme parks.

### **CONSUMING TRAVEL**

Travel suspends some of the rules and habits that govern everyday behavior, and substitutes different norms and customs, in particular those that are appropriate to being in the company of strangers. Traveling can lead to new and exciting forms of sociability, play, inquisitiveness, extraversion, and gregariousness that is lacking at home. John Urry outlines several elements of "consuming places" that shed light on the complex interconnections between travel, marketing, and consumption (1995). Let us review these elements briefly.

First, places are reinvented as sights of consumption, providing an arena for shopping, hanging out, using goods, and photographing or videotaping friends and family. Second, places themselves are consumed visually - they are devoured through sight and other senses. Third, places can be consumed literally; what people take to be significant about a place-industry, history, buildings, literature, environments-is over time depleted, devoured, or exhausted by use. Fourth, it is possible for localities to consume one's identity so that such places become almost literally all-consuming places (Urry 1995). Industries such as arts, tourism, and leisure are all important in the cultural transformations of places into consumption sites (cf. Löfgren 1999).

Consuming places represent a complex integration of consuming space, consuming goods, and consuming services. The travel

industry combines with retailing to provide scripted sites for consumers (e.g., Desmond 1999). Disney is in the business of entertainment travel. Nike Towns spectacularize shopping. Gift shops in museums, and their catalog and web versions, are as popular as the collections in those museums. Sights can also be ordered on an authenticity scale; there is a growing business in off-the-beaten-path tours for consumers in search of non-tourist sights, eco-travel, and adventure travel. There is even a guidebook for 'dangerous travel' for globetrotters who are "adventurous, curious, intelligent and skeptical of the soundbite view" (Pelton 2000).

### **MARKETING A LA DISNEY**

The Disney entertainment agglomerate includes not just theme parks but also publishing, movie studios, retailing, cruise ships, the Buena Vista Internet group, and even a major television network. The theme parks are not the oldest part of the Disney Empire but it is in these theme parks, specifically in California's Disneyland followed by the huge Walt Disney World in Florida, that the quintessential postmodern marketing strategies of Disney were invented and perfected.

Florida's Walt Disney World is the world's largest theme park, a quasi-sovereign geographic entity secured by the Reedy Creek Improvement District (Shenk 1995). The Florida complex is "a massive development that includes EPCOT Center; the Disney-MGM Studios; River Country; Discovery Island; Fort Wilderness; Walt Disney Shopping Village; Pleasure Island; Typhoon Lagoon; the Contemporary Polynesian, Grand Floridian, Caribbean Ranch, Swan, Dolphin, Yacht Club, Beach Club, and Port Orleans Resort Hotels; and three man-made lakes, a wildlife preserve, and thousands of acres of undeveloped scrub and swamp" (Fjellman 1992). There is further expansion occurring at Florida. Disney's Animal Kingdom is a new theme park and entertainment areas such as BoardWalk have been added. Also, up and running is Celebration, a real town for permanent residents, that one observer links to the modern and ancient utopian yearnings (Ross 2000). It is possible to lead a complete Disney-infused life - to be born in, grow up in, work in, and die in a Disney setting.

More by evolution than design, the Disney vision incorporates more postmodern elements than any other large business enterprise-Disney has been called the most powerful corporation on the planet (Giroux 1999). In fact, strategies pioneered or perfected by Disney are now percolating across the American business scene. Disney has excelled in the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001). Let us examine some of the key Disney strategies.

## **Spectacles**

In her analysis of Nike Town in Chicago, Lisa Peñaloza presents a useful definition of consumption spectacles. First, the memorabilia draws consumers-like a museum, spectacles like Nike Town and Disney World promise unique, valuable, and treasured cultural artifacts, such as authentic Disney products. Second, consumption spectacles require an audience actively consuming the spectacle-one moves through Disney parks to fully experience them. Third, spectacles are institutionally sponsored-- this corporate patronage places a distinct stamp on the intentions, possibilities, and outcomes of consumption spectacles like Disney or Nike Town. They combine both market and non-market attributes in a way that blurs the lines between public and privatized space, entertainment and consumption, and cultural and commercial activities. Fourth, spectacles focus on a restricted set of meaning making processes, by fostering focused collective attention, which can be contrasted to festivals, ceremonies, and fairs (Peñaloza 1999).

The logic of consumer spectacles is typified by "sales associates guiding [visitors] back into the more customary subject position of a consumer" (Peñaloza 1999, 392). Walt Disney World is made up of an amazing variety of separate venues; each aimed at a particular target market. The original part of the park, the Magic Kingdom, an enlarged version of California's Disneyland, was designed for children, and remains an important component of the business. With aging demographics, however, Disney also concentrates on grown-ups, and has expanded into theme travel and entertainment, mass media, and the Internet. The EPCOT center, with Future World and World Showcase, were designed for adults, specifically men interested in technology and gizmos. Disney provides something for everyone-in a safe, friendly environment. Disney wants its spectacular venues to be accessible to everyone: "there are day-care centers, kennels, wheelchairs, even rentable audio cassettes that describe the sights and artificial smells of each attraction for the blind" (Fjellman 1992).

The spectacles in the Disney environments are not merely static attractions; there is a constant creation of spectacles through "happenings". On any single day during the tourist seasons, Disney theme parks across the world create as many as a dozen spectacles and extravaganzas, each comparable in scope to an Olympic game opening or a Superbowl half-time show. Disney spectacles are models of anticipation and orchestration. The parades, the laser light extravaganzas, and the fireworks are orchestrated like clockwork. Disney structures the consumer experience; it is often difficult to 'own' one's encounter with a Disney theme park.

## **Themes**

While Disney did not invent the concept of "theming", the company has employed it on a staggering scale unmatched by anyone else. Almost every square meter of the Disney locations worldwide is themed in a minor or a major way. Disney's approach to theming is through creation of transparent but engaging simulations. All but the very young visitors recognize the simulations, but are charmed by the detail and sincerity that go into these. Jean Baudrillard was one of the firsts to recognize California's Disneyland not just as a simulation in itself but as a reflection of America the hyperreal:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with, it is a play of illusions and phantasms: pirates, the frontier, future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful. But, what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more than the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious reveling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks...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. (Baudrillard 1988)

Disney's theme parks are understandable, fairly predictable, and safe. What began as a fantastic escape from 'reality' has become more real than real.

## **Fantasies**

Most of the major fantasies of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Native America, Asia and elsewhere have been or are in the process of being reinterpreted in Disney parks and films. Once in the Disney fold, the Disney-rendered versions of these fantasies become the branded and protected intellectual properties of Disney, and acquire a commercial life that is highly profitable and spans decades. Although this is a strategy that has been in place from the original days of Walt Disney in the 1930s, it is only after the mid-1980s that Hollywood studios like Warner Brothers and Universal, publishing empires like Bertelsmann, and software giants such as Microsoft have woken up to the potential of the congealed cultural capital in the ancient, medieval, and modern fantasies of nations and peoples.

## **Adventures**

Although Disney parks offer some scary rides such as the Space Mountain, the Matterhorn, the Thunder Mountain Railroad, and the Tower of Terror, the basic Disney approach to adventure is through participation of the visitors in simulations and themed fantasies. As technology evolves to offer extreme rides, either in a physical sense or through virtual reality, Disney is facing competition on the

"adventure" front. The Universal Studios theme parks and some of the roller coaster oriented theme parks have taken physical or virtual adventure rides to new extremes. Furthermore, some of the story lines of the newer virtual-reality oriented rides entail levels of sex and violence that are not acceptable to Disney, with its "clean family fun" image. As a result, new opportunities have opened up for major themed attractions in Las Vegas, the sultanate of sin, where virtual-reality rides are in fact perceived as a healthy way to remake the image of the gambling Mecca into a family vacation destination (Laing 1996).

### **Acceleration**

California's Disneyland may have started the trend toward acceleration of rides with the Matterhorn, but today's Disney parks do not compete on the basis of raw physical acceleration. Other theme parks, such as Marriott's Great America and Six Flags, are several steps ahead in terms of raw acceleration of rides.

Acceleration in Disney environments is through the creation of a state of anticipation and excitement, reflected in children tugging parents and young people tugging their companions towards each new attraction or adventure. Pauses in the form of breaks for drinks, snacks, meals, to watch a parade, or a show are necessary to check the breathless anticipation of a Disney visit. Of course, these pauses generate revenue as Disney guests buy food, drink, and souvenirs-one of the key consumer traps in the parks (see Lewis and Lacy's *The Cheapskate's Unauthorized Guide to Walt Disney World: Time-Saving Techniques and the Best Values in Lodging, Food, and Shopping*, 1997).

### **CONSUMING A LA DISNEY**

Inside Disney's parks, consumers are "guests" and guests are consumers. What characterizes what they do once they buy their ticket? A recent elaboration of the question of how consumers consume presents four metaphors for consuming: experiencing, integrating, playing, and classifying (Holt 1995). Disney offers their guests a chance to pursue each of these aspects of consumption-at their own pace, balanced to their needs. Let us examine the aspects of Disney consumption that help consumers experience, integrate, play, and classify.

### **Experience**

Above all, Disney is an experience. As one critical commentator had to admit, "Walt Disney World is beguiling, infinitely interesting, and Utopian." (Fjellman 1992). Disney is a hedonic experience, one that is remembered-through souvenirs, postcards, photographs, videos, and stories (see Schroeder 2002). Disney, perhaps more successfully than any other mass-market destination, offers an

enveloping encounter with the world of fantasy, imagination, and desire. Experience consists of actions that reinforce the consumption activity, such as accounting, evaluating, and appreciating (Holt 1995). Accounting is about applying a framework for consumption. In the case of Disney, consumers need to first make sense of the seemingly overwhelming number of options available to them, estimate line size, decide which of the attractions are most interesting, etc. Evaluation of the consumption experience occurs both "on-line," that is, during the event, and afterwards, through discussion and comparison. Thus, Disney's guests evaluate Space Mountain as a "scary" ride, perhaps by comparison to other rides within Disney. Appreciation is the mark of the "expert"-one who is able to see what is special about an experience or event. Thus, Disney provokes appreciative, even aesthetic responses in their customers, the "Wow" effect, or "How do they do that?" comments. The overall goal for Disney is to overwhelm their guests with appreciation for the magical world that was created just for them.

### **Integration**

Disney's historical and (pseudo) educational attractions feed the consumer's need to integrate. Integration, through the practices of assimilating, producing, and personalizing, is a key process by which consumers "enhance the perception that a valued consumption object is a constitutive element of their identity." (Holt 1995). In other words, Disney's customers create within themselves a part of them that belongs to Disney. Disney creates a connection to young consumers through the much-loved characters of Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy. Older guests share nostalgia for Disney-the landscape of their childhood. At "The American Adventure" showcase in EPCOT, Disney offers visitors from the world over the opportunity to be and act as unabashedly patriotic Americans. Through an integration of experiences within Disney, Disney films, Disney products, and production of Disney effects through video and photography, consumers come to have a place in their heart for Disney, and value the experience of going to Disney's parks.

### **Play**

Consumers, young and old, play in Disney parks. Far from an act of rational information search, consumption *a la* Disney is designed to be pleasurable. Consumers desire Disney because it stimulates their sense of fun and adventure-indeed it has become synonymous with fun and adventure. Through the allied activities of communing and socializing, Disney provides an arena for play-for children and adults-a license for leisure. As the population ages, Disney environments are adding more adult play options such as golf, resorts, and nightclubs. Reminiscent of childhood summer camps,

now The Disney Institute is available to adult visitors. The Institute offers a large menu of "lite" educational courses, crafts, challenges, and activities such as canoeing.

### **Classification**

During a visit to Walt Disney World, the visitor is thrust into a fantasy world quite different from everyday life. The consumer practice of classification refers to how affiliations are built with products, images, or symbols. In addition, classification takes place through differentiating oneself from others-Red Sox fans versus Oriole fans, for example, or beer drinkers versus Scotch drinkers. Within the wonderful world of Disney, classification takes place largely through identification with Disney's characters, attractions, and themes. Children as well as adults see relationships between themselves and Mickey Mouse, for example.

Americans often view themselves as the subject of Walt Disney World, thus historical exhibits help classify U.S. visitors as 'us.' Visitors may have favorite characters or attractions, thus linking their identity to a particular image. The rituals of waiting in line, reading exhibit displays, looking over the park map, and talking about attractions each serve to promote classification in guests-What is the best attraction? What is the best route through the park? Buying Disney merchandise, such as hats, T-shirts, bags, watches, and staying in Disney hotels, also act as classifiers. Visitors can feel really "in" when, as guests of Disney hotels, they get an early admission time or roam the parks dressed in a well-designed and expensive Disney apparel item. Upon their return home, consumers signal their allegiance to the world of Disney by displaying authentic Disney souvenirs and recorded photo and video memories that certify the verity of their pilgrimage to the Magic Kingdom.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS**

While the postmodern marketing practices that we have described are from Disney or Disney-like environments, they have broader consumer implications. The key insight from Disney is that the management of consumer expectations is critical to the success of any business in the unfolding postmodern Information Age. Through Disney's network of films, ice shows, consumer products, recordings, advertising tie-ins, media sponsorship, and constant market research, the company is able to shape consumer expectations to an unprecedented degree. When guests arrive at Walt Disney World, they know what to expect, what they will do, what they will videotape and photograph, and what they will talk about upon their return home. To ensure that amateurs take home good-quality photos and videos, helpful signs to the best vantage

points in Disney parks are provided courtesy of Kodak. From the consumer standpoint, we hope it is useful to know more about Disney's strategies-they are part of what makes the parks work so successfully-and perhaps understand more how Disney manages consumer experience.

Walt Disney World serves as a pilgrimage for many of its visitors-they leave their homes, enter a sacred, magical world, and return transformed by their experience. Just as a religious pilgrim prepares for the visit to the sacred place through study, worship, and anticipation, the visitor to Disney theme parks is prepared through advertising, film, and travel brochure. Today, there are even dozens of websites that enable visitors to preview, review, plan, and relive every minute of their Disney theme park experience (see, for example, the Disney Web ring <http://www.ourlaughingplace.com/webring/>, accessed October 25, 2001).

Disney is able to meet customer expectations through three primary strategies. First, the consumer environment is totally within Disney's control. Second, Disney's understanding and employment of images is superlative. Third, Disney's actively manages memories-both of Disney icons and images and of United States history. In the following section, we comment on these three Disney techniques for managing customer expectations.

### **Management of the Consumer Environment**

Disney not only owns the land for its parks but in Florida the town of Lake Buena Vista - the hometown of Walt Disney World - is controlled by the Disney-affiliated Reedy Creek Improvement District (Shank 1995). Within the boundaries of its theme parks, Disney creates a total environment of consumption. Once the happy families have paid admission into the parks, the real consuming begins. Food, Mickey Mouse ears, souvenirs, taking pictures, drinks, more food (a "Mouskateer" ice cream bar), Minnie Mouse shoes, gifts for the folks back home, pajamas for the kids, more drinks-an endless array of possibilities designed to preserve the memory of the park before it is experienced. Fathers are often seen behind video cameras, strangely detached from the present, capturing the now for tomorrow. If you forgot your camera and film - no problem, Disney will provide one, for a price.

Disney's strategy is to keep people on the move. The layout of EPCOT center is based on extensive study of consumer behavior at Disneyland and the Magic Kingdom and on computer modeling of decision-making and traffic flows. Walt Disney World is laid out with care to insure dispersion of guests throughout the massive park, and to avoid emptiness in any particular place.

Line management is critical for the smooth functioning of the park. Disney parks have scores of attractions, more restaurants than a midsize city, and dozens of sparkling clean restrooms. Lines represent the paradox of spectacle management-no crowds, no spectacle, or at least no apparent demand. The popular attractions often have the longest lines. Waiting in line increases customer expectations, builds anticipation, and offers social connections with fellow guests. By zigzagging back and forth, guests come to recognize others in line, exchange comments, and bond with other "adventurers." There can, however, be too much waiting-leading to the death of fun-boredom. The Disney version of psychological manipulation reaches its apogee in its organization of line movement. Disney strives to make waiting guests feel like the line is moving, that waiting is worthwhile, and that the lines are the fair way to manage demand. Signs announce slightly overestimated "wait times" at various points in a line, leading the guests to believe that the lines moved faster than they had expected.

Environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan have extensively studied what people like in the natural and built environment (Kaplan and Kaplan 1982). Their research shows that basic informational needs influence preferences for certain landscapes. People tend to prefer scenes that help us make sense of an uncertain world. Four elements are important for environments-a feeling of coherence, some complexity, legibility, and a sense of mystery.

Disney's parks reflect this framework. The theme parks have well-defined boundaries; guests know that they will not get lost outside the confines of the park (many do temporarily inside, however). These boundaries together with highly organized structure of the attractions, streets, and buildings serve to create a *coherent* place for consumers. Complexity refers to whether "there is enough present in the scene to keep one occupied" (Kaplan and Kaplan 1982). Disney excels at this-and this is the reason many people come to Disney, there is so much to *do*, for the entire family. Complexity is an important aesthetic dimension-visual richness and diversity are key elements in good design. Even though the murals, columns, and walls in Disney parks are often transparent simulations of ancient or medieval designs, they are nonetheless elaborately carved or painted. Just because a Disney design is *faux*, it does not sacrifice *complexity*.

A key element in Disney's global appeal is the *legibility* of Disney artifacts and environments - some are transparently legible even to a 2-year old. It is easy to find one's way around in a Disney park, but not so easy as to eliminate serendipity. Maps are prominently

posted, and plenty of assistance is available to those who need it. For first time visitors, this is critical to promote legibility, but also for loyal repeat customers, there is a sense that the place won't change, and that one is visiting a place that is familiar. Mystery refers to a belief that interacting with an environment might pleasantly surprise us. Disney's spatial layouts promote a sense of *mystery* in several ways. First, attractions are often inside, hidden from view. As the line moves closer, more of the attraction is sometimes revealed, but to experience the attraction, one must actually go inside or through it. Second, Disney's parks are so huge that there are always new areas to discover. Third, Disney is not static-new attractions are constantly being added. Finally, for aficionados, Disney provides mind games, such as discovering the hidden Mickey designs at hundreds of places.

### **Management of Imagery**

From the look of their employees, who are referred to as "cast members" when in public view, and "guests", to the sudden appearance of Cinderella's castle off in the distance (a simulation of Germany's Schloss Neuschwanstein), Disney's use of imagery to create desired images in consumers' minds is powerful. Every element of the Disney environments that is accessible to the senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste of the guests is managed to delight, if possible, or to meet an expected minimum standard of pleasantness (similar to McDonald's) otherwise. Areas beyond the reach of the sense organs of the guests are designed for stark industrial efficiency.

Starting with ensuring a squeaky-clean environment, even at the peak of a tourist season, Disney does not leave any impression-creating element to chance. Even the "ad-libbed" lines spoken by cast members who help guests with the rides are scripted. Disney manages imagery on at least three levels. First, the corporate image is carefully monitored. Films that carry the Disney name are chosen to appeal to general audiences. More mature material is produced by other Disney-owned companies, such as Touchstone Pictures. Second, the "looks" of the parks are meticulously monitored. Third, the imagery within the parks, in the attractions, displays, and songs, are consistently choreographed to support the Walt Disney brand message.

Like a film, the tightly scripted attractions, exhibits, and indeed the entire group of Disney theme parks are reproduced each day. Just as with films, Disney visitors know that the experience will be the same next year, as it was last year and even decades ago. Like a vintage film, re-visits lead to a buoyant chaining of images and memories. This assurance of sameness is critical for Disney's

success. Through reproduction, Disney is able to manage the imagery inside the park, and help insure the continuity of imagery inside their guests' heads. Like a film, Disney does not leave events to chance-the Disney day is scripted, rehearsed, and produced.

In his classic 1936 (and posthumously celebrated) essay, art critic Walter Benjamin noted that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element... authenticity" (1968). What Disney and a select few top-notch global marketers (Coca-Cola, McDonald's, to lesser extent Sony and BMW) have acquired is the ability to substitute the loss of authenticity and aura with a synthesized aura. This synthesized aura is achieved through a superbly orchestrated program of massive self-referentiality of images. Every image in a Disney environment, every Disney entertainment product, every Disney merchandise refers back to one thing: Disney. The resultant synthesized aura is almost visible as a halo around the Disney logo. It is perhaps no accident that Tinkerbell often appears on the screen sprinkling sparkling pixie dust around Disney logo and characters.

### **Management of Nostalgia**

From the utopic Main Street USA to the rousing The American Adventure exhibit at the EPCOT center, Disney manages the nostalgia of America with heart-tugging warmth. Buildings on Main Street USA are scaled to about two-thirds their original size so that they appear reachable, friendly, playful. Disney's management of nostalgia is a straightforward extension of its management of consumer expectations. People expect nostalgic feelings to be pleasant, warm, idyllic; not painful and abrasive. Disney edits, adapts, and re-presents the past in line with these expectations.

One of the most interesting things that happens at Walt Disney World is the creation of nostalgia for places never visited, a past that never was, and characters that don't exist, in the normal sense. Disney promotes nostalgia for a mythical past that was exciting, happy, and safe-a past in which the good guys always win. Disney minimizes surprise. Like memories, Disney already exists. In the mind of the consumer, Disney is nostalgia. For older visitors, Disney represents innocence of childhood-both in terms of memories and action. In Walt Disney World, it is okay to be a child again.

Disney also manages a nostalgic-mythical sense of travel as exciting and adventurous. Attractions such as Spaceship Earth and "It's A Small World" perpetuate a vision where the rest of the world exists as an artificial tourist destination for Americans. Visiting Disney (especially in the EPCOT theme park) has become a suitable substitute for venturing overseas-without the risk of terrorism or

the hassle of a different language and currency. Visitors are offered a chance to create memories visiting places encapsulated within the realm of Disney. Culture becomes food, dress, and facts about each country: "Each showcase is wrapped in its sensory envelope, consistently themed from its national muzak and street shows to the accents and costumes of its staff" (Fjellman 1992). Through its thriving nostalgia business, Disney has been able to create positive memories about a staggering array of themes, all in the service of building customer connection to Disney—a relationship building "retroscape" (cf. Brown, Hirschman and Maclaren 2000).

It is not just through the sanitized management of history that Disney caters to nostalgia. Nearly six decades of Disney animation and four decades of Disney theme parks have made Disney itself an object of nostalgia. The hand-painted "cels" of early Disney animation films have been promoted as collectibles, and some of them can fetch several thousand dollars. Like Coca-Cola and other iconic brands, Disney has taken a rightful place of pride in America's commercial pantheon.

Whereas Disney has mastered the art of managing nostalgia for the American visitor, there is a risk that in a fast-changing, technology-driven age, nostalgia can become dated and uninteresting. Nostalgia can turn into quaintness, which could degenerate into apathy and boredom. Aware of this risk, Disney is investing in technology-aided pseudo-new mythology such as the computer-made movie *Toy Story*.

### **CAUTIONS AND CRITIQUES**

So—have you made your reservations yet? If Disney is this good at managing consumer expectations, what's the problem? What could possibly be wrong with meeting customer needs so successfully? Well, even the world of Disney has villains—and Disney's rise has not escaped criticism. Ironically, for an organization which has cornered the image market, much of the negative discourse on Disney focuses on the image of Disney—American, imperial, all-knowing (e.g., Giroux 1999; Kline 1995; Kunster 1993). Other critiques concern the environmental damage Disney has done to Florida, the de-humanizing false environment they have created within their parks, the influence Disney has on children, and the gap between the Disney environment and real, lived environment that most of us dwell in on a daily basis. We sort Disney doubts into three categories: (1) overconsumption; (2) influence and control over children; and (3) historical misuse and misappropriation

#### **Overconsumption**

Consumption has become one of the leading cultural institutions (see Firat 2001). Disney's potent combination of tourism and

consumption has exerted a profound influence on urban planning, architecture, and retailing (see, for example, Dunlop 1996). As cultural geographer Richard Sennett remarks: "The spaces full of people in the modern city are either spaces limited to and carefully orchestrating consumption, like the shopping mall, or spaces limited to and carefully orchestrating the experience of tourism" (1990). The wonderful world of Disney is woefully wound up with spending money - to enter the parks, for refreshments, and for the essential souvenirs. Critics view Disney as an overpriced shopping mall with a captive audience. More broadly, some see globalization in Disneyesque terms. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman compares consumers to tourists- they are both "sensation-seekers and collectors of experiences; their relationship to the world is primarily aesthetic; they perceive the world as a food for sensibility-a matrix of possible experiences..." (Bauman 1998:94). He suggests that globalization is organized around touristic dreams and desires, a logic influenced by Disney.

### **Children as Consumers**

Educational theorist Henry Giroux complains that Disney creates children as consuming subjects-learning to participate in a consuming world via early experience in Disney theme parks. Furthermore, he points to the leading role that Disney-along with other media conglomerates-play in providing us with prepackaged images of fun, frolic, and festivity. He worries that Disney has colonized childhood (Giroux 1994, 1999). Giroux's analysis of Disney also points to historical concerns about how Disney constructs and represents history-in its parks, on film, in mass media:

Disney's power and its reach into popular culture combine an insouciant playfulness and the fantastic possibility of making childhood dreams come true-yet only through the reproduction of strict gender roles, an unexamined nationalism, and a notion of choice that is attached to the proliferation of commodities (Giroux 1994).

Children, however, aren't the only ones who learn-actively and unconsciously-from Disney. The "educating" mission of Disney extends to older ages as well.

### **History and Disney**

Much of the criticism of Disney concerns its politics and the cultural signification of Disney imagery: the whitewashed history, the feigned innocence, the caricaturing of cultures, and the implied or overt imperialism. Disney's appeal to nostalgia, in particular, is subject to scathing attack:

the Disney Company has become synonymous with a notion of innocence which aggressively rewrites the historical and collective identity of the American past... Innocence in Disney's world becomes the ideological vehicle through which history is both rewritten and purged of its seamy side. In this case, innocence becomes important as an ideological construct less through its appeal to nostalgia, stylized consumption, or a unified notion of national identity than it does as a marker for recognizing the past as a terrain of pedagogical and ideological struggle. The Disney Company is not ignorant of history; it reinvents it as a pedagogical and political tool to serve its own interests, authority, and power (Giroux 1999).

It is important to realize that Disney parks present a lot of history- yet it is a highly restricted view that subtly reinforces notions of progress, prosperity, and American pride. Main Street USA, which shows a U.S. small-town street - described in Disney's marketing terms "as it should have been" - promotes a vision that is xenophobic and stereotypical. Here, as in the rest of the parks, there are few references -except for the dolls that represent Africa, India, Russia, and other places-to the rest of the world outside the U.S. (Fjellman 1992).

Disney also receives criticism from the political right. The conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) made just such a charge in June 1996. Citing the Disney corporate policy of providing health benefits to companions of gay employees, SBC and some of its fundamentalist churches initiated a boycott of Disney. To many of these conservatives, Disney, the American icon, had let them down. "It's a feeling of betrayal." according to Ron Boswell, pastor of a Southern Baptist church in Richmond, Virginia, "In one generation we lost something very real and good and moral and ethical" (quoted in Kelly 1996). What the critics from the left and the right miss is that Disney's only reality is its own - it is a commercial, simulated, self-referential hyperreality that will keep adapting to the changing times. Marketing appeals work best if "consumers cannot hold their attention, or focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous, and restive, and above all easily excitable and equally losing interest" (Bauman 1998).

### **IN CONCLUSION**

What is the Disney fan to do? Should one carry a cautionary consumer guide into the park? Does the fact that Disney misappropriates history destroy the wonder of their elaborate tableaux? Does understanding how scripted the consumer experience is ruin the experience? We hope not. We conclude that

Disney has managed to create an ideology that assumes that reality is subsumed by fantasy—a notion that the keys to the Magic Kingdom can be purchased at the gate. This is the world of the simulacrum, where the spectacle of consumption threatens to supersede and undermine the everyday world (cf. Debord 1994). Yet consumers flock to Disney parks, and Disney logic has permeated the annals of corporate strategy. We believe that critical reflection of Disney's success offers consumers insight into global processes of acceleration and spectacularization. Furthermore, understanding how Disney manages the consumer experience, and how Disney has influenced our imagination is the first step to a more powerful consumer choice process-resistant reaction.

One unexpected implication of Disney's success may be to make consumers dissatisfied with products and experiences that do not deliver a magical experience. If fantasy is the ultimate consumer goal, where does that leave our notions of "reality"? Have we reached the point where interacting with media characters within an artificial environment is preferable to our "normal" lives? Disneyland's Main Street USA attraction is a fascinating glimpse into a world that is increasingly segregated into the Disneys and the Disney-nots—a place where consumers can mingle safely in an environment that barely resembles the downtown Los Angeles of the riots, of dirt, of crime. The success of this strategy has not escaped the attention of competitors. Leading up to the entrance of the Universal Studios theme park in Hollywood is City Walk, a simulation of a Los Angeles street (not a small-town, Midwestern Main Street) minus the city's perils. While some social critics fume, consumers love it. In the future, consumers may remove themselves entirely from these locations through interactivity, Disneyesque consumption, and virtual reality. It is going to be a very, very brave new world. Where does that leave the needs of social interaction, consuming as communing, and community building? What would Mickey do? Is the answer in Tomorrowland?

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