

### **The Walt Disney Kingdom as Sacred in the American Imagination**

When Walt Disney opened his first theme park in 1955, he announced that he hoped his creation would be “a source of joy and inspiration to all the world” (Pinsky 299). Disney created his empire with the central ideas of happiness and enjoyment, however upon closer examination his philosophy was deeply complex and without the innocent naïveté and innocence portrayed. Every minute that a guest experiences in Disney World is manufactured to be pleasurable and enjoyable; from parking to waiting in line to buying merchandize to experiencing the rides; every moment, every smell, every sound is carefully calculated to create the ultimate Disney utopian experience. “[Disney World is] a pedestrian’s world, where the streets are always clean, the employees are friendly, and the trains run on time. All of its elements are themed, presented in a consistent architectural, decorative, horticultural, musical, even olfactory tone, with rides, shows, restaurants, scenery, and costumed characters coordinated to tell a consistent set of stories” (Fjellman 467). Disney is successful in its calculations, very few visitors’ experiences stray from this norm.<sup>1</sup> As the Disney Imagineer’s boast in their oversized picture book, *Walt Disney Imagineering*: “Thanks to the [Imagineer’s] dreams, themes, and magical schemes, the world is a happier place. Since the sun never sets on a Disney theme park, someone is smiling, laughing, singing, learning, caring, uniting, even forgetting about their most serious of worldly cares, even as you read these words” (Imagineers 9).

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<sup>1</sup> There have been fewer than a hundred lawsuits from over twenty-five million visits to Walt Disney World (Fjellman 219). If there is a lawsuit, Disney emerges victorious in about 85% of jury trials (Fjellman 436).

Much in the style of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor who also admired the idea of the world exposition, the world fair tradition was the foundation for the construction of Disney Land (Sudijic 205-206). Walt Disney hired people who had worked on previous world expositions to help manage his Californian empire (Sudijic 206). Walt Disney wanted to create a space that was beyond what people imagined a theme park to be. When he constructed Disney Land in California in 1955, many people were skeptical. "The amusement park trade claimed that a park without a ferris wheel, no roller coaster, no beer concession and no hotdog stands was unworkable. The banks wouldn't lend Disney any money..." (Sudjic 209). However, after successfully securing funds Disneyland exceeded beyond anyone's reasonable expectations. Americans craved the comfort of being reassured that their every need is taken care of; a new idea of vacation and relaxation emerged. "Disneyland had more than one million visitors in its first six months, grossing \$195 million in the first ten years" (Sudjic 209).

In part, the Walt Disney theme parks are in so successful because they wholeheartedly embrace what scholar Will Herberg defines as "The American Way of Life." There are certain aspects of American life that are characteristically and undeniably American that are beyond the constrained stereotypical: consumerism, apple pie, freedom, and democracy. There are some common ideals that bind Americans together that Disney capitalizes on in the most appealing way. "Spiritually, The American Way of Life is best expressed in a certain kind of 'idealism' which has come to be recognized as characteristically American. It is a faith that has its symbols and its rituals, its holiday and its liturgy, its saints and its sancta, and its faith that every American, to the degree that he is an American, knows and understands" (Herberg 78-

79). Disney in his theme parks and empire uses the ideal of “happiness” to access the American people. Happiness is the consistent theme in Disney World: “The Happiest Place on Earth.” As President Eisenhower once said: “Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that’s the way I know I’m an American: America is the most idealistic nation in the world” (Herberg 79). Walt Disney created the pinnacle of idealism with the Walt Disney Empire and therefore Walt Disney’s Enterprises are quintessentially American.

Americans have “*faith in faith*...It is not a faith in anything that is so powerful, just faith, the ‘magic of believing’” (Herberg 89). When guests go to Disney World they believe in possibility, in happiness, and in fulfillment. They enter a magical world with “magical gatherings.”<sup>2</sup> Disney World is the place that families can re-imagine history and create the future. For children especially, going to Disney World is memorable and exceptional because “[f]unctional, intact, multigenerational families living in close proximity are increasingly rare in America” (Pinsky 237). A visit to a theme park is a separate event from daily life. People want to visit Disney to gain a better understanding of themselves, of their history, and of their future.

In many ways Disney has expanded the original model of theme park by providing a seemingly safe, clean and novel environment. Walt Disney and the Disney Imagineers were able to re-imagine the history of the country and the future of tomorrow in a way that “...promotes a sense of history as a pleasantly nostalgic memory...” (Wallace 149). Walt Disney’s theme parks were not conceived in a vacuum. As Disney

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<sup>2</sup> Disney has coined a term for vacations with a multi-generational families, “a magical gathering.”

conforms to “every religious experience is expressed and transmitted in a particular historical context” (Eliade 171). Through Disney’s design, the religion is transmitted in the historical context of America; it’s specific to an American experience. “Walt’s approach, though it had its roots in Hollywood, was emblematic of larger developments in 1950s America. The dominant culture, seemingly determined to come up with a happy past to match its own contented present, contracted a selective amnesia” (Wallace 137). In 1954, the year before Disney Land opened the Supreme Court decided in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, it was unconstitutional to deny black students equal education. Disney wanted to go back before there were civil rights unrest, two destructive world wars, and the depression, to a distant and hazy and perfect Victorian time with Main Street USA.

However, despite being “quintessentially American” Walt Disney and it’s enterprises, has a very pointed audience who this nostalgia resonates with: “The class spectrum of EPCOT visitors is dramatically narrow...The median income is \$35,700, and fully three quarters are professionals or managers ...Nor do African Americans (3 percent) or Hispanics (2 percent) come in large numbers...Only 22 percent of visitors come from Florida; 71 percent are from elsewhere in the United States, chiefly the Northeast and Midwest...” (Wallace 153). Despite being the ideal of what America is and attracting tens of millions of visitors a year, Walt Disney World “...is not a working class attraction” or an attraction that appeals to the diverse population of America (Wallace 153).

Disney appeals to middle-class<sup>3</sup> white people, and it appeals to how they imagine America. This reimagining of history by Disney is: “Distory,” a way of reimagining history into telling pedagogical stories for their entertainment value. “...Walt Disney has taught more people history, in a more memorable way, than they ever learned in school... The Disney people do not consider this retrospective tidying up an abuse of the past—they freely and disarmingly admit its falsification, pointing out that this, after all, just entertainment...” (Wallace 134-137). There is little about the present at Walt Disney World, the displays are either about a vague history or a future full of possibility. Of course, by leaving out many important yet unsavory components of history, Disney cannot appeal to everyone. Still Distories have a strong enough application to a specific demographic to be representative of Americans as a whole, perhaps based out of an obscured, diluted and normative Protestant ideal in American history (Fessenden 6).

The American Adventure is perhaps the thorniest with retelling American history and is the most complex of the attractions at EPCOT<sup>4</sup>, both technologically and ideologically (Fjellman 99). The American Adventure is located at in a large Georgian

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<sup>3</sup> “The American Way of Life is a middle class way, just as the American people in their entire out-look and feeling are a middle-class people” (Herberg 81).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the original conception of Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) by Walt Disney and the way that it functions today are entirely different. The original plan, on the words of Walt Disney: “EPCOT will be an experimental city that would incorporate the best ideas of industry, government and academia worldwide, a city that caters to the people as a service function. It will be a planned, controlled community; a showcase for American industry and research, schools, cultural and educational opportunities...There will be no landowners and therefore no voting control. People will rent houses instead of buying them...there will be no retirees; everyone must be employed...” (Fjellman 116). He wanted to build a large bubble to insure consistent weather over the 550 acres (Fjellman 115). However, Disney died in the middle of the planning. EPCOT was then transformed into a park to showcase American corporations, instead of a social experiment.

building as the central pavilion of the World Showcase and forms the thematic and architectural backbone of EPCOT (Fjellman 100). In 1982, when the EPCOT opened it was obvious that the public would demand a history that contained minimal allusions to the conflicts of the country's past (Fjellman 99). Coca Cola and American Express sponsored the magical theater and the challenge became how to manipulate the history so that it showcased patriotic corporate ideals and turned conflicts into optimistic opportunities (Fjellman 100). The way this difficulty was pacified was by having the way the story was told take precedence to the content. The sticky history is almost nonexistent because in the compressed vignettes the characters are icons (Fjellman 100). Historical events have been fabricated and mythologized (Fjellman 100). People believe that they have seen something ambiguous when they leave the theater and comment on its contemporary and progressive ideology (Fjellman 100).

The American Adventure display begins with a singing group, The Voices of Liberty who sing American classics for the preshow (Fjellman 100). While listening to the songs, people can look at a display of Declaration of Independence signing paraphernalia and eleven quotations about American themes<sup>5</sup> (Fjellman 100). After the central doors open, people enter the Hall of Flags leading to an escalator ride to a thousand-seat theater (Fjellman 100). In the theater there are Spirit of America statues display meant to represent important national characteristics such as: The Spirit of

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<sup>5</sup> Here is a sample of two of the themed quotations: "America has been settled by people of all nations. All nations may claim for their own. We are not a narrow tribe of men...No, our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one...We are not a nation so much as a world" –Herman Meville (Fjellman 414). "I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfillment of our spirit of our people of our mighty and immortal land is yet to come. –Thomas Wolfe (Fjellman 416).

Heritage (an Indian maiden), Spirit of Individualism (a cowboy), and The Spirit of Discovery (a mountain man)<sup>6</sup> (Fjellman 100-101).

In the twenty-nine minute show audioanimatronic technology is highly advanced with robots representing important American figures (Fjellman 100). Robotic Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin guide the audience through the adventure with banter like talk show hosts (Fjellman 102). In the beginning, “the theme are set out: the interaction between human activity and the environment that produced Turner’s American character, the melting pot, the new society destined for greatness, national pride, the dreams and visions of a new world versus the myths and legends of the old, and the great adventure—with Englishmen...as the first adventurers” (Fjellman 102). From the “discovery” of America, there is a time jump of one hundred and forty years to the Revolutionary War when a song comes one about how joyous it is to “march and fight along the Freedom Trail” (Fjellman 102). There is a mere mention of slavery with Frederick Douglass quoting *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that anti-slavery “is no longer a thing to be prevented” (Fjellman 103).

After the Civil War is presented as a family tragedy that divided American families (missing the racial component), Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces takes the stage in a speech that is mostly fabricated (Fjellman 103). The speech that is created by Disney is much less bitter and more cheerful than the one that real Chief Joseph made (Fjellman 103). Then Twain’s response to Chief Joseph how his speech is “reminding us once again of our long, painful journey to the frontiers of human liberty...” (Fjellman

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<sup>6</sup> Out of twelve Spirit of America statues, there is one Native American statue and one Black American statue (Fjellman 101).

103). When in reality, what Chief Joseph's story is a retelling of history that is demeans Native Americans and makes it sounds like the genocide that was committed against the Native Americans was committed against everyone.

Then the stage moves to the theme of progress with the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition celebrating with a montage of inventions (Fjellman 105). After a quick journey through World War I, the Great Depression (presented as hopeful) and World War II, the set shifts into a film montage of thirty-five ecumenical iconic people<sup>7</sup> and events entitled "The Golden Dream" (Fjellman 106). The American Adventure closes with a reassurance from Benjamin Franklin that "the American Adventure will continue" (Fjellman 106). Visitors leave the theater with the sensation that Disney has not whitewashed as much as usual, yet there are still large silences, such as no working class people and no mention of institutional or class nature of contemporary conflict or really of the present day at all (Fjellman 106). In Disney's World, it is all about the air brushed past and the possibility of a hopeful future.

The philosophy displayed in a single exhibit at Disney, has evolved to become representative of how we perceive ourselves. The whole story is told from a white, male, Protestant point of view with just enough hints of token ethnicities and women sprinkled in that it is hard to protest. Originally, The Golden Dream excluded and ignored the Vietnam War, but there were complaints, so they included a token gentrified picture of a helicopter landing in Vietnam in the montage (Fjellman 106). Disney never tells a complete or even a partial history, really it's mere suggestions of an attractive truth that

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<sup>7</sup> "There are seven women, two children, five black people, one Mexican American" (Fjellman 106).

pacify people. The story that is told to us at the American Adventure is a soothing one: we faced greatly minimized problems, but we have always overcome and in the future we will always overcome them. There is a feeling of security, purity and newness that are manufactured in the eerily realistic robotic displays confirming a disguised white ideology.

A visit to a Disney theme park appeals only to a certain population of the American people, white people, yet is typified in the imagination as representative of all of Americans. “The stories many were told about the American dream and its truth, justice, and possibilities for individual happiness turned out to be untrue”, except when we are visiting Disney (Fjellmen 36). “As Durkheim predicted over ninety years ago, the division of labor – now compounded by the division of markets – has led to increasing segmentation of a society whose people are held together by an increasingly diluted set of collective values” (Fjellman 41-42). The values are present in The American Way of Life, primarily the value of having faith in faith (Herberg 89). Durkheim claimed that his segmentation within society would be brought by the accelerating demands of modern commodity consumption. Disney World meets these demands of modern commodity consumption in a way that was never done before, and that perfectly realized a mainstream segment of the American culture. Therefore Walt Disney World has become totemic of America itself.

“...Vacation Kingdom is more than just a set of amusement parks: It is the major middle-class pilgrimage center in the United States.” (Fjellman 10). Disney is full of icons that people orient themselves around. The icons they represent something collective about our society, so that we crave the carefree nature that Disney is able to provide us:

the realization of fairytales. In the chaos of American society, people just wanted to be taken care of and Disney is able to take care of us even if only for a short time, when in the confines of the 27,400 acres of swamp and scrub Florida forest (Fjellman 10). In way that Durkheim predicted, Disney creates an experience that maintains a status quo of ideals of Americans that manufactures an artificial but effective effervescence around the experience of Disney World. Durkheim explains effervescence as “swept away...they experience themselves as grander than at ordinary times; they do thing they would not do at other times; they feel, and at that moment really are, joined with each other and with the totemic being” (Durkheim xli). When at Disney World it is a break from ordinary time, people are literally swept away in the deliberate park’s design<sup>8</sup> that makes them feel like they are making decisions about where to go. Further, people feel a rare kinship at Disney to the hundreds of thousands of people experiencing Disney with them. People are friendlier to each other because they feel a sense of obligation that because of Disney’s reputation of the “Happiest Place on Earth” that they too must be happy. They remember their experience at Disney for years to come and talk about it. Some people make Disney World their annual vacation, the effervescence they feel stays with them and are maintained through memory.

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<sup>8</sup> “Decision-making is very fatiguing. Relating things that are unrelated is fatiguing...if you start wandering from thing to another, not quite knowing what you want to se, you will wear yourself out” said John Hench the senior vice-president of WED Enterprise (Fjellman 202-203). Free choice is an illusion in the park because of the urban design of the park that places visual magnets to draw people along (Fjellman 202). They base the layout of their parks on extensive study of guest’s behavior and computer modeling of decision making and traffic flow (Fjellman 203).

Disney World is all-powerful in American society, it is a financial conglomerate and it is adored by “everyone” from winners at sports<sup>9</sup> to children who watch the television commercials that promote Disney vacations as the most thrilling time in a child’s life and will instantly make you the envy of all your classmates at school. Like many things in American culture, it is a white middle class story that is propagated as the whole story.

Eliade argues that people naturally gravitate toward power. People gravitate toward Disney by the millions. Disney World has become a religious site in America. It would be hard to argue otherwise, with the pure volume of visitors equal to tourism in main major cities in the world, there are very few other attractions that draw people in such volumes. However, “unlike many holy places, which become so through the unanticipated quirks of history, [Walt Disney World] is an *intended* shrine” and creates the history that it is part of (Fjellman 21). The history is carefully controlled to gloss over anything that might be offensive or controversial, instead only perfection is presented with unbelievable attention to detail. Part of the power is in the inventiveness of Disney, it is able to invent itself into something that is powerful through money and the imagination of the Imagineers.

Eliade argues: “Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human being cannot live in chaos” (Eliade 166). For the American public, Disney provides this opening towards to the transcendent; by going to Disney people are experiencing a little slice of heaven because everything is ordered and safe.

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<sup>9</sup> “I’m going to Disney World!” is what famous sports celebrities when asked what they are going to do in celebration of winning (Fjellman 151).

People don't worry about being attacked in Disney World; they walk the streets without worrying about their safety. They can escape their chaotic everyday lives and instead for a package fee everything is taken care of. Part of the beauty of Disney World is that you don't pay per individual ride or exhibit; you are given a pass that simplifies. The theme park that was once predicted to be a flop, was re-imagined so successfully by Disney to the point that the "[t]he theme park [has become] as a sacred site...attest[ing] to the ways in which it has expanded beyond the original model" (Lukas 222).

Further evidence of the imaginations and ideals of the American people, Walt Disney World is a pilgrimage site because of its utopian ideals that perfectly answer real people's needs for order and holiness in a late capitalist society. Walt Disney was an opportunist and ingeniously he created a Kingdom that perfectly answers Americans want for something that was separate from everyday life and a fantasy of how we retell our past and imagine our futures. However, it's a carefully crafted fantasy that has a child-like innocence. Disney utilized a long American tradition and capitalized on Americans greatest desires dreams coming true. As the Imagineers say: "The magic is that feeling when dreams come true. The magic is real, and its spark lives in you" (Imagineers 190)!

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