WALT DISNEY AS THE ICON OF THE AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

Walt Disney is well-known widely throughout America as well as around the globe. In the twentieth-first century, the Disney name remains as a mark on all parts of American popular culture, namely animated movies, live-action films, network television, children's books, merchandising, theme parks, and many more. The significance of Disney's ideas among others: vanity in the American past, devotion to pastoral values, hopefulness in the future, and obviously belief in industry and technology—they all has infused the American popular thoughts. By appreciating Disney's popularity and its influence means one could understand the rhythm of American popular culture. In this article, the overview of those Disney's ideas is reflected in Disney Products such as Walt Disney World and some others.

Keywords: Disney, American popular culture, American values

A. Introduction

Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago on 5 December 1901 to Elias and Flora Disney. Elias Disney was an unsuccessful father who was continually seeking to improve his and his family's lot by moving on, both regionally and from business to business. Walt is the fourth son besides his brother Roy and sister named Ruth. Unfortunately, Elias and Flora's family was discontent about bringing Walt and the other children up in the turmoil of a modern city and in 1906 they moved to a farm in Marceline, Missouri. It was here Walt spent his seminal times and is often regarded as the source of the interest in animals which was to be so evident in his animated cartoons. The family left Marceline in 1910 then moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Walt and Roy helped their father to deliver newspaper. During 1912, Roy left Kansas City to help his uncle on a farm. While Walt, took a correspondence course in art, and in 1919 he sought work in Kansas City as a cartoonist. Then he met Ub Iwerks who gave him a job in Film Ad, he began working on moving cartoons in form of short advertising films. Due to unsatisfied with the work, Walt decided to left for Hollywood in 1923. Having failed to get a number of jobs, he was encouraged by his brother, Roy, to go back to cartoons. In July 1925, Walt married with Lillian Bounds, then in 1926 The Alice and Wonderland was released by Walt Disney.
Company, followed by *Oswald The Lucky Rabbit*. In New York, 1928, *Steamboat Willie* got a sensational success and many distributors competed for contract. During the early 1930, the Studio created the characters such as Pluto, Donald Duck, Goofy, and by around 1934 Walt came into the view that he needed to make a feature film and *The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first animated length-film which is followed by another films (Bryman, 1995: 1-7).

Walt realized that a sound movie is very potential to be made and developed, then he arranged his plan to create a cartoon, Steamboat Willie was the evident. Disney’s name for his new creation was Mortimer Mouse, but then his wife, Lillian suggested the name Mickey Mouse, and both agreed that it sounded pretty funny and good. For this reason, the most popular cartoon character of the twentieth century was born (Jackson, 1993: 13-14). The reason Walt chose a mice for the character due to his fondness for that animal, as stated in his quotation below:

"I do have a special feeling for mice. Mice gathered in my wastebasket when I worked late at night. I lifted them out and kept them in little cages on my desk. One of them was my particular friend. Then before I left Kansas City I carefully carried them him out into a field and let him go" (Jackson, 1993: 13)

The *Steamboat Willie* has an excellent impression, and subsequently Walt learned that Mickey Mouse had prolonged to be a national phenomenon. As Jackson stated in his book that "as the Great Depression gripped the nation, Americans attended the movies in droves, finding in them escape and enjoyment. Mickey became their ardent" (1993: 19). In short, one could say that Walt Disney World occupies the unique position of being the most popular manmade attraction on this planet (Birnbaum, 1988: 5). For this reason, Marshall supports with his opinion that technology in this specific area, media have often been perceived as powerful in their capacity to shape and frame the message and representations of particular cultures (1997: ix).

The discussion about Disney World has been discussed by many scholars or researchers, and I think it is important for me to get more information about Disney as the player in the American popular culture as well. To comprehend Disney’s role in American popular culture then this short discussion and brief explanation is written.

**B. Discussion**

**B.1 Understanding Culture, Popular Culture and American Culture**

**B.1.1. Concept of Culture**

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To say people in a group share a culture it is not to say that everyone believes the same thing. Instead, it is to say that people in a given community generally share similar language, values, attitudes, beliefs, and the like. It could be assumed that people in one community are sufficient different from people in another community that they can be recognized as sharing a culture, however partial the sharing might be. Culture influences social and political life without determining it. In other words, culture provides the context in which economic, social, and political life ‘make sense’ to its members. Those ideas and actions that are recognized as culturally appropriate will be supported by members of a given community sharing a culture, even if they do not agree with the specific act (for example, smoking a cigarette is considered a personal choice in the United States, so while most Americans do not smoke, they do not wish to forbid smoking either). (Crothers, 2007: 7).

B.1.2. Popular Culture

Edward Jay Whetmore defines about popular culture “represents a common denominator, something that cuts across most economic, social, and educational barriers. It means that popular culture represents the elements of everyday life, the artifacts and institutions shared by a society, and a body of common language” (quoted in Petraccia & Sorapure, 2012: 3-4). So, pop culture is the shared knowledge and practices of a specific group at a specific time. Because of its commonality, pop culture both reflects and influences people’s way of life; because it is linked to a specific time and place, pop culture is transitory, changeable, and frequently an originator of change.

The distinction of high and popular culture was developed during the Enlightenment. Intellectuals of that time began to pursue universal standards the base principles of human life which will be the product of human thought and exploration. The educated and elites at the time assumed the elements of ‘real’ beauty objectively and universally associated with ‘high’ culture. Everything else became common and popular. The social split between high and popular culture intensified and expanded with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s and beyond. As Todd Gitlin argued as follows:

“In the contemporary industrial era popular culture is a product, usually of large, often multi-national corporations providing goods and services for profit. These corporations leverage their marketing and productive capacities to create as large and pervasive a consumer base for their products as possible. They use their power to establish patterns
of planned obsolescence, ever-changing styles, and a treadmill of celebrity introductions and exits to promote endless turnover in products that are then marketed and consumed by the population at large” (quoted in Crothers, 2007: 9).

Popular culture thus provides a way for researchers to learn about the values, needs, concerns, and standards by which different communities of people live. Popular culture works at many levels as depicted in American movies (Walt Disney Production as one example).

B.1.3. American Popular Culture

The people who live in the United States come from various nations representing various languages, religious, and cultural group. Due to the diversity of social spheres then Marc Howard Ross has called a concept of ‘public culture’ which is refer to “the common terms of reference, symbols, rituals, and ideologies policy, and identity” (quoted in Crothers, 2007: 12). Furthermore, he added that terms could be found in public documents, speeches, campaigns, and political symbols referred to by others as they promote their agendas. The public culture in the United States is generally termed ‘civic’ covering values, ideas, and expectations that people who live in the United States refer to when explaining what they believe, why they believe it, and which program they favor are usually couched in norms like democracy, individual rights, tolerance, and so on that are seen in public sphere. The distribution of American public cultural attitudes and values has emerged for several reason, among others religion, social and economic position and timely and effective manner. So, it is important to understand that these public cultural values were applied differently across the American regions.

American popular culture can be seen to have influence in the production and distribution of popular culture entertainment products, one of them is the Walt Disney Company. It controls the production of wide range of entertainment ranging from film to music, television, video games, and Internet content. As stated in Globalization and American Popular Culture that one of the most famous conglomerates is the Walt Disney Company. Built from a few cartoon characters first drawn in the early twentieth century, by 2000 the company had grown to have $25 billion in revenues derives from entertainment resources—animated movies, music, cable and satellite channels, radio station and Internet access (Crothers, 2007: 33). This argument is supported by Sniderman & Hagen that “an official theme of American culture is innovation, openness to experience” (1985:44).
B.1.3.1. The mental evidence of American Pop Culture & its Formulas

American popular culture has manifested in various forms namely movies, music and television program and it has a specific content. The products of American popular culture are further embedded in formulas and narratives conventions that defines their ‘American-ness’.

• Disney Animated Movies

In Disney’s products, for example Disney animated movies, it have one element that attracts audiences is the role of gender. American popular culture has employed issues of gender in its products. As Crothers said that there are four stereotypes of women’s roles in society can be identified in American movies, They are:

1. The woman as sex object. In this role, women serve as little more than eye candy for the sexual enjoyment for the audience.

2. The woman as victim. In this role, females are dominated, often trough sexual violence, into accepting the will of an authority figure—usually, although not always, a man. This role is often linked to women who have challenged social norms (e.g. refusing to accept a husband’s demands, or going out to bar alone and meeting an abusive male). The lesson is that to be safe a woman should comply with society’s rule and expectations. Otherwise, pain and suffering follow.

3. The common gender stereotype in American popular culture is that of the traditional wife and mother. Explored in Disney animated movies such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty the image of woman usually depicts a woman whose life is devoted to her family. She is the master of the private realm of family life, working endlessly to cook, clean, care for children, and support her husband as her interacts with the outer, public world. The woman’s reward for accepting her domestic place is a life of relative physical luxury (a nice car, a nice home, etc.) if not complete emotional and intellectual satisfaction.

4. A final female stereotype is that of the ‘power woman’ which usually comes in one or two forms: the superwoman who balances family and career to be a success in the world at large, or the victimized woman who throws off her oppressors and becomes a new, strong person. The first version is usually shown as a woman in a position of authority.
The second is a woman who learns that there are other ways to live and so escape whatever forces—usually a man or a society bound to traditional values of women’s domestic subservience—have been controlling her. In other case, the women are shown to wield power, to overcome challenges placed in their way by men, and often to be sexually assertive and power seeking (Crothers, 2007: 101).

Family is also another dimension of human life treated in conventional form by American popular culture. Families are depicted in American popular culture tend to appear in three forms as follows:

1. The first form centers on hapless and incompetent fathers, faithful and persistent wives (if they exist in the show, many such programs feature only divorced or widowed fathers) who really hold the family together.

2. The second is the soap opera which regularly use the family as their dramatic focus; however, families in the serial universe are not mutually supportive partner. Instead, soap opera families are internally competitive and vicious (Brothers sleep with each other’s wives, for instance).

3. The third is derives from the power woman stereotype. In this convention, the mother is often important and powerful and well off; her problems come from struggling to find time to balance the competing pressure of job, family, and romance. (Crothers, 2007: 102-103).

Race and ethnicity are another area of human life in which American popular culture broadcasts stereotypical, often offensive, images and themes.

- Walt Disney World

Walt Disney World next abbreviated with (WDW) is the perfect example of the American way. First, of course, WDW is a set of amusement parks—the flagship Magic Kingdom, EPCOT Center with its Future World and World Showcase, the Disney-MGM Studios, River Country, Discovery Island, Typhoon Lagoon, and Pleasure Island. These venues, along with Walt Disney World Shopping Village and the various Disney resort hotels, are visited by over 30 million people a year, making WDW by far the most important entertainment center in the world. The WDW is more than just a set of amusement parks. It is the major middle-class pilgrimage center in the United States. Walt Disney, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and the others are central U.S icons. With the corporate capture as well of Peter Pan, Cinderella, Snow
White, Pinocchio, the Three Little Pigs, even Winnie-the-Pooh, even Kermit the Frog, WDW (together with California’s Disneyland) has become the home of childhood.

Walt Disney World has become a pilgrimage site partly because of the luminosity of its cross-cultural and marketing and partly because its utopian aspects appeal powerfully to real needs in the capitalist society. Disney’s marketing is unique, because it captured the symbolic essence of childhood but the company has gained access to all public communication media. Movies, television shows, comic books, dolls, apparels, and educational film strips all point to the parks and to each other (Fjellman, 1992: 10-11). Each advertise all the others as part of its content without the need of special commercial interruptions. Special advertising can be used sparingly and elsewhere.

We must always remember that the business of the Walt Disney Company is business. The theme park division is only part of a much larger conglomerate who have much capital to sell commodities. Disney competes with a lot of other corporations for the optional leisure dollar, so however predatory Disney may be, it must and does sell something special. The Company—especially at its theme parks—produces, packages, and sells experiences and memories as commodities. (Fjellman, 1992: 11).

These in many ways are utopian experiences. From horseback riding to sashimil; golf to English high tea; mock historical tableaux/scene to educational technological displays, song and dance review, parades, singing robot bears, film of all sorts, and Minnie Mouse in a kimono, WDW contains hundreds of separate events, all occurring more or less simultaneously. Each one has a consistent theme—a blend of architecture, art, craft, sound, even smell—that surrounds us like an envelope. The venues are organized into larger themes—fantasy, U.S. history, science and technology, world travel—in the major divisions of the parks. WDW presents what Disney calls “family entertainment”—fun for ages that is safe, clean, efficient, and uncontroversial. Insofar as the magic works, people purchase the experiences and all the accompanying souvenirs. In order to feel safe, happy, clean and civil—people are willing and trusting enough to put themselves into Disney’s hands for a time. (Fjellman, 1992: 13)

The semantics of the hegemonic speech are different at the various theme parks at WDW—nostalgia and fantasy at the Magic Kingdom, travel and culture at World Showcase, science and technology at Future World—but the syntax is the same. At all the parks we are
overwhelmed by the number and velocity of messages. Images speed past us, disconnected our minds as we pass theme to theme.

**B.2. Walt Disney World (WDW) as the American Popular Culture**

Culture has a number of characteristics. First, it is learned. It is taught to children and other outsiders by means of talk, writing, and other available media. Once internalized, culture becomes a way—often the only way—of interpreting the world around us. Second, culture is both shared and distributive; that is, all people within their purview, American ideas about individualism and pragmatism are such notions. The stories and symbols presented by the Walt Disney Company form one such set of cultural weapons (Fjellman, 1992: 25). Third, much of culture, especially that which is ubiquitous, is unspoken. Once we learn them, these pieces of culture are background out of our normal awareness unless rules about them are broken. Beliefs about the individual, the gods, nature, etiquette, kinship, personal space, happiness, time, causality, fun, rules of evidence, responsibility, category of people, etc all of these are understandings that we learn, forget that we learned, and consider good, true, and beautiful or unfortunate but inevitable, but in any case universal.

The use of culture here referred to what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their *The Social Construction of Reality* that they argue:

> “the structural skeleton of any social group id formed by a set of everyday behaviors that are institutionalized; that is these behaviors (or actions) are patterned, consistent, regular, and rule-governed such that people know what they are supposed to do under normal circumstances” (1992: 26).

The most powerful and frequent use of culture in the interest of management, access to the market, and even rebellion involves the other task of cultural control—the capture and manipulation of already existing stories and symbols. This is the task at which the Walt Disney Company stands out. Most of the stories told at Walt Disney World make use of Disney versions of elements of U.S. and world culture. Notions about the home, family, and sex roles as well as historical characters such as Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain also repackaged in the interest of Disney themes (Fjellman, 1993: 29). According to Dinney “by employing actuality techniques, the mass media marketed fantasy packaged in the form of documentation. This tendency reinforced by the industrial organization of the studios and networks and their associated guilds and crafts” (Spiller & Larrabee, 1961:164).
At WDW and especially at EPCOT center (Experimental Prototype Community for Tommorow), customers are offered ideas about history in the form of the simpler, less sophisticated time to the postmodern world of transnational corporations. Here, one could see the WDW and EPCOT open the view of U.S in the past, present and future. Some related things can be seen in WDW. First, there is little about the present at WDW (and surprisingly little about the future). The point of a vacation is to change the here and now for a while. Although much of WDW is named for the future and the infrastructural technology points in that direction, much of the activity at the parks is wrapped up in the trapping of the past. As Fjellman says in his book *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* as follows:

“Even the attractions at Future World are substantially about the past. The typical EPCOT story model—of which AT&T’s spaceship Earth, GM’s World of Motion, GE’s Horizons, and Delta’s Dreamflight in Tomorrowland are variations (and Exxon’s Universe of Energy and Kraft’s The Land have touches)—takes rides on a journey through a whimsical past, mentions the presents, and suggests some vague hint of a future in which technology and graphics will be important” (1993: 61).

A second interesting thing about Disneytime is that at both Disneyland and WDW, time is defined spatially. Tomorrow is not so much a time at the Magic Kingdom as a place—Tomorrowland. Each of part of the Magic Kingdom has a temporal theme. Liberty Square represents colonial America and the War of Independence. Frontierland glosses the nineteenth-century American West. Main Street USA gives us a turn of the century small town.

Disney is aggressively aware that its existence depends on continually convincing the public that its product is unique and that its symbolic capital is earned and creditable. As any of its products, images, or interfaces with the public may potentially crack the frontage, intense control is maintained over the quality of products, the use of trademark. For Disney to perform as a central icon of the American way (and to generate revenue in doing so), the Company needs to mask its interest.

**B.3. The Ideological Values in Media & Disney Products**

Raymond Wiliams defines ideology as a *relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a 'world-view' or a 'class outlook'*. (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 222). According to Samuel Becker, ideology “governs the way we perceive our world and ourselves; it controls what we see as ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’. An
ideology is an integrated set of frames of reference through which each of us sees the world and to which all of us adjust our actions” (in Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 222). In Disney Production there is some ideology or values behind its various products in the name of historical background, social, economical, and even technological values.

Disney seemed to be the personification of this American moment and the American Dream. He had built enormous wealth and a multinational creative enterprise from scratch, but projected an aura of being down-to-earth and humble. He embraced advanced technology and ideas but paradoxically used them to create nostalgic versions of the past (Tellingly, many of his most popular film productions—Snow White is set in the distance past or based on old fairy tales).

Disney’s dedication to work as a moral good also mirrored that of the Protestant work ethic so central to American culture. Disney asserted that he worked 14 hours a day and never took a vacation. “I get enough vacation,” he said, “from getting a change of troubles” (43). The result of his hard work was the success sought by so many upwardly mobile Americans. Financially, Disney related to journalist how far he had come. He said to his brother: “I was just remembering...the days when we couldn’t afford to owe even a thousand dollars because no one would lend us that much!” (Gordon in Jackson, 2006: 4).

That success, however, also displayed a crucial conflict in Disney’s life and philosophy. Like America itself, he was torn between two ideals: the drive to advance materially and technologically and the desire to stay connected to the simplicities of the past, family and nature. On one hand, Disney espoused to his interviewers his attraction to television, animatronics, and futuristic projects, such as the live-action adaptation of some literary work. He observed that “The age we’re living in is the most extraordinary the world has ever seen. There are new concepts into realities. We are moving forward”. (xiii). “I am really having fun with television—it’s just like a cage has been opened- and I can fly again”. He was equally excited about a new technology—animatronics—proclaiming at a Florida press conference announcing plans for a new theme park, that “it’s all electronically controlled. It’s another dimension in our world of animating that inanimate...and with that it’s a new door (Florida Press Conference 10). Yet Walt Disney was just as connected to the past, peppering his 1950s movie release with frontier stories like Davy Crocket. He fashioned Disneyland as a place steeped in an idealized past that existed
more in his mind than in reality. The houses on Main Street, for example, are 80% smaller than normal and all else, including to be more easily grasped (Gordon in Jackson, 2006: 29).

Disney symbolized a cultural tension of America’s industrial society; the future as represented by technology versus the past as represented by nostalgia. Here is the excerpt: "Disneyland is not only a living monument to a living man; it is a surprisingly accurate map of the complicated mass of little gray cells that make up the mind of Walt Disney. All the apparent paradoxes are there: Nostalgia jammed up against needle-point promises of the future" (Gordon in Jackson, 2006: 29). (xiv).

Walt Disney spent much of his life creating a world of fantasy filled with characters that have become America’s cultural icons. Through Disney’s various products, Disney shows about science, technology, and the future which are primarily corporate ideology. They are intended to convince us to put our lives—and our descendants’ lives—into the hands of transnational corporate planners and the technological systems they wish to control.

C. Conclusion

Disney is viewed in his persona, films, or corporation having been exposed by a series of devastating ideological incursions which have demolished Disney’s claims to political neutrality and to be a purveyor of mere innocent entertainment. Disney’s powerful hegemonic hold over children’s literature, family entertainment, mainstream taste, and Western popular culture remains intact and undeniably continues to grow. Disney simulations remind visitors of something they know, somewhere they have been, and something they have seen or heard. We point things out, tell stories, argue about Disney’s take on things. We decide what to see next, argue about where to eat, complain about the lines, and we walk—continuously. All of this take place in an environment very different from that of our normal lives, for Disney is not just offering entertainment: The Company is also selling, to those of us who can afford it, an remedial to everyday life. Under the rule of commodity, our lives have become fragmented and confusing. Our environment are dangerous and threatening. Our sense of powerlessness is fed by the institutions of modern life and by the uncontrollable behavior of others. What we buy at WDW is not just fun and souvenirs but is also a welcome civility on a human scale.

Although much of WDW has taste, the category is meaningless here as well. In its destruction of the idea of excess, WDW is a constituting symbol of a United States beyond
excess. It is like a mutant growth, distilling the commodity form to its core and presenting the postmodern world of the late capitalism—the vast market of image and mixed metaphor—in its essence.

The production of mass popular culture has always been centered in the United States, even as Americans have reached out the rest of the world for ideas, money and markets. In addition, much of the music, films, and television programming generated by the major popular culture corporations carry an American label regardless of the nation of origin of the company that owns it. Moreover, much of its programming—especially those to be marketed and distributed to the world derives its life and context from the economic, social, and technological popular culture. Thus, American popular culture is a global phenomenon that is embedded in the context of globalization in our contemporary era.

References


