

A PREVIOUS ARTICLE IN *Image & Text* CONSIDERED THE STEREOTYPICAL MEANING OF MICKEY MOUSE WHEN GIVEN A TYPICALLY SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITY AFTER ENGAGING IT WITH SPECIFIC AFRICAN ICONOGRAPHIES. THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE WAYS IN WHICH 'ENTERTAINMENT' FROM MICKEY'S WORLD - OR DISNEYLAND AS IT IS MORE COMMONLY KNOWN - IS INFILTRATING THE GLOBAL AND SPECIFICALLY SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL DISCOURSE. IT EXPLAINS HOW A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT MODELED ON THE AMERICAN THEME PARK ADVOCATES A NEW 'ENTERTAINMENT' AESTHETIC TO A COMMITTED GLOBAL, AS WELL AS SOUTH AFRICAN SPECTATOR-CONSUMER CULTURE.



OF MICE AND (WO)MEN: DISNEYLAND AND

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In a cultural domain, such as South Africa, which is just escaping years of myopic vision and Calvinistic ideals, it is important to question the validity, positive contributions or negative detractions presented by Americanised entertainment ideals. The aesthetic implications of the Walt Disney Corporation's global entertainment campaign reveal interesting cultural anomalies with which to initiate a debate on the state of culture in the New South Africa.



THE INS AND OUTS OF DISNEY ENTERTAINMENT IMPERIALISM

The Walt Disney Corporation's agenda of internationalisation coinciding with the opening of Euro Disney in France, has clearly positioned Disneyland in the mind of the Postmodern spectator-consumer. 'Disneyland' implies the 'multi-million-dollar-entertainment-industry' dreamed into reality in 1942 by Walter Elias Disney and expanded since 1986, as a 'mega-

entertainment-empire' by businessman Michael Eisner and his Walt Disney Company. Disneyana, as Disney products are collectively known, includes the theme parks called Disneyland, Walt Disney World and EPCOT Centre, Tokyo Disneyland, and Euro Disney; 335 globally situated retail stores; Disney MGM Studios; Disney's Christmas on Ice Escapades; a codex of blockbuster and classic moving pictures translated into 14 languages distributed globally; and a host of cartoon characters and magic shows broadcast on the Disney channel.

The proverbial 'Disney magic' also implies a broader manifestation of American theme park entertainment. In America alone no less than 28 Theme, Amusement and Resort Parks are in operation (Birnbaum 1994; Norman 1990; Wiley 1994; Fenster 1994; Andersen 1994). Additionally, Russia's best-known sculptor and architect, Tsereteli, is planning a 927-acre version of Disneyland, called *Wonderpark*, seven miles from the Kremlin (Carpenter 1994). Numerous architects, developers and planners worldwide have incorpo-

rated Disney techniques into their designs for suburban shopping malls, inner city festival marketplaces, revitalised small town main streets, new satellite residential neighbourhoods and entire cities such as Seaside in Florida.

Postmodern architect Charles Eames (Finch 1983: 425, 426) interprets Disneyland as a convincing experiment in urban psychology. He argues that it is exclusively in Disneyland – or in the entertainment space – that 'mass society' or 'popular culture' can congregate with courtesy and pleasure. Here, different cultures share the same values of singing, dancing and creating wealth. Eames (Finch 1983: 388) stipulates that Walt Disney succeeded in reaching mass culture through a solid knowledge of advertising and promotion skills, as well as through a well-planned presentation of archetypal imagination which appealed to the post-war spectator-consumer. The role of vital human gaiety – as represented with song, masquerade, musicians, colour and exotic costumes at entertainment centres – is to represent



THE CULTURAL AESTHETICS OF ENTERTAINMENT IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

a state of romance, populism, pastiche and eclecticism in global Postmodern society (Stam 1988: 47).

Disneyland entertainment supports a Postmodern culture which exhibits the following traits: a global demand for sophisticated, individualistic, relevant, and valuable entertainment with potent imagery especially during increased leisure hours (Weinstein 1992: 134; Mills 1990: 68); a revolution in cultural tastes via the television and its range of imagery; the fulfilment of immediacy and value for a sophisticated, caring culture where everyone is empowered; a propensity towards the democratic juxtapositioning of all discourses into one mass aesthetic which salutes anti-essentialism, plurality, democracy, and freedom; the mass production of messages, information, and imagery with the aid of the tools of the Information Revolution; the production of narratives, brand names, trademarks, and images as a comforting paradigm for Postmodern spectator-consumers who have the power of responsible choice; and the proliferation of Disneyfied

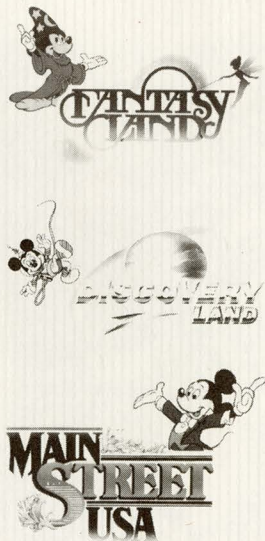
nostalgia, myth, down-ageing and spectacle in creating communal traditions between different societies.

In an era where westernised man or woman represents himself or herself on the political and psychological stage of a spectacular world-theatre, their personalities become innately cinematic (Paglia 1992: 102). Culture becomes equated with entertainment, celebration and spectacle. The adoration of spectacle in Postmodern society, represents a culture's belief in its own myths and urban legends (Polan 1988: 52). Disneyland's Las Vegas type entertainment represents a tendency around the globe where 'all-night' restaurants, supermarkets and petrol stations become the vehicles for instant gratification (Anderson 1994: 42). America is saturating the world with its 'theme park' myths, fantasies, songs and dreams of democracy, wealth and the good life whilst becoming the driving cultural force around the world (Bernstein 1990: 56).

SIMULATION AND SIGNS OF WONDER:
CREATING MYTH AND MAGIC AS THE 'STUFF OF LIFE'

Atkins (1990: 131) notes that Postmodernism as a movement has brought about a shift in thought which has moved beyond the boundaries of elitist Modernism. Jencks (1991) sees Postmodern culture as the mirror for a 'new dispensation' which is brought about by 'signs' from several discourses, subjects or societies. It is important to note that Postmodern society is ruled by messages, signs, and images which are presented in the media. More importantly, Postmodern society blends media images into a rhetoric of folk tales, myths and clichés which determine the state of a society. The image of modern painter Picasso, for instance, is the product of clichés and widely shared preconceptions which were, and still are, presented in the mass media.

The semiotic approach to popular culture is interested in the comprehension, metaphysics and psyche of Postmodern





society as revealed by the dominant images publicised by that society. Semiotics inquires into the total meaning or inherent synthetic knowledge revealed by images, advertising, mass media and consumer objects as a whole. The image or sign plays a central role in the consciousness of the spectator-consumer, and its final meaning depends upon the relationship between the sender (propagandist, advertising agency) and the decoder (spectator-consumer). Disneyland entertainment provides structures whereby spectators establish a specific American identity when seeing specific American stereotypes and icons such as Mickey Mouse.

Several critics, including Italian author Umberto Eco, who propagated the concept of hyperreality in Disneyland, American critic Kate Linker, French semiotologist Jean Baudrillard as well as author Benjamin Woolley, argue that Disneyland is the quintessential model for current debates surrounding the notions of cultural simulation in the Postmodern world. 'Simulation' is defined as an indication of the way in which the imaginary, the illusory or the fictitious has replaced the real, the actual or the true as a proponent of the believable in the Postmodern era. In a multitude of spectacles, spectator-consumers are left to continually construct, reconstruct and adjust their specific image of reality or culture. Consumer culture is thus obsessed with the interweaving of mass imagery which infiltrates its television screens, multimedia computer programmes, the Internet, films, videos, and the printed media.

The foremost semiotic analysis of Disneyland, is Louis Marin's approach of reading the map of Disneyland as a text of narratives to be pursued and interpreted by the visitor, resulting in differing cultural interpretations by different spectator-consumers. Ultimately, however, the same meta-narrative of 'fun' and 'entertainment' will be experienced. The process of hyperreality or simulation manifest by Disneyland, has certain repercussions for Postmodern culture: the 'pop-surrealistic-Disneyesque-art-of-illusion-spinning' continually

questions the state of the original and truth in the real world. For instance, a series of images displayed via advertising in a narrative society, defines the state of reality in that society. Dominantly advertised images are recycled and mythologised in further advertising campaigns in order to reach and maintain audiences who crave sensational 'infotainment' spectacles. Culture is produced by a multitude of signs, such as animatronics at Disneyland, which are presented as more real than reality itself. Culture becomes a rendering of a world defined by certain models, codes or images.

ENTERTAINING FALLEN ANGELS: THE NEW SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL PARADIGM

The thirst for Disneyland-style entertainment in South Africa is clearly supported by the recent application for casino licenses by British, Malaysian and Black Empowerment consortiums in this country. The planned construction of impressively integrated Entertainment Centres – which will include hotels, casinos, convention centres, international shopping outlets, cosmopolitan marketplaces, restaurants and theme park rides – is a clear indication of the ideals regulating

the South African entertainment market. Examples of such proposed entertainment centres include The Midrand Entertainment Project, The Ramada Rhino Resort and Casino Development, and The Northgate Dome Project. Furthermore, existing entertainment, convention and shopping centres such as Gold Reef City, The Carousel Entertainment Centre, The Wild Coast Sun and Entertainment Complex, The Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre, Nasrec, The Wheel, The Workshop, Tygervally Centre (which includes imitation steamer and 'fantasy' restaurants), The Pavillion, The Waterfront, and The Lost City at Sun City, provide escapist entertainment and popular culture to their South African patrons.

In South Africa, culture is becoming a space of inclusion rather than exclusion, of identity rather than anonymity, vibrant cultural inheritance and multiplicity rather than one-sided vision. The cultural experience propounded by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology is similar to Situationist Guy Debord's vision of 'Disneyfied' culture as the product of planned spectacles. Public performance in the shape of the South African praise-singer or *imbongi*, tribal and Gumboot dance groups at Gold Reef City, and privately





funded National Symphony Orchestra appearances - as well as national sports related spectacles are leading the manifestation of 'a Cultural Carousel of Progress' in the South African community (Bukatman 1991: 64). This reinforces Robert Venturi's (Polan 1988: 45) statement that modernist belief in technology and human achievement must make way for the spectacles of a 'Disneyfied' mass culture. Furthermore, Minister Mbandla (1996: 1) states: *Now is the time to sing, dance, paint and create!*

The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage submitted by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology promotes a cultural consciousness which widely celebrates the principles of diversity, justice, democracy, non-racism, non-sexism and freedom of expression (Ngubane 1996: 1). Similarly Douglas Rushkoff (1995: 14) sees popular culture as a spontaneous creation. Popular culture is not a forced entity or a discriminatory happening, but it is created by and for its specific audience. After all, it is the buyer or consumer who dictates the market for certain cultural goods. Consequently, media content emerges in order to simultaneously articulate and inform a society's cultural experience. South African popular culture obtains a great deal of its content from advertising. The way a product is marketed ultimately reflects the tastes and interests of its audience. Advertising campaigns like Vodacom's *Yebo Gogo* campaign by Lindsay Smithers-FCB reveal the cultural kaleidoscope currently being created in South Africa. Disney's animation feature films, such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, similarly reflect the implicit pedagogy of a system and act as hidden reinforcement of a society's dominant myths and values (Eco 1994: 55). South Africa's new post-colonial arts and culture policy displays a cultural space concerned with the formation of 'human identity' in popular culture. The ideals of excellence should be created via our country's vibrant cultural inheritance and multiplicity (Mbandla 1996: 1). Vodacom's representation of a Sandton yuppie trapped in the tribal lore of an arranged marriage,

reflects the integration of once separated cultural activities in an entertaining and humorous way.

According to Tannenbaum (1983: 303) Disneyland creates television commercials with the aid of celebrities from all walks of life to support central cultural narratives. Disney also takes fairy tales into the public domain and reinvents them as corporate identity (Henry 1994: 1). South African audiences are beginning to see the manifestation of public myth in advertising campaigns: Vodacom's *Yebo Gogo* advertising campaign cemented the slogan as part of our new cultural heritage for years to come. Similarly, Sasol's *Ama-glug-lug* commercial by O₂, manages the perception of a brand by marrying the popular *Ama-boko-boko* slogan with the country's premier oil company. Furthermore, the advertising of 'the beer of the nation' is integrated with strong messages advocating the mutual building of a nation by hardworking people. South Africans are subliminally being educated towards a process of cultural tolerance.

Disneyfied entertainment reveals the ultimate spectacle where spectator-consumers can choose a life they cannot find anywhere else (Holleran 1990: 45). In a previously excluded society, such as South Africa, Mikhail Bakhtin's five elements of cultural spectacle remain important vehicles of cultural and economic exchange: *the aesthetics of energy* (as expressed by freedom, dance and movement); *multiplicity* (i.e. festivity and role playing); *intensity* (i.e. life as theatre); *transparency* (i.e. freedom of speech and visibility of identity); and *communality* (i.e. loss of self and collective jouissance) become important cultural cohesives in a previously disconnected society. This process of reconciliation and collective construction was a visible element at the 1997 UNESCO Children's Summit held at Euro Disney in France. Similarly, several sporting heroes have become 'actors' who endorse specific cultural ideals and lifestyles. Rugby player Chester Williams, for example, appears in the campaign for Spur Steak Ranches, where he popularises the restaurant as

one which caters for 'people with a taste for life'. Cricket captain Hansie Cronje is alternatively employed to market South African cricket as a veritable travelling showcase of marvellous cricketers and carnival 'nights'. This advertising angle has led to the successful marketing of companies like Standard Bank and Sasol. When Brian Macmillan blows up a storm with his cricket bat, he clarifies a submerged cultural myth into popular iconography.

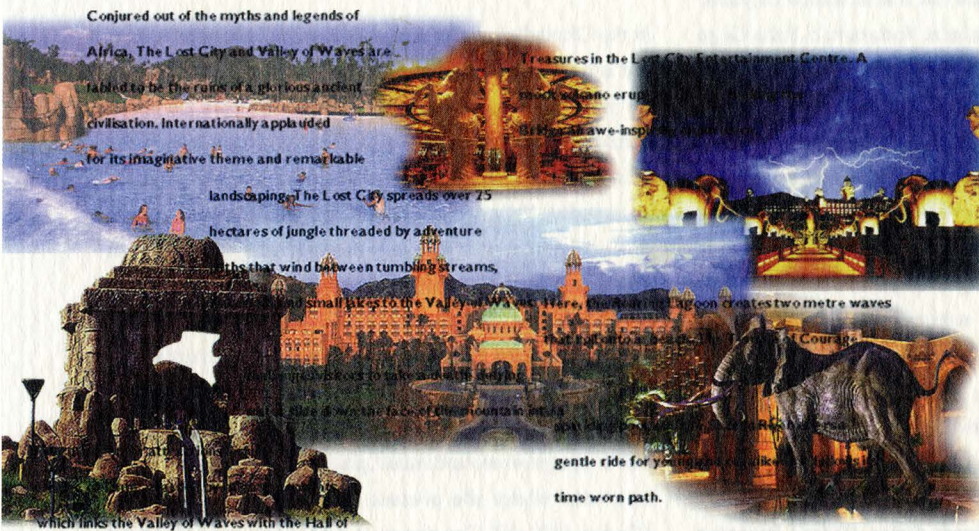
In the Disneyfied entertainment space spectator-consumers are invited to act as a participators within a web of meaningful signs. The reproduction of historical events for man's cultural enjoyment or the translation of history into public history, tends to transform history into a disposable commodity. When Disney's EPCOT Centre presents its *American Adventure*, it ironically deconstructs historical facts into partly ignored and partly honoured realities. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be seen as a space where history is collectively deconstructed and interwoven into new legacies of culture. The reinterpretation and nostalgic recycling of the past in fiction, film, art, television programmes and music, places spectator-consumers in a state where the present is seen as ever permanent (Cooke 1991: 23). The danger is that spectator-consumers will forget the past and accept its reproduction in various prepackaged forms of nostalgia, implying a passive compliance with the ideas propagated by a dominant ideology.

South African spectator-consumers should be bold and educated enough to interpret found messages and images with responsibility and respect for difference. In this manner, Disneyland's Postmodern consumer culture exhibits a new coalition between high art and popular entertainment. It endorses an aesthetic of reification and simulation, where culture is determined by changing images in the mass media. The popular employment of parody leads to the alternative of richer images than those displaying dominant cultural stereotypes. Disneyfied entertainment presents a cross-



fertilisation of ideas, a variety of styles, techniques and content.

Disneyland stands at the forefront in the creation of the premises for better multi-cultural communication via its use of a plethora of signs which reinforce a central cultural message. Disneyland is not just a rendition of a theme park par excellence: it is an entertainment model which illustrates the



major aesthetic clockwork mechanisms of Postmodern society, and it presents the spectator-consumer with a series of responsibilities and opportunities. These include the awareness of stereotypic information, the exercise of responsible choice over complacency, the celebration of newly acquired cultural ideas, and the discovery of richer and more meaningful semiotic essences which may assist a society in redefining itself.

In this connection, Disneyland raises important issues for a South African aesthetic paradigm in the Postmodern era. The central fear of an Orwellian Big Brother syndrome in which spectator-consumers are bombarded with Americanised cultural goods, seems real in a society saturated with hallucinatory imagery where fabricated realities are regarded

as master narratives. This process is clearly illustrated in South Africa's 'Disneyland', namely The Lost City. This entertainment paradise presents the narrative of a bygone civilisation which left behind the traces of a mythical palace. The narrative presented reminds the spectator-consumer of courageous tribes, dark African mystery and royal entertainment as set against the background of the colonial conservation of exotic oddities as well as the Victorian mystification of the 'Dark African Continent'. There is a need to readdress cultural realities instead of conserving romantic interpretations of cultural difference.

In a cultural space where visual images are able to reach and influence a large illiterate audience, the fear of media oppression is a reality. The question of whether trendiness is a substitution for innovation and original thought must be answered by responsible choice on the part of the spectator-consumer. The emphasis on responsible choice over complacency implies the responsible comprehension and regulation of personal spectatorship and participation in the manifold Disneyfied entertainment agendas infiltrating our nation, as well as a conviction of the power to create potent multi-cultural messages and objective realities in a society. We as a nation have to discard our ideologically inspired views of other cultures. Now is the time to sing, dance, paint and create!

Morrow (1992: 50) argues that a large part of folklore and myth remains hidden in the remnants of the visual memory of spectator-consumers in the shape of stereotypes, propaganda and entertainment, implying that the way we play reflects our submerged societal experiences. South Africans may need a period of 'fun' and 'spectacle' in order to forget years of negative visual and cultural indoctrination. The South African cultural cocoon is just escaping its infancy. South Africans are only now beginning to grow towards a stage of cultural cohesion informed by the sharing of popular iconographies, mass mediated information and 'culturally neutral' spectacles. One may well question whether culture

will ever be experienced in the same manner by different South African citizens: Does infotainment offer a viable solution in negating cultural similarity or is it once again presenting the ingredients for cultural myopia and entertainment lobotomisation?

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