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Robots in the Magic Kingdom's Hall of Presidents (© Walt Disney Productions)

Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World

Mike Wallace

"Industry has lost credibility with the public, the government has lost credibility, but people still have faith in Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck." (Marty Sklar, vice-president, WED Enterprises, Inc.)

Walt Disney never got a Ph.D., but he was, nevertheless, a passionate historian. At Disneyland in California and Disney World in Florida, the past is powerfully evoked for visitors—using music, movies, robots, and the latest in special effects. Thirty-three million people visited these attractions in 1983; it's possible that Walt Disney has taught people more history, in a more memorable way, than they ever learned in school. As a professional historian interested in popular presentations of the past, I decided to review the work of this premier interpreter of the American experience.

I soon discovered there are *two* Walt Disneys. The man we might call "Original Walt" built the Magic Kingdom in Disneyland in the 1950s. Later, the Magic Kingdom was cloned and transported to Disney World in Florida. Today both kingdoms remain essentially intact, frozen in time, their presentations of "Main Street," "Frontierland," "Adventureland," and the "Hall of Presidents" reflecting Original Walt's 1950s-style approach to history.

Disney died in 1966—despite persistent rumors that he had himself frozen, and may yet be back. But in a way he *did* live on

As WED (Walter Elias Disney) Enterprises, Inc., he was reincarnated as a corporation.

In the 1970s, this "Corporate Walt," claiming it was carrying out Original Walt's wishes, forged an alliance with other corporations (the crème de la crème of U.S. multinationals). Together they built EPCOT—the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow—and housed it in Disney World, next door to the Magic Kingdom. EPCOT, too, is saturated with history, but of a remarkably different kind from Disney's 1950s version. It is these two historical perspectives, side by side in Orlando, that I want to explore and juxtapose. While there are intriguing continuities between them, EPCOT's approach suggests that the sixties and seventies had an extraordinary impact on popular historical consciousness, enough to warrant extraordinary efforts by corporate America to reconstitute a past they could live with.

In the early 1950s Walt Disney set out to build an amusement park that was clean, wholesome, and altogether different from the seedy carnivals he remembered from his youth. Against great odds (bankers frowned on the project and he had to borrow on his insurance policy to do the initial planning), he brought Disneyland into being in 1955. At the heart of the project, right along with his fantasy characters, Disney placed a series of history-flavored entertainments.

This was new for Walt. Aside from the spectacularly successful *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier*, a few costume dramas like *Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue*, and *Song of the South* (whose idyllic depiction of master/slave relationships drew NAACP fire), Walt had shied away from history. Perhaps his turnaround was influenced by the crowds flocking to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford's Greenfield Village as 1950s Americans took to the highways in search of their roots. Certainly his technique resembled that used at Williamsburg—he transported visitors back in time.

The minute you stroll through the turnstiles into the Magic Kingdom you "turn back the clock," as your guidebook tells you, "to the turn-of-the-century." Your first steps take you to Main Street, the heart of a small American town. It's a happy street, clean and tidy, filled with prancing Disney characters. It has a toylike quality, perhaps because it's built five-eighths true size ("people like to think their world is somehow more grown up than Papa's was"). It's like playing in a walk-in doll's house that is simultaneously a consumer's paradise, equipped with dozens of little olde-time shoppes with corporate logos tastefully affixed.

But Main Street, ostensibly, is grounded in historic reality. It was fashioned, we are told, out of Disney's recollections of his turn-of-the-century boyhood in Marceline, Missouri, a small town a hundred miles northeast of Kansas City. The intent, Walt said, was to "bring back happy memories for those who remember the carefree times it recreates." This is puzzling to those familiar with Disney's own story, which was rather grimmer.

Disney's father Elias, a hardscrabble small operator, drifted back and forth between country and city in an unsuccessful attempt to establish himself and his family. After failing at citrus growing in Florida, he moved to Chicago, where he worked as a carpenter on the Columbian Exposition of 1893, and then established a hand-to-mouth small contracting business. Walt was born in 1901, just before the business failed and the family moved again, this time to a forty-eight-acre farm near Marceline, on which Elias entered into the precarious and indebted life of the American small farmer. (Perhaps the then pervasive agrarian resentment of bankers was a source of the elder Disney's socialism—he voted consistently for Eugene Debs and subscribed to the *Appeal to Reason*). Walt was set to hard farm labor (drudgery which his two elder brothers escaped by running off) and a diet of stern patriarchal beatings. In 1910, Elias failed again. Forced to sell the farm and auction off the livestock, he moved to Kansas City, Missouri, bought a newspaper route, and set Walt and his remaining brother Roy to work as newsboys; Roy ran away the following year. After living meanly in Missouri a few more years, Elias drifted back to Chicago, where he became chief of construction and maintenance in a jelly factory, and put Walt to work washing bottles. Finally, in 1919, Walt made his own break. He spent the early 1920s in Kansas City as a commercial artist, hustling hard to stay alive and ahead of the bill collectors. In 1923 he moved to Hollywood, where his career began to click.

The confectionery quality of Magic Kingdom's Main Street thus bears little resemblance to Disney's real childhood home. And indeed a Disney official history confesses that "historically speaking, this Main Street was quite unlike the real Main Streets of yesteryear. Here, everything would always remain fresh and new. And the rows of old-time shops and the traffic vehicles and all the other elements would function together in harmony and unison unlike anything grandfather ever experienced."

Original Walt's approach to the past was thus not to reproduce it, but to *improve* it. A Disney "imagineer" (as the designers style themselves) explains how the process works: "What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements." (This vacuum-cleaning of the

past is reminiscent of Walt's film work in which he transformed Grimm's gothic horror tales into cute and cheery cartoons.) As another Disney planner puts it: "This is what the real Main Street should have been like."

The Disney people don't consider this retrospective tidying up an abuse of the past—they freely and disarmingly admit its falsification, pointing out that this is, after all, just entertainment. But they also insist they are bringing out deeper truths. John Hench, a leading member of the organization, expanded on this in an interview, explaining that Disney sought to recapture the *essence* of a period. "You take a certain style, and take out the contradictions that have crept in there through people that never understood it or by accident or by some kind of emergency that happened once and found itself being repeated—you leave those things out, purify the style, and it comes back to its old form again." Like the French architect Viollet-le-Duc, who in the 1860s and 1870s strove to restore churches to imagined Gothic purity, Original Walt aimed to strip away the accretions of time. In the case of Main Street, Hench explains, he was striving to recreate the Victorian era, "which is probably one of the great optimistic periods of the world, where we thought progress was great and we all knew where we were going. [Main Street] reflects that prosperity, that enthusiasm."

The decades before and after the turn of the century had their decidedly prosperous moments. But they also included depressions, strikes on the railroads, warfare in the minefields, squalor in the immigrant communities, lynching, imperial wars, and the emergence of mass protests by populists and socialists. *This* history has been whited out, presumably because it would have distressed and repelled visitors. As Hench noted, "Walt wanted to reassure people."

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. Leading academic historians downplayed past conflicts and painted optimistic, even uplifting pictures of the American past. Colonial Williamsburg's recollection of olden times conspicuously excised the presence of black slaves, 50 percent of its eighteenth-century inhabitants. Greenfield Village—another conflict-free small town—overlooked such realities of rural life as foreclosures and farmers' movements.

Walt's Main Street, therefore, can perhaps best be understood as part of a larger trend. As a stage set that cultivated nostalgia for a fabricated past, it contributed its bit toward fashioning an image—now deeply etched into popular memory—of the "gay nineties" as a world without classes, conflict, or crime, a world of continuous consumption, a supermarket of fun. At the same time, it fastened this image on the future. Just as Colonial Williamsburg provided the model for thousands of "colonial" suburbs, Disneyland's Main Street became a model for the developing American shopping mall and the "ye olde" entertainment centers beginning to festoon the American landscape. On the face of it, Eisenhower-era citizens could assume that America's present had evolved gently, naturally, and inevitably out of its past.

There *are* places in Disneyland that recall the bumpier patches of the good old days. At Frontiertown and Adventureland, contradictions are not deleted but dwelt upon. Here we go on rides that travel to the distant and benighted places which once threatened Civilization. In the Wild West, Darkest Africa, and the Caribbean, we are in the domain of dangerous opponents—Indians, pygmy headhunters, pirates. But there is no real danger in these realms. As Hench explains: "What we do here is to throw a challenge at you—not a real menace, but a pseudo-menace, a theatricalized menace—and we allow you to win."

Scary but harmless images are a stock-in-trade of amusement parks. But it is striking that Disney's "pseudo-menaces" are all historical ones—the ghosts of once vigorous, now defeated enemies of Main Street—transformed into fun-filled characters. On the ride up the Congo River, your affable host regales you with such witticisms as "These natives have one thing in mind; they just want to get ahead." The robot pirates are agreeably wicked and the robot women seem to enjoy being ravished. In Frontierland you can hole up in an old fort and shoot Indians, with a barrage of canned gunfire as an accompaniment (this was Walt's favorite part of the park).

For all the whizzing bullets, the experience of reliving ancient passions is a soothing one. For one thing, as Hench comments shrewdly, these are "old-fashioned weapons. They're part of the safe past. Nobody worries about the past. . . ." For another, cowboys-and-Indians is a well-established and conventional game, and historical conflict is thus shuttled into a regressive world of childhood fantasy. Frontierland and Adventureland brush up against some realities of the past, but in the end they serve as ritual reassurance of Main Street's triumph over its opponents.

The Magic Kingdom includes a direct portrayal of American history—at the Hall of Presidents. The hall has a peculiar history of its own. Designed in 1957-58, it was put on the shelf because

Disney imagineers lacked the technology to produce it. Breakthroughs in "audioanimatronics" (robot building) came in the early 1960s, and at the 1964 World's Fair Disney tried out the new engineering. In collaboration with the State of Illinois, he built the "Visit with Mr. Lincoln" pavilion, starring an artificial Abe. In the 1970s, the original Hall of Presidents show was dusted off, and the Lincoln robot became its centerpiece.

The Hall of Presidents is housed at Liberty Square, in a mock-up of the eighteenth-century Philadelphia mansion. Visitors wait for the next show in the Rotunda, where paintings of the Founding Fathers establish respectful atmospherics. Then they are ushered into a theater (and told that no eating is allowed—"to maintain the dignity of the presentation"). A film begins. It shows the Founding Fathers making the Constitution. We learn that the new document was soon challenged by the Whiskey Rebels, a churlish mob, and that George Washington crushed them. Then slaveholders, an aristocratic mob, threatened it again. Andrew Jackson threatened to hang them from the nearest tree. Finally the Confederates launched the greatest challenge to date, and Lincoln took up the burden of defense. The movie implies that internal disorder remains the chief threat to America's survival.

The film ends. With great fanfare the screen goes up, revealing a stage full of robot presidents. All of them, from Washington to Reagan, are in motion, nodding or solemnly (if somewhat arthritically) gesticulating. They are done up with scrupulous attention to detail. George Washington's chair is a precise reproduction of the one in which he sat at the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Their costumes are authentic down to the last stitch. Wig-makers in Guatemala reproduced their hair strand for strand. (The attention to detail, characteristic of Hollywood costume dramas, again reminds us of Disney's cinematic roots.)

A sepulchral voice-over calls the roll of these men "who have defended the Constitution." The audience is hushed—perhaps in awe at the solemnity of the occasion, perhaps in amazement at the spectacle of thirty-odd robots twitching about on stage. When the roll call gets to FDR and the more recent presidents, there is a whisper here and there. But when it gets to Nixon, chortles and guffaws break out. The contrast between the Official History and living memories is too great—Nixon as defender of the Constitution?—and the spell snaps under the strain. I asked later if this was simply a bad day for Mr. Nixon, and was told that no, the crowd always rumbles when RN takes his bow.

The Nixon disturbance is symptomatic of a larger problem with the Hall of Presidents. By the 1970s, for all its technical sophistication, its ideology was old-fashioned, less believable than it was in the heyday of McCarthyism. The Disney people deny any dissatisfaction with it, but in retrospect we can see that in the 1960s they began exploring alternatives to the nationalistic approach. The transition to the eventual solution (EPCOT) was provided by another Disney 1964 World's Fair exhibit, the Carousel of Progress, created in collaboration with General Electric.

At the Carousel of Progress, Disney takes visitors on a ride through time. After they settle down in the Carousel's small theater, the curtain rises on a robot middle-class family at home in 1900. Mom, Dad, and the kids are chatting about housework. They have the latest in labor-saving devices—gas lights, telephones, iceboxes—and *think* that life couldn't be any easier, but *we* see that poor Mom is still subject to all kinds of drudgery. Luckily, as Dad reads in the paper, some smart fellers down at General Electric are cooking up new gadgets. At this point the theater begins to revolve around the stage (accompanied by a cheery ditty whose refrain is "Now is the best time, now is the best time, now is the best time of your life") until it reaches a new set, this one peopled with 1920s-style robots. Mom and Dad enthuse about their new machines—percolators, refrigerators, electric irons—but note that those research people at General Electric are still at it. And on we go to 1940, and finally to 1960. Things have really progressed now. Dad is cooking dinner (though somewhat clumsily) and Mom is celebrating passage of a bond issue (on which she had time to work thanks to her GE dishwasher and dryer). At ride's end a hearty voice-over concludes that we live in "the best time" ("one of the reasons is that electricity has improved our lives"), and that things will get even better ("each new year and each new day will bring a better way of life"). Finally we are shuttled toward the Kitchen of Tomorrow to see what General Electric has dreamed up for us next.

The Carousel of Progress is more than simply an extended commercial break. It is a paean to Progress—defined as the availability of emancipatory consumer goods. This was new for Disney. He had tended to political rather than commercial themes. But it was an old line of argument for industrial corporations. Even the pseudo-feminist claim that household commodities liberated women had been advanced by advertisers since the 1920s and had been a staple at the 1939 World's Fair. I would like to suggest that the Disney-GE collaboration represents an important merging of several longstanding traditions of American culture.

Consider, first, the roots of Disney's Magic Kingdom shows. They descend, in part, from the patriotic dioramas, *tableaux vivants*, and waxworks of the nineteenth century. Disney upgraded the

This extraordinary project might seem quite a jump from an amusement park, but the overheated reaction Disneyland evoked may have been instrumental in EPCOT's creation. Walt had been praised extravagantly as an urban planner. James Rouse, master builder of new towns and historical shopping malls modeled on Main Street (Boston's Faneuil Hall, Baltimore's Harborplace, New York's South Street Seaport), told a 1963 Harvard conference that Disneyland was the "greatest piece of urban design in the United States today." Architectural critic Peter Blake called the Anaheim park the only significant New Town built in the U.S. since World War II—"staggeringly successful"—and suggested, only half-humorously, turning Manhattan over to Disney to fix up.

All this went to Walt's head and he flowered into a utopian capitalist. This was partly a family legacy: as Michael Harrington has perceptively noted, Disney's father had been an admirer of Edward Bellamy's "warmhearted, futuristic authoritarianism." Partly, perhaps, Walt had been inspired by the 1939 World's Fair's Democracity, a scale model of a perfectly planned "World of Tomorrow"—a "vast, Utopian stage set" housed inside the great globe of the Perisphere. Whatever its roots, the hothouse atmosphere of the Kennedy-Johnson years speeded the process. Gigantic projects of social reconstruction seemed plausible in those boom years and though Walt was a Goldwater Republican (and an early financial supporter of Ronald Reagan), he too dreamed of creating a Great Society.

Like Johnson, Disney acted boldly. By 1965 he had bought up, secretly, forty square miles (*twice* the size of Manhattan) in central Florida. The state, anticipating mammoth tourist revenues, granted him virtually feudal powers. Democracy for the residents of the Community of Tomorrow would have been a nuisance. ("There will be no landowners and therefore no voting control.") To ensure that EPCOT ran smoothly, Walt would be King.

But in 1966, in the midst of planning the new society, Walt died. WED Enterprises considered going ahead with his prototype city, but the company was nervous; it could see lawsuits in its future from disgruntled and disfranchised residents. So it scrapped the notion of a living city and went with a safer version, an extension of Disney's collaboration with General Electric. WED proposed to some of the biggest corporations in the U.S. a joint project: the construction of a permanent World's Fair. There the companies, with the help of Disney imagineers, would display evolving technologies and promote their visions of the future. EPCOT was thus transformed from utopian community to sound business proposition.

By targeting Yuppies instead of Mouseketeers, WED got itself out of an impending crisis—a looming baby bust that promised to shrivel its traditional prime market of five-to-nine-year-olds. (A similar marketing strategy recently dictated scrapping Dick Van Dyke movies for PG films like *Splash*: pre-teens no longer flocked to traditional Disney fare and the studio was forced to respond to this cultural shift.) The participating companies would also profit: they could advertise new product lines and drape themselves in the mantle of Disney respectability, no small matter in the anti-corporate atmosphere of the 1970s. The corporate giants agreed. Kraft declared that sponsorship of a land pavilion was "the most effective way we can enhance our corporate identity." General Electric explained that "the Disney organization is absolutely superb in interpreting our company dramatically, memorably, and favorably to the public." Kodak observed, somewhat baldly, that "you might entrance a teenager today, but tomorrow he's going to invest his money in Kodak stock." General Motors took a broader view, noting not only that EPCOT would give them the chance "to make contact with millions of motorists," but that "it will be a good opportunity to point out how technological progress has contributed to the world and the free enterprise system."

In the end, major multinationals—notably those who had been most successful at the 1939 Fair—signed on to tell Americans what life would be like in the twenty-first century. At EPCOT, Exxon explains Energy and AT&T does Communications. Transportation is presented by General Motors, the Land by Kraft, the Home by GE, "Imagination" by Kodak. Each corporation has a high-tech pavilion, the heart of which is a ride. Seated passengers are conveyed through tunnels which open out into drive-through dioramas—stage sets crammed with robots, videos, and holograms. Supplementing each ride are exhibits, films, and hands-on demonstrations. The pavilions are grouped into an area of the park called (echoing 1939) the World of Tomorrow.

Nation-states were also invited to EPCOT. England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, China, Mexico, Canada—usually in conjunction with national businesses (Japan Airlines, British Railways, Labatt Beer)—exhibit their wares and promote travel to their shores. Disney imagineers helped them design terrains that portray the "essence" of their culture. Presiding over this World of Nations is the host pavilion, the American Adventure (presented jointly by American Express and Coca-Cola), devoted entirely to presenting the history of the United States.

In 1982 EPCOT opened. It billed itself as "a community of ideas and nations and a testing ground where free enterprise can

explore and demonstrate and showcase new ideas that relate to man's hopes and dreams." In its first year, over twenty-two million people visited. More businesses and countries signed on. By 1984, total investment had reached $1.75 billion and was still climbing.

An amazing amount of the World of Tomorrow is devoted to the world of yesterday. Virtually all the rides are time travels. Passengers settle themselves into moving vehicles which carry them from the dim past to an imagined future. Voice-over narrators, like those on TV commercials, explain the passing views and propound an interpretation of historical development.

Each multinational historian has its own style. GM's tends toward the relentlessly cheery; the past was endlessly droll, even "wacky" and "zany." AT&T's is more portentous: "Who Are We? Where Are We Going?" it asks in sepulchral tones as we climb aboard our Time Machines, and informs us that the answer must be sought in the "Dawn of Recorded Time." But it is the similarities that compel attention.

There is a discernible corporate vision of history. At first blush it appears merely that of the Carousel of Progress writ large: history is a record of the invention of commodities which allow Man to master his environment. But EPCOT goes beyond this. The temporal dimensions are far grander—from the cave men to outer space. And, significantly, each corporation admits there have been Problems in the past.

Each journey begins in prehistoric times. GM's history of transportation has robot neanderthals "stumbling around" by footpower. Exxon's history of energy commences with robot dinosaurs (reminiscent of those in *Fantasia*) battling one another in a primeval swamp as fossil fuels cook beneath their feet. AT&T's history of communication starts with cave men attacking mammoths and painting on walls.

Then Man climbs out of primitive times. GM's Man does this in an unrelievedly hearty way. As we ride along (accompanied by a background ditty proclaiming that "It's fun to be free, to go anywhere, with never a care"), we watch Man slowly produce improved forms of transport—canoes, horse-drawn vehicles—until we reach that favorite corporate period, the Renaissance. Here GM's robot Leonardo turns from culture to engineering: he is shown tinkering with a flying machine while a scowling robot Mona Lisa model taps her foot. Then it's on to the Era of Inventions and a cornucopia of improvements—bicycles, horseless carriages, trains, airplanes—that bring us to the present.

AT&T's trajectory is similar. It tracks the slow progress of communications—Egyptians invent scrolls (a robot pharoah gives dictation to a robot secretary), Greeks give birth to theater (robots declaim on stage), and monks illuminate manuscripts (one is shown cutely snoring at his desk). When AT&T hits the Renaissance, it tilts (unlike GM) toward the cultural dimension, featuring a robot Michelangelo, on its back, laboring at the Sistine ceiling. Then AT&T's Man also enters the jet stream of Progress, and inventions tumble out on what seems a self-sustaining basis.

But when the rides reach the near past, there is a sudden departure from triumphalism. Each corporation acknowledges some blemishes on the record. To be sure, many were inconsequential: one General Motors diorama jovially depicts the first traffic jam (which it blames on a horse). Other problems were serious. Kraft reminds us graphically of Dust Bowl days. Exxon reminds us that an energy crisis emerged. The past was *not* the best of all possible pasts.

The corporate histories are less than clear as to *why* problems emerged. Some seem facts of nature—dinosaur days bequeathed us limited quantities of fossil fuel. But people are responsible for others. Kraft tells us that "we" (or, occasionally, "technological man") made mistakes. "We" abused the environment. "We" polluted the air. There is a hint that "unplanned development" had something to do with it (a practice, presumably, in which multinationals do not engage).

Luckily, we are given to understand, people (or, more precisely, corporations) are working on these problems. The adjacent exhibits expand on this, and we shall return to them.

Each ride then breaks through the troubled recent past into the Future. The Future is always set in outer space. The narrative tapes and ditties shut off, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* music comes on, laser beams flash, and we are launched into awesome starry expanses in which space stations and satellites hover. In the Future, Problems have been eliminated, presumably by the corporations, whose logos are visible everywhere (as in the movie *2001*). Life in space looks remarkably like life on sitcom TV. Mom back on earth communicates (via AT&T's Network) with Sis up on the space station, and they chat about homework and boyfriends. There's a sense of serene ordinariness about the Future, which is not accidental. Hench believes "nobody worries about the future, because that's going to be up in space, in the space colonies." And Marty Sklar, WED VP, says: "We admit to being optimistic over man's future. You can call EPCOT our answer to the gloomy future predictions of the Club of Rome."

Subsidiary exhibits explain the basis for this optimism—corporate problem solvers are at work. Kraft, in full environmentalist regalia, talks about the need for "symbiosis" with the land, shows films about replanting forests and reoxygenating rivers, and explains the artificial farms of the future. AT&T appropriates Bucky Fuller's environmentalist imagery—its geodesic dome pavilion is called Spaceship Earth—and shows how AT&T's Network will overcome communications bottlenecks on earth and in outer space. Exxon tells us it is working away at solar power (the roof of its pavilion is bejeweled with photoelectric panels). Solar, sadly, still seems far from practicable. So, Exxon explains, until the big breakthroughs come, we must rely on oil (videos sing the romance of offshore rigs and ecologically correct pipelines) and coal (films prove that strip mining can be beautiful). Exxon also wants us to keep the nuclear option open and visitors can play at running a nuclear plant. But the company is not heavy-handed about plumping for oil or atoms. All options must be kept open and in competition, including geothermal and biomass. Let the best one win.

GM, another corporate environmentalist, also believes in open options. In its "Engine of the Future" show, films project cartoon characters onto large overhead screens. Each promotes a different energy-conscious design. On the left, GM's own persona, a jolly cowboy, pitches for an improved internal combustion engine. Then alternatives are presented: an Archie Bunker sort favors coal, a Yuppie lady pushes solar, even the omnipresent Leonardo has a better idea. All these notions are shot down for one reason or another. Finally, on the extreme right, we meet a character who looks like a cross between mad scientist and Japanese dwarf, and sounds like Peter Lorre. He is working—fanatically—on a totally pollution-free and inexpensive water engine, using hydrogen. In the grand finale this crackpot blows everything up, and flames sweep across all the screens.

Then cowboy Tex gets the floor back, applauds the others, says they have a ways to go before they beat out the "good ole reliable internal combustion engine," but assures them General Motors wants them all in competition, so the consumer will benefit in the end. (Consumers are indeed never far from GM's mind; the last exhibit is a showroom of current-model GM cars. GM is the most vulgar self-promoter—a hucksterism perhaps related to declining car sales?—but even the suavest of the multinationals have their tacky moments.)

EPCOT's sensitivity to social and environmental problems is rooted in the 1970s corporate world's awareness of its image problems. Business wanted, with the aid of Disney publicists, to refurbish itself in the public mind. EPCOT designers knew Magic Kingdom boosterism wouldn't suffice. So the imagineers admitted to problems in the past but rejected corporate responsibility for them. More imaginatively still, they presented business as the cutting edge of the ecology movement. America's problems, Corporate Walt says, are technical ones; responsible corporations are the Mr. Goodwrenches who can fix them. A Kraft VP summarized the strategy: "Hopefully [visitors to our pavilion will] be aware that major organizations are working at new ways of controlling the land—without disrupting the ecology—to ensure an adequate food supply. To our benefit will be the message that here is Kraft with that kind of concern."

This is a difficult message to sell. Exxon the champion of alternative energy? General Motors the promoter of mass transit? Kraft and agribusiness the practitioners of symbiosis with the land? AT&T the savior of Spaceship Earth? As in the case of the Nixon robot, the discrepancy between claim and reality invites ridicule. Corporate Walt, a skillful communicator, tries to bridge the gap not only through bald assertion but in more indirect ways as well.

As in the Magic Kingdom sets, a "whiteout" approach is at work—silence blankets the sorry environmental record of the corporations. (This doesn't fool people who know better, but it doesn't enlighten those—particularly children—who don't.)

Another technique is EPCOT's bravura display of technological mastery and management capacity, which seems intent on inducing awe at the capabilities of the corporations, as machines in Greek temples once impressed the populace with the power of the gods. Imagine, the place implies, what business could do if let loose on America's ills (and never mind it created many of them in the first place, or that the cost of attaining EPCOT-level efficiency—$1 billion per hundred acres—seems a mite high). EPCOT thus forms a chapter in capital's longstanding attempt to control social space as it controls production space; it echoes company-town experiments from Lowell to Pullman (all of which failed—but hope springs eternal).

But the most subtle and perhaps most powerful of the methods at work is the historical analysis that permeates the entire operation. The World of Tomorrow implies that capitalist development is natural and inevitable. It does so by riding visitors, literally on rails, from a bowdlerized presentation of the past to an impoverished vision of the future. The progression goes like this: history was made by inventors and businessmen; the corporations are the legatees of such a past (their slogan might be: "From Leonardo to Exxon"); this pedigree entitles them to run Tomorrow. Citizens can sit back and consume.

Disney did not invent this approach: it had respectable academic roots in "modernization theory." This analysis, fashionable during the 1950s and 1960s, updated the Victorian belief in a march of progress from "savagery" to "civilization," substituting a trajectory from "traditional" to "modern" society, with the latter-day terminus understood to be contemporary America. It is worth noting that EPCOT's popularization of modernization theory, reactionary though it is, was the product of a relatively liberal corporate culture. Had EPCOT been designed in the tooth-and-claw world of the 1980s it would probably have argued that the driving force of history was profit maximization, an approach that might make the actual version seem positively benign.

Corporate Walt's history is bad history. All historical interpretations are necessarily selective in their facts, but here the silences are profoundly distorting. Consider, for example, that in all EPCOT's depictions of the past as a continuous expansion of man's possibilities through technology, there is not a word about war. Nothing about the critical impetus it provided through the ages to scientific development. Nor about the phenomenal destruction such "development" wrought. And nothing about the contemporary possibilities of planetary extermination. Perhaps the imagineers stuck their heads in the sand on this one because they wanted us to think only the most positive thoughts. But the Magic Kingdom's justification for ostrichism ("this is only an entertainment park") doesn't wash here—EPCOT is explicitly devoted to enhancing understanding. Perhaps, as in Fantasyland, they think the wish is parent to the fact. Or perhaps the silences are related to the fact that many corporations are producing armaments as well as toasters, and that if they and Reagan have their way, the outer-space dioramas of the Future will have to be reconstructed to include killer satellites.

Corporate Walt's history, like modernization theory, is unidirectional. There were never any forks on the path of Progress, never any sharp political struggles over which way to go. EPCOT visitors would never guess that millions of Americans once objected to motoring down the capitalist road. The implication, moreover, is that there are no alternatives now. If there have been problems, they have been the price of progress; the only solution is full speed ahead on the corporate space shuttle; minor course corrections can be left to the pilot. Corporate Walt and the multinationals have produced a past that leads ineluctably toward *their* kind of future.

Corporate Walt's history is also a top-down version. Popular political movements don't exist in this past. Rendering ordinary people invisible as makers of history hardly encourages visitors to believe they can make their own future. (And EPCOT's impact goes far beyond visitors: its sponsors have launched a massive outreach program to the nation's classrooms; they are mass-marketing lesson plans and videos on land, energy, and communications.)

Corporate desire to fudge the past combined with Disney's ability to spruce it up promotes a sense of history as a pleasantly nostalgic memory, now so completely transcended by the modern corporate order as to be irrelevant to contemporary life. This diminishes our capacity to make sense of our world through understanding how it came to be. The Disney version of history thus creates a way of not seeing and—perhaps—a way of not acting.

Good historical analysis informs people about the matrix of constraints and possibilities they have inherited from the past and enhances their capacity for effective social action in the present. EPCOT's World of Tomorrow does the opposite: it dulls historical sensibility and invites acquiescence to what is. It should, consequently, be regarded not as a historical, but as a historicidal enterprise.

EPCOT'S American Adventure—American Express and Coca-Cola's direct exploration of U.S. history—is intriguingly different from the high-tech pavilions; it also marks a startling departure from Original Walt's 1950s approach to the subject.

Like the Hall of Presidents, the American Adventure is housed in a simulated Georgian mansion, staffed by costumed hosts and hostesses. Again there is an inspirational antechamber, with quotes by authors ranging from Herman Melville to Ayn Rand. But here there are no films, no rides. The model is closer to a TV variety show, with the presentation emceed by Ben Franklin and Mark Twain robots. The American Adventure consists of a series of turns by computer-operated robot ensembles, alternately raised and lowered by a 350,000-pound apparatus below the floor boards. The technology, as usual, is stunning. The robots are the latest in lifelike humanoids. The Franklin robot actually walks up stairs. The research into details (the size of Revolutionary War cannonballs, Alexander Graham Bell's diction) is scrupulous as ever. And this dazzling technology, when set in motion, proceeds to tell, in twenty-nine minutes flat, the entire history of the United States.

At first the show seems merely a spiffed-up Hall of Presidents. It begins with an inspirational reading of the Pilgrims-to-Revolution period (robot Rebel soldiers chat at Valley Forge while a George Washington robot sits dolefully on a robot horse). But with Independence won, and westward movement underway, the show departs dramatically from the expected. Emcee Twain tells us

that "a whole bunch of folks found out 'we the people' didn't yet mean *all* the people," and a Frederick Douglass robot is hoisted up on stage. As he poles (somewhat improbably) down the Mississippi, Douglass speaks of the noise of chains and the crack of the whip, and of his hope that "antislavery will unlock the slave prison." A subdued Civil War sequence follows, using Brady photographs to stress costs rather than glory.

The Civil War over, a new wave of immigrants pours in. This, Twain tells us, heralds "a new dawn to the American Adventure." But as we resign ourselves to melting-pot platitudes, a clap of thunder introduces a Chief Joseph robot. He notes that the New Dawn means a "final sunset" for his people who are being shot down like animals. He gives his famous "I will fight no more forever" speech, reminding us (as Twain says) of "our long painful journey to the frontiers of human liberty."

Then it's on to the 1876 Centennial. But before launching into a Carousel-of-Progress-type paean to inventions, a Susan B. Anthony robot surfaces. In ringing voice she says: "We ask justice, we ask equality be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever," and adds, quoting Edison (with whom she most improbably shares the stage), that "discontent is the first necessity of progress."

Edison, Carnegie, and the roll call of inventions then have their moment, but after hearing about zippers, trolley cars, vacuum cleaners, and airplanes, a robot naturalist John Muir reminds us that all this growth posed a threat to America the Beautiful, and urges a robot Teddy Roosevelt to build national parks. Next comes World War I—"ready or not, we were thrust into the role of world leader"—and Lindbergh's flight. But then comes the Crash of 1929, which "tarnished the golden dreams of millions," and we are into the Depression era. Here the set is a weatherbeaten southern post office-cum-gas station. Two Black and two white robots sit on the front porch (there is a lot of implausible retrospective integration in the show). They strum "Brother, can you spare a dime," chuckle about ex-millionaires in New York, and listen to FDR on the radio talking about "fear itself." (There is also a momentary descent into tacky self-promotion: the shack is plastered with contemporary Coca-Cola and American Express ads.) Then Will Rogers plumps for military preparedness, FDR announces Pearl Harbor, and we are into World War II—which consists entirely of a stage set featuring Rosie the Riveter fixing a submarine.

The postwar material plays it safer. History becomes popular culture. A series of filmic images of personalities is projected—like *People* magazine covers—which then float up into clouds, to the accompaniment of ethereal music about America spreading its golden wings and flying high. It's an eclectic and distinctly integrated assortment, including Jackie Robinson, Marilyn Monroe, Jonas Salk, Satchmo, Elvis, Einstein, Walt Disney, Norman Rockwell, John Wayne, Lucy, Billie Jean King, JFK (giving his "Ask not" speech), Martin Luther King (giving his "I have a dream" speech), Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, the U.S. Olympic hockey team, and the men on the moon. We end with a blaze of traditional Disney patriotism, with Ben and Mark perched atop the Statue of Liberty foreseeing a long run for the American Adventure.

The American Adventure is thus a dramatic departure from the Hall of Presidents (and the spirit of the World of Tomorrow). American History is no longer just about great white men; indeed it seems to be largely about Blacks, women, Indians, and ecologists. The show doesn't celebrate law and order; it recalls the words of critics. On the face of it, the American Adventure represents an extraordinary step forward.

How do we account for it? One answer is the impact, by the mid-1970s, of the Black, women's, antiwar, and environmentalist movements that had heightened popular consciousness. After a generation of protest, 1950s celebrations would no longer do for public historical presentations; even Colonial Williamsburg had to restore Blacks to its streets. As a Disney briefing pamphlet for hosts says: "we couldn't ignore certain major issues that questioned our nation's stand on human liberty and justice." Even the sponsors agreed: a Coca-Cola executive told me "the warts-and-all perspective is appreciated by most visitors because our country is not perfect and they know it." In the last analysis, I believe, shifts in popular opinion forced the Disney people to update their ideology.

The writers, though not academics, were also influenced by the new social historians who reconstructed U.S. history in the 1960s and 1970s. Dr. Alan Yarnell, a UCLA historian consulted on the project, insisted that "the Jesse Lemisch approach—history from the bottom up" replace the great-white-men verities. The corporate sponsors went along with this approach—the heavy intervention of businessmen into World of Tomorrow scripting was missing here, perhaps because it was an area of lesser political concern. Amex and Coke simply assumed from the Disney track record that nothing embarrassing would emerge from the design process.

In the end, they were right. Despite the trappings of the new social history, the American Adventure remains Disney history. The imagineers imposed a theme of "Dreamers and Doers" on the show: the past had to be portrayed in an upbeat manner. So Susan

B. Anthony, Chief Joseph, and Frederick Douglass notwithstanding, American History is still a saga of progress. The dissatisfactions of Blacks, women, and ecologists are presented as having been opportunities in disguise. As Disney literature puts it: "Inevitably, Americans have overcome the tragedies of their controversies, which ultimately led to a better way of life." In the American Adventure, social contradictions are transcended as easily as are natural ones at the World of Tomorrow. The agents of change, moreover, were individual speakers and writers, not collective social movements. The spokespersons of the discontented knocked, and the door was opened.

Some "controversial" aspects of U.S. history remain completely unacknowledged—most notably, the history of labor. While the show embraces individuals associated in the public mind with the struggle for civil rights and civil liberties, i.e., the individual rights of particular groups, it finds itself unable to deal with a movement long founded on principles of collective rights and collective action—namely unions. This reluctance, perhaps, is also rooted in the ongoing challenge labor represents to the capitalist *system* as well as to the particular corporations bankrolling the exhibits.

The silences get louder the closer the show gets to the present. There are no 1960s ghetto uprisings, no campus protests, no feminist or ecology movements, no Watergate. Most notoriously, there is nothing about Vietnam. One of the designers explained that "I searched for a long time for a photograph of an antiwar demonstration that would be optimistic, but I never found one." (A picture of a helicopter was recently added—a distinctly minimalist response to complaints.)

Though willing to accept that the past was made by the discontented, the show disconnects the present from that tradition. It abandons the narrative line on reaching the postwar period—King is there, but as an icon, not as spokesman for a movement—and it implies our problems are things of the past. At show's end, Mark and Ben counsel worry only about the perils of plenty, the problem of how to use leisure time, and how each individual can fulfill his or her dreams. But because the show refuses to acknowledge the social constraints on individual actors—sexism and racism, poverty and unemployment remain obstinate components of contemporary U.S. culture—it peters out into complacent boosterism. Forced to confront a changed American popular historical consciousness and to incorporate the work of radical scholars, it opts for damage control. It defuses the danger inherent in the intrusion of "real" history by redeploying it within a vision of an imperfect but still inevitable progress.

Does Corporate Walt's history have an impact? How does it affect the millions of people who visit? There is little direct evidence one way or the other. Only a few hundred have written letters, the largest single response coming from Vietnam veterans complaining about the obliteration of their experiences. But what do such cavils mean when set beside the fact that Disney World is now the biggest single tourist destination in the entire world? A tenth of the entire U.S. population travels there in a year: what accounts for this stupendous success?

Demographic statistics provide an avenue to an answer. The class spectrum of EPCOT visitors is dramatically narrow. They come from groups doing best in terms of pay and personal power on the job: the median income is $35,700, and fully three-quarters are professionals or managers. (Professional and technical personnel account for 48 percent of attendees, managers and administrators for 26 percent.) This is not a working-class attraction. (Craftsmen, 4 percent; operatives, 4 percent; sales, 8 percent; service, 2 percent; laborers, 2 percent.) Nor do Blacks (3 percent) or Hispanics (2 percent) come in large numbers. (To a degree these demographics simply reflect the cost of getting there: only 22 percent of visitors come from Florida; 71 percent are from elsewhere in the U.S., chiefly the Northeast and the Midwest.)

A process of class self-affirmation seems to be at work. Certainly Disney World seems intent on providing reassurance to this class, on presenting it with its own pedigree. EPCOT's seventies-style liberal corporatism seems tailor-made for professionals and technocrats. It's calibrated to their concerns—nothing on labor, heavy on ecology, clean, well-managed, emphasis on individual solutions, good restaurants—and it provides just the right kind of past for their hipper sensibilities. Perhaps, therefore, professionals and managers (many of whom, after all, function as subalterns of capital) flock there because it ratifies their world. Perhaps they don't *want* to know about reality—past or present—and prefer comforting (and plausible) stereotypes.

Yet many in this class are at least potentially antagonistic to the multinationals. Their members have spearheaded the ecology movement. It was their growing sophistication that made it impossible for Disney to recycle 1950s approaches, either in films or theme parks (approaches now dismissed by a younger generation as "Mickey Mouse"). We must be suspicious of blaming messages on the receiving public, even such an affluent one as this.

Would accurate history bore or repel them? Perhaps not. Audiences often respond favorably where conventional wisdom says they won't. (A dramatic and relevant comparison might be with

the spectacularly successful *Roots*—which for all its Hollywood devices and elisions was a striking departure from *Gone with the Wind*.) Do Disney's sitcoms in space work because people want reassurance, or because that's all they're being given? Are visitors getting what they want, or what corporate publicists want them to want?

There is no simple answer to these questions. Some of EPCOT's consumers may be inclined to adopt the comfortable and convenient ideologies purveyed there. Others have no vested interest in or are profoundly disserved by doing so. Regardless of predisposition, however, EPCOT's casual subordination of truth to "entertainment" impairs visitors' ability to distinguish between reality and plausible fiction. The consequences for the country are serious. George Kennan recently noted that "when an individual is unable to face his own past and feels compelled to build his view of himself on a total denial of it and on the creation of myths to put in its place, this is normally regarded as a sign of extreme neurosis." A similar diagnosis, he argued, was warranted for a society "that is incapable of seeing itself realistically and can live only by the systematic distortion or repression of its memories about itself and its early behavior." Kennan was referring to the Soviet Union. But the United States suffers from a similar malady. If we wish to restore our social health, we had better get beyond Mickey Mouse history.

Postscript: Mickey Mouse Amid the Big Bad Wolves

Disney World's imagineers spin wondrous fantasies about the nature of capitalism for their twenty million visitors. But there is another Disney World story, reserved for readers of the *Wall Street Journal*. Peeking behind EPCOT's sugar plum facade reveals how the *real* capitalist world works.

In 1940, Walt found himself in a financial bind. Riding the wave of his first big success, *Snow White*, Disney had set aside his inherited distrust of bankers—his films, like Capra's, consistently portrayed them as villains—and plunged into debt to construct an expensive new studio. This and a full load of feature films ate up his capital just as war closed the crucial foreign market to him. When his debt to bankers reached $4.5 million, they shut off his credit line entirely. He was thus forced, for the first time, to make a public stock offering and dilute his control of the company. Worse yet, the stock soon started tumbling in value.

Some of the stock he had distributed to employees. Its slide worsened already bad labor relations. In 1941, a bitter strike broke out at the Disney studio, a conflict which Disney chose to regard as part of a communist plot to subvert the country. Disney stock prices fell further—from $25 to $3 a share—and only government wartime contracts for training and propaganda films kept him going. When the company slowly climbed out of the red after the war, Disney bought back outstanding stock to regain complete control.

His next encounter with finance capital came when he reluctantly sought bank backing for Disneyland. Cautious bankers turned him down: "they stepped on my neck" was the way he put it. His project was rescued by the big corporations to whom he sold concessions, and by ABC-Paramount, which bought a third of the shares of Disneyland, Inc., chartered in 1951. This time, however, Disney insisted on getting an option to repurchase the shares, and did so by 1961. He had, he thought, finally achieved financial stability and independence of the financial community.

Luckily for him, Walt died without having to witness the recent mauling and near dismemberment of his corporation by the sharks of Wall Street.

In March 1984, Saul P. Steinberg, a New York financier, began purchasing Disney stock. Rumors of a takeover bid swept Wall Street. Disney management, led by Walt's son-in-law, Ronald W. Miller, prepared for a fight. He was backed by Disney's widow, Lillian; her daughter, Sharon Disney Lund; Disney's investment banker, Morgan Stanley & Company; and a crack anti-takeover law firm. The defense team arranged to triple Disney Inc.'s $400 million line of credit with a Bank of America-led consortium.

Disney management knew it would be helpless against Steinberg in the financial jungle without a powerful outside protector. It turned to the Bass brothers, billionaire Texas investors (and raiders in their own right). In May, Disney managers purchased a Bass real estate development firm. By paying for it with Disney stock they transferred a big share of the company to "friendly" hands. On June 6, Disney announced plans for another acquisition—Gibson, a greeting card company—that would bring William E. Simon, the powerful former Treasury secretary (and a major Gibson stockholder) onto the defense team.

At this point Steinberg declared open war. He formally announced an attempt to buy 49 percent of Walt Disney Productions by paying stockholders between $70 and $73 a share at a time when the market value was fluctuating between $62 and $68. This would cost him about $900 million. To make the threat credible, he put together a group of raiders who lusted after parts of the Disney company. Kirk Kerkorian, the majority stockholder of MGM-United Artists, would be given Disney's rich film library to sell in the

home video market. The Fisher brothers, major New York developers, would get the extensive Florida landholdings worth hundreds of millions. Steinberg also announced he would launch a proxy fight to make all stockholders who bought stock in the company after May 25 (i. e., the Bass brothers) ineligible to vote, and then unseat the Disney management.

At this point, management panicked and decided to buy Steinberg off—which may have been what he was hoping for in the first place. They agreed to pay him $70.35 a share, substantially above market value, plus $28 million for "expenses," if he would give back his block of stock and promise not to buy any more for ten years. Steinberg cleared $60 million on the deal.

Disney was not alone that year in being stung by what is called "greenmail." In the first six months of 1984, companies shelled out over $2 billion to buy off unwanted outside investors. Commenting on the incident, one institutional investor said, "I think Steinberg did exactly what you would expect someone to do, given the existing laws and free-market society we live in."

The fight to stay independent left Disney bloodied. The company's debt soared from $350 million to $850 million. Disney's stock value fell by more than 25 percent. In mid-June, with the price down to $45 a share, a new group of raiders began buying stock, this one led by Irwin L. Jacobs, a Minneapolis investor.

The Jacobs group and the Bass brothers then combined to force Disney management to renege on the agreed-upon—but as yet unconsummated—purchase of Gibson, thus freezing out William Simon, who would have shown a profit of $70 million had the deal gone through. One Paine Webber analyst, noting that management had again caved in to blackmail, suggested that "this company is going to continue to be very, very vulnerable to threats from the outside." This proved an accurate forecast: on September 7, Ronald W. Miller was forced to resign as president and chief executive.

The stage was now set for a gunfight at the Disney corral. The Bass brothers increased their share of the company to 8.6 percent, overtaking the Jacobs group's 7.7 percent. Jacobs threatened to buy enough stock to take over and break up the company. The Bass brothers countered by buying $148.2 million more stock (at $60 a share), bringing their holdings to nearly 16 percent. Jacobs, having decided there was "not a place for both of us," offered to buy out the Basses at $65 a share. They refused, and countered with an offer to buy out Jacobs at $61. He capitulated, sold at a tidy profit, and left the Basses in command.

All this wheeling and dealing took its toll. For the operating quarter ending September 30, 1984, the company posted a loss of $64 million. It sought to deal with this in time-honored corporate fashion, by putting the screws to its workforce. In September, management told workers that wages had to be controlled to keep profits at an acceptable level. They announced pay cuts of 16.1 percent over the next three years and cutbacks in health benefits.

On September 25, Disneyland employees struck. Nineteen hundred picketing workers, wearing "no-Mickey" T-shirts, asked for a 2 to 5 percent increase in wages and maintenance of health benefits. The company kept the park open using clerical and managerial personnel; went to court for a restraining order against picketing; sued the unions for a quarter-million dollars; and began hiring scab replacements, who, the strikers were warned, would be taken on permanently if workers did not return. The unions responded with a boycott threat, and the Employees Association served notice it would bring class action suits against potential greenmailers or any who would dismember the organization.

Despite these militant initiatives, the workers were in a weak position, and knew it. In October, they ended their strike, accepting a two-year wage freeze and some cuts in benefits. In November Walt Disney World laid off one hundred employees.

EPCOT has no immediate plans to include a "Disney Does 'Dallas' " exhibit sponsored by the AFL-CIO.

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