

Disney's California Adventure Theme Park: Rhetorical Shape of a California Dream

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These would be the successive phases of the image:

- *it is the reflection of a basic reality*
- *it masks and perverts a basic reality*
- *it masks the absence of a basic reality*
- *it bears no relations to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.*

(Baudrillard 256)

After taking the Lion King Tram from the Timon Parking Lot, and purchasing a Disney Passport from a Disneyland Ticket Booth, Disney's California Adventure opens southward to "Sunshine Plaza's" centerpiece, a fifty-foot-tall sun sitting atop a perpetual wave fountain just beyond the Golden Gateway. Disney's California Adventure Theme Park is the newest addition to what is now known as The Disneyland Resort, comprised of both theme parks, three hotels, and Downtown Disney, an outside shopping mall with merchants, restaurants, and a movie theater. These two additions to the Magic Kingdom mark the transformation from park to resort and a concurrent transformation from simulacrum to imitation. In my thesis, I intend to expose ideologies at work to identify implicit themes that foster a co-created narrative about California between park tourists and their environment, with particular attention to how that reality has shifted from constructions of "pure simula-cra" in Disneyland to the "reflections and perversions of reality" in California Ad-

ventures. This thesis will not rest on the shoulders of such leftist verbiage, however, but will simply identify the fantasy themes at work in the space that comprise rhetorical visions and root out the shared ideologies that from which they arise. This process will yield the anatomy of Disney's contribution to California Dreamism, a contribution that does not simply tack on to an essential core narrative, but in adding to it alters its "shape" entirely.

Disney has long been identified with homogeneity. As such, they provide their tourists with a unified environment replete with symbols that consistently signify the experience Disney purposely creates. Defining "fantasy theme," Foss states: "It is a word, phrase, or statement that interprets events in the past, envisions events in the future, or depicts current events that are removed in time and/or space from the actual activities of the group" (123). The events are taken out of time and place, and dramatized in a homogenous environment, which renders signification efficient and guarantees a shared experience, a shared reality. In varying terms, critics have made such observations about Disneyland and Disneyworld for decades, although the "statements" are understood in the broader semiotic and symbolic sense, rather than the merely linguistic. Luis Marin in his article, "Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia," for example, attempts to "show how a utopic structure and utopic functions degenerate, how the utopic representation can be entirely caught in a dominant system of ideas and values and, thus, be changed into a myth or a collective fantasy" (1). In a fantasy theme analysis, one identifies a collective fantasy of a group, noting its setting, characters, and actions. This narrows down specific ways in which people order their experiences and "provide compelling explanations" (124). These

[s]ymbols create reality because of their capacity to introduce form and law into a disordered sensory experience. The chaotic and disorderly sensory world is organized and made manageable by the symbols that are devised to dominate it: "The process of language formation shows for example that how the chaos of immediate impressions takes on order the clarity for us only when we 'name' it and so permeate it with the function of linguistic thought and expression." (Foss 122; Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 87)

Disneyland provides an environment where shared experience is assumed within its borders. One could analyze, for example, the slogan, "The Dream That You Wish Will Come True" for a fruitful fantasy theme analysis. My task, however, involves a rooting out of the semiotic statements, the tacit though at times obvious ideological statements suggested by the architecture and symbols used in Disney's California Adventure.

Reflecting on his travels through the United States, Umberto Eco observes that “Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure, it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced” (43). Whereas imitations may attempt to fantastically represent reality, Disneyland realistically represents fantasy. Without an original artifact as a quality-guide, its criteria for authenticity as “genuine fake” is constituted in its ability to gather assent from the masses—to capture their imagination, (re)construct it, and sell it—in whatever order. This is most obvious in the way Disney feeds the imagination of a movie-going audience with their animated features, and then demarcates a space where these creatures of pure imagination become three dimensional and perfectly tangible. Disney similarly represents our nostalgia in Main Street and New Orleans Square, dreams of an idyllic future in the original Tomorrowland (recently redesigned in fittingly retro, Jules Verne-esque fashion—effectively representing nostalgia for the “future,” *yesterday’s future*), desire for adventure in Adventureland, and fantasies of exploration and discovery in Frontierland.

Although California Adventures appears in part to be an ideological extension of Frontierland as “the representation of scenes of the final conquest of the West,” its purported correspondence to actual historical events, places, and architecture on several fronts depend on a real and verifiable artifact to guarantee the quality of the imitation (Marin 5). Take for example its counterpart to the Magic Kingdom’s “Main Street” entrance, the Hollywood Pictures Backlot, which appears just to the left of the fifty-foot-sun. One of the three “themed lands,” Hollywood Pictures Backlot invites guests of the resort to “experience the magic of Hollywood” (Walt Disney Travel Co. 4). As such, it forms a “Main Street” of sorts, with two lanes divided by a broken white line, and shops and restaurants with facades patterned after Hollywood landmarks on both sides. In his analysis of Disneyland, Marin describes its “Access to the Center”:

Main Street USA leads the visitor to the center. But this route toward the center plaza is also the way toward Fantasyland, one of the four districts of Disneyland. So the most obvious axis of Disney's utopia leads the visitor not only from the circular limit or perimeter to the core of the closed space, but also from reality to fantasy. This fantasy is the trademark, the sign, the symbolic image of Disney's utopia. (3)

Umberto Eco amplifies Marin’s description:

Main Street—like the whole city, for that matter—is presented as at once absolutely realistic and absolutely fantastic [. . .]. The houses of Disneyland are full-size on the ground floor, and on a two-thirds scale on the floor above, so they give the impression of being inhabitable (and they are) but also of belonging to a fantastic past that we can grasp with our imagination. The Main Street facades are presented as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but the interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing. (43)

The Backlot mirrors this description in most essential ways. The layout Eco describes is essentially the same, except that the Backlot attempts to represent *actual* and verifiable Hollywood sites, such as the Los Angeles Theater and the set of Who Wants to be a Millionaire and several soap opera sets, instead of representing in an exclusively *general* way the feeling or idea of Hollywood; the Backlot is supposed to recreate the “Golden Age of Hollywood” (Disney Online). Main Street recalls an idea of something, constructed in simulacra (these are not intended to represent known buildings from an actual Main Street, although they are patterned after actual buildings); and although the Backlot recalls an *idea* of something as well, they are signs with immediate referents, whereas the Main Street structures signify primarily themselves and an abstract ideology.

The Backlot’s “trajectory” is geographically counter to Main Street’s, as it leads to the edge of the park instead of the center; however, one may recognize a parallel ideological trajectory: Main Street leads to the “symbolic image of Disney’s utopia,” Fantasyland; and the Backlot street similarly leads to perhaps the most dominant image of California: blue skies and white clouds. This is not to say that the street leads to a view of the Anaheim sky, but to a Hollywood-style backdrop that continues the street and building images in center-point perspective into the “distance” amidst a too-blue sky with too-white clouds; ironically, the back-drop *is* set against the Anaheim sky, depicting a dissonance of blues—the imitation much cleaner and bluer than the real thing. Here we have an imitation of an imitation (an original Hollywood backdrop depicting a blue sky), exposed side-by-side with the *original* original: the present less-blue sky. As Eco notes about the Magic Kingdom several years earlier, “Disneyland not only produces illusion, but—in confessing it—stimulates the desire for it [. . .]. Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands” (44). Here as well, the illusion is purposely obvious, and nature by comparison despairs next to a dingy blue. But this image represents more than the perfecting effect of technologizing nature. In

addition, “[t]he fake is recognized as ‘historical,’ and is thus garbed in authenticity,” as Eco noted of Disneyland’s New Orleans Square (30). The fake is historicized, a sort of popcorn authenticity found in an imitation of an imitation sky. Its depiction of a road that never ends represents its surroundings, perhaps the most popular example of California’s prosperity, wish fulfillment, and real fantasy: Hollywood. In addition to the referents, the content of the picture on the backdrop—the road that never ends—suggests movement beyond what is known, a traversal via idyllic dream-stuff toward an as yet undetermined, yet optimistic, end: a dream beyond the dream, of what is yet to come.

The park as a whole clearly represents this theme. As a park that is “Golden Age” oriented in all three sections—the “Golden Age of Hollywood” in the Backlot; the “pioneering spirit of its people, past and present” in the Golden State; and “the ‘Golden Age’ of amusement parks” in Paradise Pier (Disney Online)—it represents a “Golden Age” of achievement and prosperity, and hence a twice idealized ideology: dreams of the past (re)inspiring a “manifest destiny” teleology of the present (yesterday’s dreams of the future), re-dreamt in the present to reorient us toward a continued future as such. The Golden State is perhaps the section of the park most overtly geared toward this ideology, however, evident in Disney’s aforementioned description of it. And within the Golden State, “the emotional centerpiece” is the twenty-two minute movie entitled “Golden Dreams,” which “celebrates the people and events that have helped shape the character of California” (Disney Online). “Golden Dreams” attempts to communicate California’s general millennial history, encapsulated in a “California Dream” theme. The “California Dream” was a marketing invention in the Nineteenth Century meant to encourage people to move to California, most of the main substance of which is comparable to the familiar “American Dream.” Opportunity and prosperity, realized through hard work, forms the dominant theme of this movie’s depiction of the “California Dream.” Nineteenth Century California is not only an untapped space for living the “American Dream,” but also a beautiful and healthy climate purported to alleviate the discomfort of those with failing lungs, consumption, etc. (Vail). The movie does not highlight this latter detail, but chooses to focus on issues that support an ideology of progress.

Narrated by the spirit of California, Calafia, the story is told from the point of view that California is itself a place of dreams. Calafia embodies California’s own good intentions to take care of its people, whoever they may be at the time. The movie begins with Native Americans doing Native American things: building canoes, telling stories about how they must protect the land (blatant environmental message),

wearing lots of face paint. Califia, played by Whoopie Goldberg, smoothly comments on their “dream of California,” suggesting a primordial connection between the native ideology and the current “California Dream,” supported also in her own native dress, deified authority, and matter-of-fact acceptance: others had dreams not compatible with the natives’, and many of the native peoples were killed off by the diseases they brought (Golden Dreams). Her short narrative of the Spanish occupation that follows represents the only unrealized dream in the movie—the Spanish never made California part of their empire.

The narrative resumes at the time of the Gold Rush. Here, mere narrative association places the plight of these new settlers on equal footing with the dream of the native peoples, because the dream does not belong to any one people, but belongs to the land itself. In other words, the messy business of accountability is rendered moot in this conception where the motivation for all action is a function of the land and space, and the people inhabiting the space are merely under its spell. However, the people are not totally without agency. Although the land supplies the dream, the people must remain strong and committed to that dream so that it may be realized; as such, we see that a commitment to the dream is a commitment to the land, a backdoor way to a vague and ironic sort of environmentalism. Whereas one *may* criticize the mining of precious metals as raping the land, the movie’s identification of mining with the “dream” launders away the pejorative interpretation—the miner only follows the dream *supplied* by the land, dreamt originally by its native peoples, and carried on by its enduring spirit, Califia. This specific scene depicts a weary and nearly defeated miner panning for gold, but Califia, who assumes minor roles throughout the movie, points out a piece of gold just under a rock, thus motivating him to keep following the dream, and moving the “California Dream” itself forward.

The narrative then moves to deal with a topic still firmly with us: immigration and racial diversity. Here, the Chinese are celebrated for their work on the railroads, then a weeping Chinese mail order bride benefits from the encouraging words of Califia, “Be strong.” Her new husband reiterates this, insisting that life will not be easier in California, but that they will prosper if they *work hard*. While Chinese emigrate from the Far East, Americans migrate from the Midwest during the Depression, and Califia’s message remains: “Be strong.” The message that hard work pays off dominates this representation of the California Dream, although it is not the kind of hard work one identifies with American “rugged individualism”; these narratives suggest cooperation with the land, a negotiated and co-wrought “hard work” that jibes with the “California Dream.” It continues as Califia takes us to the

site of Mr. Mullholland's triumph of piping water into the California desert, to the California groves where we witness Cesar Chavez speaking to his fellow workers, to Hollywood where our imaginations are transformed into reality almost magically before our eyes, and to Berkeley where the first personal computer prototype is unveiled and its destiny as a "California Dream" realized on a global scale is made evident. The dream of a better life leads to farming and to mining the land for resources, to industrialization and irrigation, to aviation, to media and computer technology, which reaches out to the whole world. This ethos is consistent with Marin's criticism of "Disneyland [as] a fantasmatic projection of the history of the American nation, of the way in which this history was conceived with regard to other peoples and to the natural world [. . .] an immense and displaced metaphor of the system of representations and values unique to American society (1). California Adventures extends the size of the metaphor, and ironically both extends and narrows the effect of the metaphor. California, one would think, represents itself rather than a nation, but as we see, its theme extends past the borders of even the original Disneyland, making multi-culturalism and diversity one of its main topoi. Quite simply, the "California Dream" is embodied in every accomplishment recorded within our borders, and is attributed to California-ness, while it concurrently calls outside its borders, globally, for those with the same dreams to realize them here. Disneyland then lays claim to this ethos by reversing its own proximal status. One may have once said that Disneyland was located in California, however naively. Jean Baudrillard notes the ironic play of significance of Disneyland:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland [. . .] presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (262)

Disneyland, if we agree with Baudrillard, already signifies America by apparent opposition—the apparent fantasy that is Disneyland oppositionally sets off the "reality" that is America. California Adventure's alters this effect, somewhat, because it attempts to ground its credibility in crafty imitation and depiction of actual events rather than through self-signifying simulacra. Ironically, the addition of California Adventures more obviously exposes Baudrillard's observation by effectively constructing a California that belongs *to* Disney *in* Disneyland. The opposition, and hence the illusion, begins to collapse. The "Golden Dreams" movie contributes to

this collapse of opposition by trying more than any other feature in Disney's California Adventure to be authentic representation. Yet, how authentic can it be? It is twenty-two minutes and claims to give a history of California. The narrative must be extremely selective.

Naturally, the state's darker moments do not make it to the screen, although the virtual wiping out of the native peoples is whitewashed as one dream picking up where another left off, a clever and smooth way to deal with an undeniable recalcitrance. But the fact that the LA riots, for example, were not dealt with is not surprising, and one is hard-pressed to come up with a viable criticism. Who would expect a themed show such as this to focus on the negative? If we were to take the narrative at face-value, as a documentary intended to educate us on the history of California, then perhaps one could criticize its selective vision, its banal optimism. But the events it describes seem to merely provide credible support for a theme: the "California Dream." The depiction of the dream at once exalts California and calls out to the world—the dream of a better life is everyone's dream. The characters and actions in the movie represent a universal struggle to attain prosperity, and its proximity in California certainly includes everyone in the theater. Essentially, no one is left out. It is not only for Californians, but for anyone who was led to this place by whatever inclination; any tourist is even in some small way a part of the dream.

The setting is a complex play of California and Disney Resort; in a sense California is in Disneyland, and in a sense the reverse is true. They do not appear to be mutually exclusive, however, because the play between them is articulated tongue-in-cheek throughout the park. Disney motifs and trademark Disney Imagineering pervade the park's attractions, and everyone's ticket is still a Disneyland ticket. "Disney's California Adventure Theme Park celebrates the fun and adventures of California, Disney style" (Disney Travel Agents). It also celebrates the progress and achievements of California and its people. But who are its people? Anyone who pays to stay at the park is effectively "its people," which is not an especially novel observation; in conjunction with the "California Dream" message that all dreams of a better life are embodied in the state itself, those who share that feeling and find themselves in the state at any point have an implicit claim to the spirit. The topoi of the park collectively provide motive to its people: the "California Dream" motivates us. Since California is itself largely a tourist-driven state, the theme park contribution into the "Dream" narrative complements the state's ethos. In short, California is *supposed* to be pretty and it is *supposed* to be fun. A settler from 1888 testifies to the appeal of its climate: "We certainly can live on climate, and climate

alone, so long as those who want it, seek for it and pay us for it when they have found it" (Vail 8). And pay these "settlers" do—as Umberto Eco notes, although the merchandise they buy is real, "[w]hat is falsified is our will to buy, which we take as real, and in this sense Disneyland is really the quintessence of consumer ideology" (43). The park's visitors are captive consumers, but willing. The sign of prosperity in this ethos is the ability to have *more*. "In America [and California] you don't say, 'Give me another coffee'; you ask for 'More coffee'; [. . .] more than you might want, leaving a surplus to throw away—that's prosperity" (Eco 15-16).

Perhaps the overt fantasy theme, noticeable by any park guest, is fun. This is a park designed for fun, no doubt. But few in our consumer culture will accede unquestioningly to the "consumer ideology." We have become savvier than that. However, the fantasy theme working at the fundament of the Disney ideology seems to be: by acting on one's dream for a better life, one may achieve prosperity. Although this is a "California Dream," it is at once inclusive of all people. Additionally, we associate prosperity with consumer power. This is all fun, of course, but the "California Dream" theme makes it meaningful, and guarantees a shared experience that goes beyond the technical appreciation of a roller coaster ride. They are given an ideological base from which to interpret history and culture in this state, and that narrative is reinforced in the movie "Golden Dreams," certainly a slanted view of California's history. Luis Marin's similar comments on Disneyland years prior suggest a method of representation long established, though nowhere near as neatly as in Disney's California Adventure, where the mitigating influence of pure simulacra is almost nonexistent:

The visitors have learned the codes of the language of Disneyland and have thus been given the possibilities to tell their individual story, to utter their own speech. Yet their freedom, the freedom of their own individual narrative, is constrained not only by these codes but also by the representation of an imaginary history contained in a stereotyped system of representations. (Marin 5) The effect seems to be less a matter of strategy in this case, however. The fact is that they chose an actual state as their theme, with actual trademarks and motifs that they had to represent, because the concept is at base a representation of something real. I do not see this as an overtly ethical issue, but aesthetical. If we revel in the postmodern scope of Disneyland as the epitome of simulacra, the Sistine Chapel of the hyperreal (Eco 48), then Disney's California Adventure is truly a step backward. If we instead take Disneyland as the epitome of consumer culture that here celebrates a "prosperity" rhetorical vision in consumerist terms, then perhaps it has taken a step forward.

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