

America Appropriates The World

A fascination with the American cultural phenomenon, Walt Disney World began during my time in graduate school at the University of Florida. The installation *America Appropriates the World* combines this interest with some of the concerns that I have dealt with in my artwork over the last few years, issues of veracity and fabrication, photography and tourism, semiotics, and the commodification of experience.

EPCOT Center is one segment of the Disney World grouping of themed parks and hotels that are situated within the corporation's 27,400 square acres in Central Florida.

A visit to Disney's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, (EPCOT) is a visit to the future and the four corners of the world all in one day. Originally conceived by Walt Disney in 1966, he envisioned EPCOT as

"a prototype community of tomorrow that will take its cue from the new ideas and technologies that are now emerging from the creative centers of American industry ... [It] would be a showcase to the world for the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise."

Future World, the first section of Epcot is a collection of modernistic pavilions, displaying the World of Tomorrow or rather, corporate America's version of how its technologies will shape the direction of the earth's future. Mega corporations like AT&T, Exxon, United Technologies and Kodak, have sponsored space age architectural feats, which are designed to feed information to the masses of people who passively file through their displays of American technological triumphs and amazing achievements for the future.¹

After paying your admission fee of \$42 US (one day ticket admission in 1999) and passing through the gates, you are confronted with EPCOT's most imposing structure, The Space Ship Earth. This gleaming silver geosphere dominates the entire EPCOT landscape and easily boasts the longest line of viewers. Normally impatient Americans will quietly submit to waiting in line for well over an hour. Umberto Eco in his essay *Travels in Hyperreality*, describes Disneyland as

*"a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railing, which discourage any individual initiative."*²

After funneling into the sphere, one is finally seated on a continuously moving, modern roller coaster-like vehicle (minus the speed). You are then taken up, up into the giant ball. It is like you have entered into a gigantic television set. Everything is happening around you and there is nothing to do but lean back and enjoy it all. What you are shown is

¹ Birnbaum, Steve, *Walt Disney World, The Official Guide*, Avon Books & Hearst Professional Magazines Inc. Willard, Ohio, 1990, pp.113

² Eco, Umberto, *Travels in Hyperreality*, translated by Weaver, William, Harcourt Brace Janovich, Publishers, New York, 1986, pp.48

comparable to an educational program on the American Broadcasting System, PBS, only much better, because you are right inside of it. The history of communications as presented by AT&T, complete with musty smells of the past, inspiring sound tracks and life-like “audio-animatronic” characters, who talk and sing and grin as you pass by. Chronologically you progress from prehistoric times with the beginning of language, past the earliest writing achievements, past the invention of printing on through the technological achievements of the telegraph, radio, film, television, and the computer, until finally you emerge at the top of the sphere into a vast outer space filled with twinkling stars, satellites, astronauts and the communication apparatus of the future. Everything is believable, down to its last detail and you feel like you are accompanying captain James T. Kirk on a peaceful Star Trek voyage aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise.

You know it is not really real, but it is absolutely perfect in its fakery. “... [O]nce the ‘total fake’ is admitted, in order to be enjoyed it must seem totally real. ... because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake ...”³ . and Disney is certainly master of the fake.

. The creators of Epcot have gathered pieces of 11 countries, which have been put together as a montage of editorialized, sanitized, commodified and Americanized symbols, easily recognized by the media savvy public. They make no secrets about its fabrications. In the *Official Guide to Disney World* it states that it demonstrates “... Disney conceptions about participating countries in remarkably realistic, consistently entertaining styles. You won’t find the real Germany here; rather, the country’s essence, ... Shops, restaurants, and an occasional special attraction are all housed in a group of structures that are an artful pastiche of all the elements that give that nation’s countryside and towns their distinctive flavor.” .

The second section is a collection of ethnic pavilions called World Showcase. Constructed in the fashion of a permanent world fair, these pseudo-communities are spaced along a 2 km promenade, which encircles a 41 acre man made lagoon. Presented here are signifiers of the “civilized” world. Each country is represented by an American designed pastiche of prominent historical landmarks or symbols, which have come to represent the ethnic characteristics of each particular country through a language of simulacrum.

A visit to The Epcot Center is like walking into a Hollywood film. The employees are called cast members and they have to audition for their jobs. They all have their appropriate costumes to wear and roles to play. Everything around you fits perfectly. Just the way you always thought it would look. Just like in the movies. Here is the France

³ Echo, Umberto, *Travels in Hyperreality*, translated by Weaver, William, Harcourt Brace Janovich, Publishers, New York, 1986, pp 44

Showcase. There is the Eiffel tower in the background. There are the artists on the Left bank. You can even have a glass of wine at the sidewalk cafe, just like in the movies. Or better still, it is like being inside of a 3 -dimensional television set.

The Disney recreations are very well researched and the achievement of such convincing local ambiance is uncanny. They even import employees from abroad to provide the right ethnic look and accent for the cast members who guide you through the attractions and sell you their authentic wares, which Disney imports to complete the setting. Thus we have the whole show. A painless visit to a foreign country, a polite and cheerful encounter with an English speaking, foreign native, a taste of the ethnic cuisine “chosen for its intrinsic appeal to American taste, though in only a few instances have native cuisines been modified in any substantive way to make them more palatable.” and a chance to buy “real souvenirs” which have actually originated from the country in question.

Now I ask, why bother leaving the comforts of the United States when you can travel to China, Italy, France and outer space all in one day? Even at Disney’s exorbitant rates, it is of course, much cheaper than actually travelling to each country. In Dean MacCannell’s essay *Reconstructed Ethnicity* he writes “ We might ask what can happen to the quality of our understanding of other people and places, other times, when it is no longer based on humane scholarship and comes to depend, for the most part, on visits to Main Street USA [which is part of Disney World] Chinatown, etc.” and places like Epcot.

By examining the Epcot Center, the ultimate in presenting idealized symbols of the world, I find myself questioning this global phenomenon of cultural appropriation and commodification. In contrast to the other side of the mass media scale of the Global Village in terms of instantaneous disaster coverage and real war in your living room, how are these opposing representations affecting our understanding of the world and its humanity? How is it changing global tastes and cultures, and what is it doing to the quality of our life?

Notes:

1. Echo, Umberto, *Travels in Hyperreality*, translated by Weaver, William, Harcourt Brace Janovich, Publishers, New York, 1986, pg
2. Birnbaum, Steve, *Walt Disney World, The Official Guide*, Avon Books & Hearst Professional Magazines Inc. Willard, Ohio, 1990.

1. Baudrillard, Jean, *The Precession of Simulacra*, Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, Edited by Willis, Brian, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, pg.253-281.