

attempting to remake the world in the image of his own imagination, to certify his place as a force in that world and keep reality from encroaching upon it, to recapture a sense of childhood power that he either had never felt or had lost long ago.

It was this attempt, in fact, as much as the fairy tales he used for inspiration, that forged the bond between Disney and childhood, a bond he frequently disavowed by insisting that his films were not made for children. Whether in his movies or in his theme parks, Disney always promised a fantasy in which one could exercise the privileges of childhood—privileges he never abandoned in his own life. This will to power also explained why animation was his preferred medium. In animation one took the inanimate and brought it to life, or the illusion of life. In animation one could exercise the power of a god.

No doubt because he worked in what was regarded as a juvenile idiom, and because his films seemed naïve, unselfconscious, and unpretentious, the young Walt Disney was regarded in most circles as a kind of folk artist. In the 1930s, when he became a celebrity virtually overnight, intellectuals frequently compared him to another popular artist, Charlie Chaplin, and several, including Thornton Wilder, went so far as to say that Chaplin and Disney were the only true geniuses that the movies had produced. Still, there was always something in Disney that pegged him not just as a populist but as peculiarly American, and though an early biography of him was subtitled *An American Original*, he was less original in many respects than quintessential. He had been born in the Midwest in the very heart of the country at the turn of the century and at the fulcrum of an expiring agricultural nation that looked backward to an idyllic past and an aspiring industrialized one that looked forward to a technological future, and he had a foot in each. His childhood had even been divided between the country and the city. An American Everyman, he lived the American experience and seemed to embody it in his doggedness, his idealism, his informality, and his lack of affectation, perhaps above all in his sudden rise from poverty and anonymity to the summit of success. “[H]e emerged from the very heart of the people,” one admirer rhapsodized. “Only so was it possible for him to respond to our subtlest moods.” Another remarked that “[o]f all the activists

of public diversion, Uncle Walt was the one most precisely in the American mainstream.” The synchronicity between Disney and America would become his brand. His imagination formed a double helix with the American imagination.

Obviously Disney’s work had universal appeal, but in America, with its almost religious belief in possibilities, his urge to wish fulfillment was especially resonant. In both Disney’s imagination and the American imagination, one could assert one’s will on the world; one could, through one’s own power, or more accurately through the power of one’s innate goodness, achieve success. Indeed, in a typically American formulation, nothing but goodness and will mattered. Disney’s best animations—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, and *Dumbo*—were archetypal expressions of this idea. In large measure, they were about the process of a child making his or her claim upon the world, about the process of overcoming obstacles to become whatever he or she wanted to be. Similarly, in both Disney’s imagination and the American imagination perfection was seen as an attainable goal. In a world that was often confusing, dangerous, and even tragic, a world that seemed beyond any individual’s control, Disney and America both promised not only dominance but also improvement. Disneyland was just a modern variant on the old Puritan ideal of a shining City on a Hill, as Disney’s Audio-Animatronic robots were just a variant on the American dream of making oneself anew.

The helix between America and Disney was especially tight in the anxiety-ridden Depression America of the 1930s, when his films seemed to capture and then soothe the national malaise. Virtually everyone interpreted *Three Little Pigs* as a Depression allegory, and many others saw in Mickey Mouse’s pluck an intrepid American spirit. But among American critics the line between naïve populism and cloying sentimentality proved to be thin. Already by the end of World War II Disney’s artistic reputation was in decline, and intellectuals who had been swooning just a few years earlier over his innocence and artless artfulness now complained that he had lost his touch and become a mass artist rather than a folk artist. By the end of his life, though his iconic status as America’s favorite uncle was probably more unshakable than ever, his artistic status had plummeted. What had