

In truth, Disney's final destination was fire, not ice; he had been cremated and his ashes interred in a mausoleum in a remote corner of the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, not far from his studio. But the persistence of the rumor, however outlandish, testified not only to the identification of Disney with futuristic technology late in his life but to a public unwillingness to let go of him, even to the point of mythologizing him as an immortal who could not be felled by natural forces. Arguably no single figure so bestrode American popular culture as Walt Disney. By one estimate, in 1966 alone, the year of his death, 240 million people saw a Disney movie, a weekly audience of 100 million watched a Disney television show, 80 million read a Disney book, 50 million listened to Disney records, 80 million bought Disney merchandise, 150 million read a Disney comic strip, 80 million saw a Disney educational film, and nearly 7 million visited Disneyland. By another estimate, during his lifetime Disney's live-action films grossed nearly \$300 million and the feature animations just under \$100 million, when these were astronomical figures, and more than 60 million people had visited Disneyland. *The Saturday Evening Post* once called him the "world's most celebrated entertainer and possibly its best known non-political public figure," and *The New York Times* eulogized him as "probably the only man to have been praised by both the American Legion and the Soviet Union."

But Walt Disney's influence cannot be measured by numbers or encomia. It can only be measured by how thoroughly he reshaped the culture and the American consciousness. Disney was protean. In the late 1920s he began reinventing animation, gradually turning it from a novelty that emphasized movement and elasticity of line into an art form that emphasized character, narrative, and emotion. In doing so, he also helped reinvent graphic design by introducing the soft, round, bold, colorful forms that decades later would be adopted and adapted by a vanguard of fine artists. The critic Robert Hughes credited him with inventing Pop Art itself, not only in the look he bequeathed but also in the convergence of high art and low that he effected. "[I]t happened," Hughes wrote, "when, in *Fantasia*, Mickey Mouse clambered up to the (real) podium and shook hands with the (real) conductor Leopold Stokowski."

instrumental in generating public support for space exploration. It was Disney, too, who created Tomorrowland at his Disneyland theme park and collaborated with Monsanto on a House of the Future attraction there, and Disney who advanced the ideas of monorails, “people movers,” Audio-Animatronic robots, and other marvels, even to the point of designing an entire city that would, had it been built, have incorporated the latest in technology and urban planning. It made Disney at once a nostalgist and a futurist, a conservative and a visionary.

Then there was his effect on nature and conservation. By anthropomorphizing animals in his cartoons, Disney helped sensitize the public to environmental issues; with *Bambi* alone he triggered a national debate on hunting. Later when, basically for his own curiosity, he commissioned a husband-and-wife filmmaking team to shoot footage of a remote Alaskan island and then in 1948 had the film edited into a story of the seals who lived and bred there, *Seal Island*, he essentially created a new genre, the wildlife documentary, and though he would be sternly criticized in some quarters for imposing narratives on nature and turning animals into characters, his films may nevertheless have played a greater role than anything else in popular culture in educating the public on conservation and building a constituency for it.

Finally, there were Disney’s accomplishments as an entrepreneur, albeit a reluctant one. He was the first motion picture mogul to realize the potential of television as an ally rather than an adversary, and his decision to make a series for the American Broadcasting Company opened the way for a rapprochement between the large screen and the small one. He was also the first to bundle television programs, feature animation, live-action films, documentaries, theme parks, music, books, comics, character merchandise, and educational films under one corporate shingle. In effect, as one observer put it, he created the first “modern multimedia corporation” and showed the way for the media conglomerates that would follow. One critic of Disney’s even accused him of having dragged corporatism, in the form of the “precise, clean, insipid, mechanical image,” into the daily lives of Americans and advised, “Throw him a kiss every time you get a computer letter.”

the most powerful source of his appeal as well as his greatest legacy may be that Walt Disney, more than any other American artist, defined the terms of wish fulfillment and demonstrated on a grand scale to his fellow Americans, and ultimately to the entire world, how one could be empowered by fantasy —how one could learn, in effect, to live within one's own illusions and even to transform the world into those illusions. “When You Wish Upon a Star,” the song Disney borrowed from *Pinocchio* for his television theme, was his anthem and guiding principle. The key to his success was, as the journalist Adela Rogers St. John put it, that he “makes dreams come true,” or at least gave the impression he did, and that he had “remolded a world not only nearer to his heart’s desire, but to yours and mine.” In numerous ways Disney struck what may be the very fundament of entertainment: the promise of a perfect world that conforms to our wishes.

He achieved this in part by managing, almost purely by instinct, to tap into archetypes that resonated with people of various ages, eras, and cultures. One of his greatest gifts was in finding the elemental and the essential of virtually every form in which he worked—its genetic code. Whether it was his fairy tales or his boy’s adventures or his castle or Main Street or the *Mark Twain* Riverboat in Disneyland, each seemed to have been refined into *the* fairy tale, *the* boy’s adventure, *the* castle or Main Street or riverboat of our mind’s eye. In an idealized world where wish fulfillment prevailed, Disney had consistently concretized the ideal and provided the pleasure of things made simple and pure the way one imagined they should be, or at least the way one imagined they should be from childhood. He had Platonic templates in his head.

Others, virtually everyone in entertainment, attempt to tap this same reserve, but Disney understood wish fulfillment from the inside, which may be why his own longings connected so powerfully to his audience’s. During a peripatetic childhood of material and emotional deprivation, at least as he remembered it, he began drawing and retreating into his own imaginative worlds. That set a pattern. His life would become an ongoing effort to devise what psychologists call a “paracosm,” an invented universe, that he could control as he could not control reality. From Mickey Mouse through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* through Disneyland through EPCOT, he kept

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

among intellectuals, underwent a similar if somewhat more gradual transformation from beloved naïf to avaricious corporate kingpin and general villain. Much of this change was politically inspired. Ever since a cartoonists' strike in 1941 that wracked the studio and shattered its owner's utopianism, Disney had grown increasingly conservative, aligning himself with red-baiting anti-Communists and with the most reactionary elements of the Republican Party, thus putting himself in the political crosshairs. Whispered accusations of anti-Semitism and racism clearly eroded his image. But much of the criticism was also culturally inspired. His long identification with small-town, conformist America, which had been one source of his popularity, became a liability in the 1960s, when that America was itself increasingly under attack from intellectuals and political activists and was itself increasingly identified not with America's sinewy strength but with her prejudices. Disney became a symbol of an America facing backward—politically, culturally, and artistically.

One of the most important flash points in both crystallizing and advancing this revisionist view was Richard Schickel's 1968 critical study, *The Disney Version*, which portrayed Disney as mercenary and mendacious, his entire life "an illusion created by a vast machinery," so much so that even his own signature, used as the company's logo, had to be manufactured for him. (In truth, Disney's personal signature was far more flamboyantly loopy than the modified corporate version.) "Disney was a callous man, oblivious to patterns inherent in nature, art, literature," a critic wrote in an approving review of Schickel's book, delivering what rapidly became the standard intellectual verdict on Hollywood's chief fantasist. "He had a magic touch, but it turned things into gold, not art. He lacked perception and sensitivity for genuine artistic creativity, and his compulsion to control made him no respecter of the integrity of the works of others." Another biographer, drawing on the deep hostility that Disney now evoked among intellectuals, accused him of being everything from the illegitimate son of a Spanish dancer to an alcoholic to a bigot to an FBI informant. The book was subtitled *Hollywood's Dark Prince*.

By the 1950s Disney himself was well aware that as a producer he had headed up the river to the heart of commercial darkness and that as a

which he so profoundly affected.