

Whenever someone manages to implant himself in American culture and the American psyche as deeply as Walt Disney did, analysts naturally look for explanations. In Disney's case they have pointed to the seeming innocence of his work, its gentle reassurance, its powerful sentimentality, its populism, its transport to childhood, its naïve faith in perseverance and triumph, even its appeal to atavistic images of survival in which, by one analysis, Mickey Mouse's circular shape subliminally summons breasts, babies, and fruit. One scholar has attributed Disney's popularity to his having traversed the distance between the "sentimental populism" of the Great Depression with its nudging critique of the prevailing social order and the "sentimental libertarianism" of the Cold War era that came to embrace the social order. Taking a different tack, the novelist John Gardner, a Disney advocate, located in Disney's work a lightly secularized Christian theology of hope and beneficence in which "God has things well under control" and life is fundamentally good. Essentially, as Gardner saw it, Disney had reinterpreted Christianity for mass culture.

There are certainly elements of all of these appeals in Disney's work, and its enormous popularity is undoubtedly the result of a combination of factors—indeed, of Disney's knack for splicing many disparate and even contradictory strains together. On the one hand, a Disney scholar could impute to Walt Disney a major role in the creation of a white, middle-class, Protestant ideal of childhood that turned American offspring in the 1950s into disciplined, self-sacrificing, thrifty, obedient consumers. On the other hand, another Disney scholar, citing the questioning of authority, the antagonism toward the moneyed class, the emphasis on personal liberation, the love of nature, and the advocacy of tolerance in his films, could credit him as the "primary creator of the counterculture, which the public imagination views as embracing values that are the antithesis of those that the body of his work supposedly communicated to children."

But if one source of Disney's magic was his ability to mediate between past and future, tradition and iconoclasm, the rural and the urban, the individual and the community, even between conservatism and liberalism,

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