INTRODUCTION

He was frozen. At least that was the rumor that emerged shortly after his death and quickly became legend: Walt Disney had been cryogenically preserved, hibernating like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, to await the day when science could revive him and cure his disease. Though it is impossible to determine exactly, the source of the rumor may have been a tabloid named *National Spotlite,* whose correspondent claimed to have sneaked into St. Joseph's Hospital where Disney had expired, disguised himself as an orderly, picked the lock on a storage room door, and spotted Disney suspended in a metal cylinder. The story also surfaced in 1969 in a French publication, *Ici Paris,* which said it based its report on individuals close to Disney, and it was repeated in *The National Tattler,* an American scandal sheet, which added that Disney had instructed doctors to thaw him in 1975. Yet another supermarket tabloid, *Midnight,* under the headline "Walt Disney Is Being Kept Alive in Deep Freeze," quoted both a studio librarian who remembered Disney accumulating a vast file of filmed material on cryogenics and an acquaintance of Disney's who said that the producer was "obsessed" with these movies. A writer for *The Mickey Mouse Club* television show, produced under Disney auspices, seemed to corroborate the librarian's recollection by recalling that Disney had once asked him about cryogenics and that the writer had then had the studio library staff research the subject. Ward Kimball, a puckish animator at the studio, took some pride in keeping the rumor afloat. And Disney himself may have lent it credence. According to one account, just weeks after his death studio department heads were invited to a screening room with nameplates on the seats, then watched a film of Disney sitting at his desk and eerily pointing to and addressing each of them on future plans. He concluded by smiling knowingly and saying that he would be seeing them soon.

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."

Beyond his animations, Disney changed the shape of American recreation with his Disneyland park. Obviously there had been amusement parks before Disneyland, but they had been grab-bag collections of various rides, games, and shows. Disney reconceptualized the amusement park as a full imaginative experience, a *theme* park, rather than a series of diversions, and just as his animation revised graphic design, his park eventually revised urban design. Detractors called the effect "Disneyfication," meaning the substitution of a synthetic world for a real one, but the urban planner James W. Rouse commended Disneyland as the "greatest piece of urban design in the United States" for the way it managed to serve its function and satisfy its guests, and architecture critic Peter Blake wrote, "[I]t seems unlikely that any American school of architecture will ever again graduate a student without first requiring him to take a field trip to Orlando, [Florida]," the site of Walt Disney World Resort, the East Coast sequel to Disneyland. In time Disneyland, with its faux environments and manipulated experiences, would become a metaphor for a whole new consciousness in which, for better or worse, the fabricated was preferred over the authentic and the real could be purged of its threats. As Robert Hughes put it, "[H]is achievement became a large shift in the limits of unreality."

Disney's influence also impregnated the American mind in subtler, less widely recognized ways. As he reinvented animation and amusement, he changed Americans' view of their own history and values. In live-action films like *So Dear to My Heart*, *Old Yeller*, and *Pollyanna*, he refined and exploited a lode of nostalgia that became identifiable enough to be called "Disneyesque," and in others like *Davy Crockett*, *Westward Ho the Wagons!*, and *Johnny Tremain* he fashioned an American past of rugged heroes and bold accomplishment that for generations turned history into boyhood adventure. By the end of his life it was the saccharine values of the nostalgic films and the sturdy patriotism of the historical ones as much as the cartoons that one associated with Disney and that made him, along with Norman Rockwell, the leading avatar of small-town, flag-waving America. At the same time, however, his forward-looking television programs depicting the future helped shape attitudes about technological change, and NASA acknowledged that Disney's early drumbeating for its program was

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."

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

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

once been hailed as an unerring sense of the American temper was now attacked by critics for having transmogrified into aesthetic demagoguery and vulgarization. As one disgruntled animator put it, "Walt Disney had the innate bad taste of the American public."

In the end he was widely identified with cultural degradation—the "rallying point for the subliterates of our society," as critic Richard Schickel wrote. Almost no one took him seriously any longer, except for the undiscriminating hordes who loved his work, and one could almost have divided the country between those who subscribed to the Disney vision and those who abhorred it. "A few years ago when you mentioned Walt Disney at a respectable party...the standard response was a head-shake and a groan," John Gardner wrote in 1973. "Intellectuals spoke of how he butchered the classics—from *Pinocchio* to *Winnie the Pooh*—how his wildlife pictures were sadistic and coy, how the World's Fair sculptures of hippopotamuses, etc., were a national if not international disgrace." The bill of indictment was, indeed, a long one. He had infantilized the culture and removed the danger from fairy tales in the process of popularizing them for a mass market, providing, in novelist Max Apple's words, "the illusion of life without any of the mess." He had promoted treacly values that seemed anachronistic and even idiotic in a complex, modern, often tragic world and that defined him as a cultural and political troglodyte. He had usurped each person's individual imagination with a homogenized corporate one and promoted conformity, prompting one critic to declare, "The borders of fantasy are closed now." Like a capitalist Midas, he had commercialized everything he touched, reducing it all, in another antagonist's view, "to a sickening blend of cheap formulas packaged to sell...One feels our whole mass culture heading up the dark river to the source—that heart of darkness where Mr. Disney traffics in pastel-trinketed evil for gold and ivory." And at the same time that he was commercializing his own country, he was regarded by his detractors as perhaps the primary example of America's cultural imperialism, supplanting the myths of native cultures with his own myths just as he had supplanted the imaginations of his audience.

All of this antagonism was aimed at Disney in his role as studio head, but in his later years, and especially after his death, his personal image, at least

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

person he had allowed himself to become lost in the corporate haze. He had created the studio; then the studio, with his complicity, created him, making him, he fully understood, as much a commodity as a man—the very sort of diffident, genial, plainspoken, unprepossessing, and childishly enthusiastic character who would have produced Walt Disney movies. Essentially, he had become his own paracosm. Though he actually possessed all of those qualities, they were now simplified, like his signature, into an image and brand. He told one prospective employee that the studio was in the business of selling the name "Walt Disney." To another associate he commented, "I'm not Walt Disney anymore. Walt Disney is a thing. It's grown to become a whole different meaning than just one man."

Though Disney was anything but a dark prince, neither was he exactly the affable illusion that had subsumed him. For all his outward sociability, associates found him deeply private, complex, often moody, and finally opaque. No one seemed to know him. "He was a difficult man to understand," said Ben Sharpsteen, who worked for him in various capacities from the late 1920s on. "He never made his motives clear.... When I added up thirty years of employment, I found I understood him less at the end." Bill Peet, another longtime studio hand, wrote, "I do believe I knew Walt about as well as any employee could know him," then added, "even though he was never the same two days in a row." "I've always said that if you get forty people in a room together," Walt's nephew Roy E. Disney told an interviewer, "and ask each one of them to write down who Walt was, you'd get forty different Walts."

This book is an attempt to penetrate the image and decipher the mystery of Walt Disney—to understand the psychological, cultural, economic, and social forces that acted upon him and led to his art and his empire. And because Disney was so deeply embedded in the American psyche and scene, understanding him may also enable one to understand the power of popular culture in shaping the national consciousness, the force of possibility and perfectionism as American ideals, the ongoing interplay between commerce and art, and the evolution of the American imagination in the twentieth century. In short, to understand Walt Disney, one of the most emblematic of Americans, is to understand much about the country in which he lived and

which he so profoundly affected.