

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 indiscriminating 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.