

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.

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

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,

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

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

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