

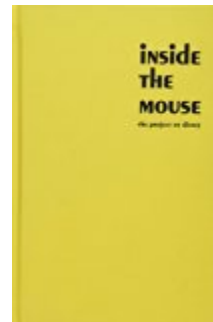
H-Net Reviews

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Project on Disney. *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 250 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1624-4; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1607-7.

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The Project on Disney group is made up of Jane Kuenz, Karen Llugman, Shelton Waldrep, and Susan Willis. Their concern is with the everyday experience of Disney World as both private and public space. The authors are concerned with the production and consumption of leisure and strive to use Disney World as a metaphor for understanding the United States—even the rest of the world as it becomes americanized.

The basic question which the book asks is whether there is any pleasure in mass culture. The basic answer which each of the authors puts forward is “No.” The authors are aware that they are open to criticism on that score and attempt to address it in the opening chapter, “The Problem with Pleasure.” They also seem aware that they never adequately address that question.

Along the way, they certainly do consider a number of interesting and serious issues. The power of the grotesque as demonstrated in the costumed characters, the fear of carnival in our culture, the importance of setting and context to meaning, the taming of the wild at Disney World, and the layers of meaning that require deconstruction, among many themes. The photos in the book also offer interesting insights into the contrast between the reality and the advertised. There are, in sum, a number of pleasures and insights found in reading this work thoroughly.

Not the least of its pleasures is arguing with much of the book. I have not only gone to Disney World and Disney Land on at least fifteen occasions with my children and—yes—without them with my wife, but I have also written about Disney’s presentation of culture at the Mexican Pavilion in Epcot and compared it with that found in Mexico City. In the article I addressed the notion

of authentic and inauthentic culture. One of the problems I noted in that article is the same one I found to be a problem with this book: namely, the elitist pretension of knowing what is best for “the people.”

It is obvious that The Project on Disney is convinced that its Marxist, post-modernist perspectives hold the key to all the answers that beset our market-oriented, mass-production society. I hasten to add that I agree with many of the criticisms the Project puts forward of Disney: it is secretive; it is overly protective of its image; and it does not treat its employees in a fashion that I, as a son of a union organizer, would approve. I do not agree with many of the other criticisms leveled. For example, Disney has, in fact, become more “politically correct” over the years. It has incorporated more women and “minorities” in its cast. Its Epcot World Showcase does offer “authentic” glimpses into the countries represented. I have spent a good deal of time talking to youngsters and oldsters there about their countries, as have my family members. My son and I had a fine time at the Morocco exhibit speaking with various people there. They were, granted, surprised to find people with a genuine interest in their culture. They responded generously and openly to our questions.

The authors do make the valid point that a person can use Disney in his or her own way. My argument with their position is that they view this use as somehow subversive and against the corporation’s aim. Perhaps, it is. But, perhaps, it is not. That is the beauty of popular culture. It can be molded to fit uses designed by its audiences. As an individual, I read Faulkner and Proust but also admit to guilty pleasure in watching the “Death Wish” movies. Mass culture has made it possible for me

to get cheap editions of all of these works. No one forces me to indulge in any one of them.

This knee-jerk negativity harms much of the analysis found in *Inside the Mouse*. The authors wish to have us condemn Disney because it is pro-family, pro-heterosexuality, pro- cleanliness, and pro-safety. Those who dislike these elements are free to roam the streets of midtown Manhattan, as I have, if they wish alternate experiences. It is a matter of taste. But the Project members fail to ask why Disney should change its image to suit their tastes. Moreover, many people who say they sympathize with the masses really fail to understand them—as

Disney's huge popularity demonstrates in the face of the criticism brought to bear by this anthology.

While this elitist, post-modernist bias spoils the book's valid arguments, the sharp edge of argumentation makes it fun to read. Certainly, it is a stimulating, well-written, if tendentious, book. I highly recommend it for those who love the mouse but wonder at his influence.

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