16. Noir Disney

Weenies and the Big Wow

The movie dog jumps on cue because someone wiggles a frankfurter off screen. That is what Walt Disney meant by a "weenie." 'There's got to be a weenie at the end of every street," he was often quoted as saying. Sleeping Beauty's Castle lures like a weenie, even from a distance.[1] Weenies build memories, make for repeat visits. They are the centerpiece of the scripted space. Historian Steven Watts explains: Weenies "were the large visual attractions in each land' which caught the eye and drew people along preordained routes so that the crowds flowed smoothly."[2]

Inside each attraction, one immersive thrill should stand out most of all. Disney called this "the Big Wow"—the peak moment on a ride, when all the techno effects jumped at once. As one Imagineer explained, the Big Wow is "the thirteen-story drop in the Tower of Terror in Orlando."[3] Even at Universal Orlando, the Big Wow meant "all projectors, screens and physical effects."[4]

Finally, each attraction should be on a berm. That is, it should feel isolated from the shocks of the world outside the park. Technically a berm was the shoulder of earth that obscured Anaheim from visitors. By the nineties, the term had been stretched. At the newest Disney stores, *berm* meant "the threshold … isolating the visitor from the street, and inviting a theatrical suspension of disbelief."[5] As narrative, the berm was the proscenium arch, marking the reassuring boundaries of the scripted space.

To add reassurance, the attraction was designed like a movie set. The visitor's eyes had to roam like a camera. Thus even the tabletop miniatures that were built for each attraction had close-ups and long shots clearly identified.[6] There was always a hole or grotto; by peeking in, you reenacted a close-up. The space inside was occluded, filled with Baroque surprises. The overhead of the miniature suggested a camera long shot: unobstructed, panoramic. Walt and

his Imagineering team were instinctively merging the two fundamental traditions in special effects—Baroque and panorama. They scavenged through the history of animation, theatrical machines, automata, and auto and road design, and wove this into a nostalgic whole—very controlled, sanitized, but as American as Mark Twain (with the venom carefully removed).

Walt was nostalgic for the Gilded Age. He loved to convert industrial into Baroque miniatures of a nostalgic 1900, to shrink the city of circulation into an automaton. He and various of his leading animators (notably Ward Kimball[7] and Ollie Johnstone[8]) were obsessed with toy trains. Walt called his $\frac{1}{8}$ scale train the "Carolwood Pacific Railroad"; and made it the prototype for Lily Belle, the railroad that circled the perimeter of Disneyland. On opening day, July 1955, he welcomed guests as the conductor of Lily Belle.

Disneyland models were like elaborate Christmas cribs, like Baroque *crèche*. They were as intensely precious as miniatures for movies, designed precisely to give the builder close-ups and long shots. For the Pirates of the Caribbean (1967), the miniature fully sculpted every expression, every pose of every pirate and wench in Marc Davis's inspirational sketches. Even the treasure chests had working hinges.

Disney wanted the landscaping to look fundamentally American, as if it had simply grown that way, the look of swimming holes and backyard fantasies. Legends suggested that he even modeled some of the park from huge piano boxes he used to convert as a boy into adventures in the family backyard. Walt loved "wild nature,"[9] like Disney's "real-life" adventure films. But generally the results were cinematic. To make the Jungle Cruise look "wild" enough going down the river, one Imagineer was inspired by the movie *The African Queen* (1951).[10]

Baroque special effects appealed to Walt, like Pepper's Ghost for the Haunted Mansion (a Victorian optical illusion based on old Baroque systems of smoke and mirrors). The animatronic Abraham Lincoln and yawning hippos clearly referred back to the Baroque automata of Vaucanson. Even Walt's presence at the park was to be miniatured, hidden away inside the $\frac{5}{8}$ scale. He had a lair, an apartment on Main Street, and planned to have his own secret country club. When he died, it was turned into the 33 Club, the only place where alcoholic beverages were available in Disneyland.

Noir Disney

Walt Disney waited over ten years to test these ideas at a two-acre Kiddieland near the Burbank Studios. His first concept was called Mickey Mouse Park, to be located on a triangular property right across from Forest Lawn Cemetery.[11] Finally, Burbank city managers balked at the mess this park would make, saying that carmies were sinister places (they approved a freeway over it instead).

Then while researching further, Walt hired a team from Stanford to do a market study of locations that were just about to grow, just outside the orbit of Los Angeles. Applying their suggestions, he purchased 160 acres of orange grove in Anaheim, in Orange County. He manipulated investors against great odds to raise the seventeen million dollars he needed for his triangular amusement park berm inside a newly dug hill, shut off from the world.

His two favorite passions became legendary signatures at the park: the railroad, modeled on one he had at home; and his vision of Main Street USA, circa 1890 to 1905—the entry and hub of the park. After it opened in July 1955, over a million "guests" came to the park that first year. The park's success quadrupled profits at Disney within only four years, and went on from there, dipping in the sixties for a time, and in the early eighties, but mostly a bonanza.

It was almost the first time in Walt's life that he had more than enough money to plow into projects without begging. He had spent so much of his career squeezing dollars out of his brother Roy, who was the cautious business manager; or coaxing the Bank of Italy again (name changed to Bank of America); or staving of bankruptcy by taking on contracts with the army during World War II. Or relying most of all on cash through licensing deals with thousands of companies from 1929 onward.

Disneyland became the original happy simulacrum, the oxymoron made solid, but it also has evoked many dark visions. I could call this noir Disneyland, Disney as hell, in the spirit of what director David Lynch called *Blue Velvet*: "Andy Hardy goes to hell." But there really is a direct political apposition in the way the park was imagined and built. It's a double of sorts.

I searched for evidence of the dark half of Disneyland's facade; this is not the first site to have that split. Los Angeles as a consumer, booster fantasy has a double face, as sunshine capital and noir capital. Since 1890, in its way, it has been Imagineered before it was built. Plans to have it grow from a population of fifty thousand to a million were already in the works in the 1890s.[12]

From 1955 on, Disneyland was constantly compared to Las Vegas. The areas around the park were viewed almost as the enemy, like the brothels and

phantoms around the Strip at Vegas. (Finally in the late nineties, the perimeter around Disneyland was given a new, happier face.) Walt and his team continually evaluated how much of the raucous amusement park they could excise from Disneyland; and yet, keep the edginess of turn-of-the century entertainment, the good-hearted rustic family fun. That made for a Gothic irony continuously observed about Disneyland, about all shopping environments, from the weathered arcades of 1920's Paris to the dog-eared ruins of amusement parks Walt studied in Europe and America (e.g., Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, the weary merry-go-round at Griffith Park in L.A.). This ambivalence is constantly at play in Disney parks.

Even shopping malls, in their strange policing of noise and their Gothic silences, have a certain ironic dark side, like *Dawn of the Dead* remade for the Mall of America. Certainly in Disneyland, this "happiest place on earth" impulse can weigh on you, like the classic 1935 cartoon from the Van Beuren Studio, entitled *Sunshine Makers*, where blue meanies are forced to become mindlessly happy when inoculated with milk (this was for the milk board).

When in Disneyland, do we feel released or force-fed? Aren't both images, in some perverse way, equally exciting to the viewer, as you get ready for sleep at the Disneyland Hotel, bathe with Mickey soap, see if you can sudse away Mickey's grin? Isn't there a momentary psychotic joke that makes you laugh, and keeps you involved? For despite all the complaints about Disneyland, and the litigation by Disney to protect its good name, doesn't it still hold true that you cannot insult Disneyland without in some way making the place more tolerable, even exciting to the visitor? Disney funk, like the 1992 song by Dada, "Dizz Knee Land," about relaxing after seeing a murder by mentally heading out to Disneyland.

One finds this double face in any area where tourist promotion dominates, not only in Vegas and LA., but even at the monastery of Mont Saint Michel, a home to tourist pilgrimages since the fourteenth century; you buy skull imagery on ashtrays, in plastic no less, hell and redemption for your keychain, so utterly non-spiritual that you laugh, until you are reminded that these skull pastiches are simply plastic descendants of pieces of the cross and other relics sold to pilgrims in the late Middle Ages. Hell and redemption in the happiest place on earth. People come in droves for a bit of fright, some horrifying slapstick that throws a whimsical wrench to the cuteness, adds some life.

Any tourist location will develop that other hellish edge to its cute-ness, as a kind of hidden pleasure, the sinister fun of kitsch if you will, or the artistry of consumer repression. It is the darker edge of consumer fun. And Disney-

land obviously has that side as well, "when hinges creak in doorless chambers," as the blurb for the Haunted House used to go. Childhood can also be creaky, a happy reunion with yourself as a repressed nine-year-old. Childhood desire is lavishly encouraged; therefore, forbidden desire is implied, even if it is repressed; perhaps encouraged simply because it is repressed.

This obvious paradox is essential to the power of consumer experience, that innocence is more exciting when it is threatened with imaginary violence, that "thrills" are crucial to innocence, that we want safe versions of death, as in melodrama or roller-coaster rides, and a thousand other stops in between.

It has been noted endlessly that all the early Disney movie rides in the original Disneyland, like Mr. Toad's Ride, or the Snow White and Peter Pan rides, suggested death, and just as death seemed to be around the next turn, the visitor coasted into the light, ride over, and went to the next attraction.

This gimmick was intentional. Those three rides were specifically lit in "black" light, with dark walls and special lamps. It was an old movie trick. The early Disneyland was modeled on movie sets, on accelerated perspective used in movie backgrounds, and on Baroque ceilings, and finally in Vegas facades of the nineties.

The sites were designed essentially in the way that Disney worked on his movies, at least the backgrounds—starting with inspiration sketches first, sorted out by the art director (or layout man). Even before presentations, Walt always hired an inspirational sketch artist, who was supposed to remain anonymous. Every plot point had to be suggested in these sketches, like a Japanese scroll, or like a ride twisting through a tunnel with lighting and effects on the walls. It was an adventure where the visitor was supposed to feel like a character in a cartoon; a character in mock danger, in a world upside down, but safe.

Movie sets were already suburban gated communities, while amusement parks were supposed to feel like inner-city streets gone crazy, a cheerful mob scene. Disney preferred the gated community to crowds spilling every which way, as in Coney Island. He already knew how to market what his gated community produced, beyond the movies themselves. For over twenty years, he had been relying on profits from his Disney brand to remain solvent at all: licensing Mickey's face for watches, tablets, toys. His operation was already a Disneyland, converting cartoons into suburban fetishes. But to harvest properly, the rules were strict. Disney kept a reign on everything (on all copyrights, name brands). His gated community was intensely hierarchical, privatized and undemocratic. And not only Disney's: every movie mogul was expected to reign

like a suburban king. It was the Baroque logic of Hollywood—a feudal business inside a city state. One simply had to apply this logic to Disneyland.

Imagine a sound stage circa 1955 as the model for a theme park. The interior is kept in quarantine. The air remains dustfree, to protect the cameras and the light. Facades are repainted constantly, fetishistically. Every surface (even the stars' faces) must begin the day as an immaculate blank—scrubbed, ageless—then be artificially aged when the story required it: fake cobwebs, dust, smoke, fog, wrinkles. Similarly, the visitor to Disneyland was supposed to get something of the thrill that an actor felt on the set (an idea we see at Universal Tours as well, of course, built in response to Disneyland, even using many of the same Imagineering terms, like the Big Wow).

Disney wanted to shut out the usual chaotic amusement-park setting that went with merry-go-rounds and roller coasters—none of the fairground anarchy, and no Ferris wheel. In fact, he wasn't certain whether amusement-park rides even belonged in Disneyland, except perhaps a family-oriented tunnel of love, something that played intimately and could be lit like a movie. Let us remember that in 1955, 3-D was the rage (a rage that ended by 1956); also cinemascope. The screen that surrounded and invaded and was immersive in scale seemed particularly appealing. It seemed modern, panoramic, wall to wall.

Movie sets suggested domesticated, safer carnies. During World War II, when Walt Disney took his young daughters to the merry-go-round at Griffith Park in LA, he found it grimy and uncontrolled. Later, in 1952, when he started researching for his Kiddieland Park, as he called it, agents were sent to carnivals and amusement parks throughout the US. The advice he was given seems painfully ironic today. He was advised never to invest more than $50,000 in an attraction, to hire professional barkers whenever possible, never to limit access to only one entrance, to rely on circuses for quick fixes, and, above all, never to bother cleaning up too much, because the chaos was part of the appeal, like confetti at a Mardi Gras.

In that sense, amusement parks were explosive, or anarchic; they exaggerated whimsically the chaos of industrial change, or urbanization. They reflected the random look of towns and cities aging, worn like old familiar shoes. Amusement parks were associated with the world of vaudeville, of Coney Island in its heyday (however, even in its heyday in 1910, Coney Island's Dreamland was a dangerous firetrap of staged disasters, like the attraction called the Great Chicago Fire even before Dreamland itself burned down).

By 1945, Coney Island had lost two of its key amusement parks: Dreamland and Luna Park. But more than ever, it stood in for the explosive growth of New

York, for its chaos, particularly on a hot day at the beach, when hundreds of thousands of parched New Yorkers would cover practically every foot of sand with blankets.

The boardwalk had its own history of crime and confusion. The bathhouses, sex under the boardwalk, the problem of drunken soldiers, prostitution had long been part of the myth of the place. The weekender cottages, the weight lifters at muscle beach—if ever an entertainment venue was unscripted it was Coney Island, not simply the parks, but the two neighborhoods around it, with a thumb-sized enclave at its tip, Sea Gate, as the middle-class exception.

Coney Island parks were modeled mostly on the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, but still closer to a carny midway. Dreamland was by far the grandest of them all. But next door, along Surf Avenue, the side shows and freak shows continued, including the strange Baby Incubators attraction: premature babies in incubators.

The Cyclone roller coaster had legends of curing people. Stutterers tried it. A blind couple tried it. At Tilyou's Steeplechase park, the Insanitarium was the most raucous attraction of all, formerly called the Blow Hole Theater. The scenery was straight out of Bowery burlesque: six-foot-high playing cards, a doghouse, and a tree with three-feet-long hot dog branches. It was designed by Willy Pogany, who had once "painted Constance Bennett's face on top of his own wife's body."[13]

To finish your combo ride ticket, or to enter on the Bowery side, you had to pass through the Insanitarium. But this was no weenie. The sign at the Insanitarium was a painting of a lunatic's face. Its hosts were carny actors who were supposed to be trifle lurid. As each woman passed by, some more enticing than others, the clown would jump "up and down near the floodlights, shaping with his hand, for the audience's delight, the double-barreled curves of Mae Westian figures.[14]

Understandably, the "girls" tended to walk "timidly" through an alley called Comedy Lane, especially after crawling through the doghouse. However, at the turnstile, while waiting for the cowboy to punch their tickets, "a great blast of warm air pours up through the grating … and whisks their skirts up around their ears." Screaming, the girls scramble away. "The audience is howling. The cowboy whoops: 'They got a good airing.'"

Then "the clown climbs like a monkey up a short flagpole to express his jubilation." But before the girls can roar angrily, a tall farmer moves them along, sometimes with "an electric, stinger" that touches "the nearest buttocks." The clown then grabs the next girl in line, pulls her over the vent in the wooden

floor. Her "dress whirls skyward, and the audience responds. 'A good blow,' exclaims the clown." The full moon seems to blush suddenly. And "the glass eyes of the elephant turn blood red, and the crowd weeps with laughter."[15]

That was absolutely *not* Walt's idea of the happiest place on earth. By 1952, amusement parks were often identified with the tarnished world of film noir, of scandal beneath the big top, and carnies. In novels and films, they echoed a rural America that was fading, turning creepy. They belonged to towns before the emerging freeways, before radio and now TV hooked together audiences across the Great Plains, from coast to coast. They reminded the Disney team of towns where a magic show was the only way to cut the boredom, like Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, of lonely and dusty Main Streets, of the shooting gallery beside the general store (Bradbury later wrote the script for some Disney attractions).

Many older amusement parks remained part of prewar America, now worn down. They looked seamy, like bad neighborhoods. Walt's vision for the future was quite different in 1952. He understood clearly what many so-called "family" consumers saw as progress that year: freeways (with cleaner roadside attractions, new hotels and motel chains); the sanitary look of air travel, of wall-to-wall carpeting; tilted like a rocket (even tail-finned) Googie coffee shops; horizontalized one-stop shopping centers, stripped massively of any encumbrance from prewar ornament; all these so-called Modern features were obsessively designed as a liberation from inner-city decay, which in turn reminded people of the Depression or the war in Europe, or the immigrant neighborhood they wanted to forget.

There is considerable speculation as to how much the 1939 New York World's Fair influenced Disneyland, even though Walt did not spend much time there (too busy with *Pinocchio*), and only worked on one cartoon advertisement there for Nabisco. Still, the famous General Electric display, Norman Bel-Geddes's design, for Futurama, had a profound influence on L.A. urban planning during the war, and was very well known. Similar "freeway" models were imagined during World War II.

Also, Walt financed his park in a way similar to the New York World's Fair, by licensing spaces on Main Street until he had enough guaranteed income to float a larger loan (then, of course, he covered the rest of the capital through his TV deal with ABC television).

He worked furiously to block out the chaos of urban amusements. All this was part of his systematic policy to keep the problems of the world away, to provide a bunkered alternative to anxiety about cities in particular, very much

like L.A. boosters since the 1890s, who invested millions to remind visitors that L.A. was absolutely immune to the problems one found in cities like Chicago. Disneyland was to be cleaned continuously, like one of those new self-cleaning ovens, and would offer absolute immunity to the visitor, a sanctuary like a monastic zone of safety during a Viking invasion, a monastery about childhood, about a simplified history where families were the foundation, and there was no history; because families never changed throughout the ages, or down any of the jungle rivers of the world, or in the old West.

All these locations were built like movie sets with only some structural improvement (many had to be strengthened later, since movie-set building was too fragile, made too much with wood and not enough with steel). They were lit very much like movies, though Walt hired a man who also had designed lighting for the New York World's Fair. The only area not lit like a movie set was Tomorrowland, particularly the Monsanta House of the Future. That was glossy and bright, with a hygienic glow flooding in from outside (at least as of 1955). That future (in other words, the suburban present) was more like a stainless-steel kitchen than a movie. History was adapted in sepia from Jules Verne and Stevenson fantasies—foreign adventure as nostalgic imperialism.

But the overall mood was like a kitchen table in a thoroughly white household—overseen by a man directly committed to setting up anticommunist policies in Hollywood. It was perfect marketing triad: clean movies at a clean park for the clean new medium of television, located by the clean and liberating freeway, in a community specifically chosen because it was away from the worst smog, and was still a small town. Acres of Orange County orange groves were cut away to make room for the park; and that single act of defoliation seemed to serve as a gunshot to a land rush. Disney began the deforestation of Orange County. By 1990, the last of the orange groves were gone. The mystique said that here was the next urban alternative, away from the horrors of the city that was decayed, spoiled; "that old whore" as Raymond Chandler called L.A. in 1946, when he decided to live instead in La Jolla, another Orange County small town.

Disney made a few concessions to chills and thrills (those three backlit rides); but only in the spirit of movie lighting instead of carry gags. He had done much the same in his cartoons, by pointing them away from the outhouse humor of his early films, and away from the zany chase cartoon of the forties (Warner's or MGM). Instead, he kept pursuing what Eisenstein (in compliment) called Disney's "lyrical" style. Craftsmanship overcame badass slapstick, a literalization in real space of Victorian picturesque imagery.

Disney was also drawn to the rueful and hellish side of childhood fantasy, to the anarchy in vaudeville (which he loved as much as a good ass joke). They became Pleasure Island in *Pinocchio* (he had to tone down his animators' zeal on that sequence). Walt had spent almost twenty years, since 1932, and certainly since 1934, scaling back the scatological humor, and the grimy small-town gags. He was pressured to tone down the big teats of Clarabel Cow, who would swing her milk jugs ponderously as she ran. Clarabel underwent severe mammary reduction, was turned into a flat-chested schoolmarm cow, not the bovine barnyard milk machine.

Walt knew quite clearly that instead of Clarabel and the outhouse, he was presenting a nonexistent small town, or farm world. He had begun his career by making more gags about outhouses and bare asses than any other animation house. Mickey started out in dirt-packed streets. Richard Francaviglia researched the Main Street of Marceline, Missouri, during the years when Disney the boy lived there: "It was unpaved, rutted and tilled and horse manure helped turn it into a soupy quagmire."[16]

One should also remember the condition of Main Streets by 1952. They were threatened by growing roadside commerce. And yet, in cities like Glendale and Burbank, even in much of downtown Los Angeles, the Main Streets had survived, and still dominated shopping. But they were losing out quickly. Their architecture suited local trade, or even fancier carriage trade; but not automobile cash-'n-carry. The motor courts, motels, freeways were all considered improvements over the shoddy look of Main Street.

So, Disney imagineered the small town around 1905, when Main Street was gaslit, though most of the lighting (as in movies) came from $7\frac{1}{2}$ watt lights on the buildings themselves, when Main Street had no room for cars. Main Street was smaller, literally $\frac{5}{8}$ normal scale: in his words, to remind the viewer that the present is always greater than the past. It is not so much nostalgia here as an ironic use of a collapsing code. As Walt's principal designer for the park, John Hench, explained: "There was never a Main Street like this. But it reminds you of some things about yourself."[17] (Hench, by the way, had been trained as a painter, movie-set designer and special-effects technician; later he became CEO of WED, the company Walt set up to run Disneyland.) Hench understood that Walt planned the park as a kind of psychological journey, one street watching the other. "What we are selling," Hench said in 1978, 'is not escapism, but reassurance."

Before Disney World was built in Orlando, the crime (and children's book) novelist Robert Alter wrote *Carny Kill* (1966). He imagined a sinister doppel-

gänger to Disneyland built as "one of those tourist traps that have turned the coast of Florida into a glittering facade." The tinsel hides "the hundreds of thousands of voracious cash registers."[18] Like the Vegas Strip or even Anaheim, "this place was on the outskirts, on the tidelands, where acreage is cheap." Called Neverland, "it was a big, bristling, brawling takeoff on the Disneyland idea out in Southern Ca. You might almost call it 'a steal.'"

Instead of the Jungle Ride, it had a Swamp Ride. Instead of Swiss Family Robinson Tree House, it had a Taman House. But "start scratching the surface, and the dirt you find under your fingernails is the same grime you'll find in any clipjoint." At Dracula's Castle, "where all kinds of wired spooks sprang at you with earsplitting screams … your girl's skirt was blown up around her ears so all the sailors and pimply-faced high school dropouts could gawk at her panties."[19] "They had the illusion show and the shooting gallery and the fat lady and the tattooed man and the stripshow: "Everything was there but it was out of tune."

This interplay between carny noir and Disney domesticity has become a standard dialectic in hundreds of movies, TV shows, cyberpunk stories. In any boosterist setting, the con men show up, as they did in twenties Los Angeles. That twenties roguerie was very much an early source for noir literature, that boomed in the mid-thirties.[20] In many ways, noir storytelling is simply the black-light version of streetwise special effects, the card trick that is quicker than the eye, the loading dock behind the shopping mall. Legends about surveillance at Disneyland take on the romance of catacombs underneath Chinatowns. Do exhausted Mickeys go there for a break? How is any form of consumer reassurance policed? What class structure does the scripted space obscure? The fragrance of the carny is very appealing, even though Walt was against selling chewing gum or cotton candy at the park (to stay away from the urban mess that was the apotheosis of the amusement park).

Still, even if Walt hated this noir side to the Electronic Baroque, it was often slipped into caricatures about Disneyland anyway—in Ricky Rat jokes and in underground comix gags about Mickey as a drunk, or the nephews as illegitimate children.[21] It is part of the collective memory, the folklore, that goes with the Happiest Place on Earth, its memento mori, its *vanitas*. As I write this, I have a frozen Walt on my desk, made years ago by students at the California Institute of the Arts. False rumor suggests that Walt was cryogenically frozen, and is stored in the basement of the art school that he began. His dissolving face smiles back at me through a cake of ice (a polymer). I rub the top for any version of good luck that Walt delivered. As one critic wrote after visiting Disneyland, I "spent the morning riding through the dreams that lay somewhere

at the bottom of my mind."[22] They are leftovers from childhood, but also from over four hundred years of special effects, condensed in theme parks, for an emerging globalized consumer civilization.