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The Disneyization of Society

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Bryman, a British sociologist, proposes the idea of Disneyization as a complementary no-
tion to McDonaldization in contemporary society. He outlines four trends that have been
carried over from the popular Disney theme park motif to the larger world that influence the
shape and content of our lives. The clearest is theming, where previously disparate elements
become combined into one cohesive image to coordinate together and present an integrated,
fun motif, such as is found in malls, resorts, and shopping centers. We also see the dedifferen-
tiation of consumption, where consumption from disparate spheres becomes intertwined, so
that theme parks sell merchandise and food in addition to rides, fast-food restaurants sell
movie-related goods, and ostensible knowledge centers are equipped with marketing outlets.
We have also seen the rise of new dimensions of merchandising, with goods being manufac-
tured and promoted featuring copyrighted images and logos of athletic teams, movies, theme
park characters, and other novelties, for the express purpose of manufacturing and sales (and
even children's television shows designed around toys to increase their market demand). The
final element is emotional labor, in which service work has been scripted to include the kind
of cheerful friendliness that helps distract customers from realizing that they are being capti-
vated into an artificially constructed themed environment and pitched the sale of goods. It
may be instructive for you to compare Ritzer's and Bryman's article to see how much you
think they represent the larger culture in which you live. Are there any other organizations
that can metaphorically be used to illustrate larger trends in your society?

Ritzer's (1993) concept of McDonaldization represents a stimulating and important attempt to address large-scale issues concerning social change and the nature of modernity and to link these topics to some minutiae of everyday life. Ritzer is at pains to point out that McDonald's is merely a symbol of McDonaldization though it has undoubtedly been a major force behind the process. McDonaldization refers to "the process by which *the principles* of the

fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (Ritzer, 1993: 3, emphasis added). This means that McDonaldization is not simply about the spread of McDonald's restaurants or of restaurants explicitly modelled on them; nor is it a process that can be specifically attributed to McDonald's alone, since the restaurants incorporate practices that were formulated long before the McDonald brothers started their first restaurant, such as scientific management, Fordism, and bureaucracy.

The purpose of this article is to propose that a similar case can be made for a process that I will call "Disneyization," by which I mean:

> the process by which *the principles* of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.

My view of Disneyization is meant to parallel Ritzer's notion of McDonaldization: it is meant to draw attention to the spread of principles exemplified by the Disney theme parks. Of course, the Disney theme parks are sites of McDonaldization too. A number of Ritzer's (1993) illustrations of the four dimensions of McDonaldization—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—are drawn from Disney parks and from theme parks that appear to have been influenced by them. There are, moreover, numerous parallels between McDonald's restaurants and the Disney parks (Bryman, 1995: 123; King, 1983). . . .

Further, we may well find that the McDonald's fast-food restaurants will be bearers of Disneyization, in much the same way that Disney theme parks are bearers of McDonaldization.

In the following account of Disneyization, four dimensions will be outlined. In each case, the meaning of the dimension and its operation in the context of the Disney parks will be outlined, its diffusion beyond the realms of the Disney parks will be indicated, and aspects of any of the dimensions which precede the opening of the first Disney theme park (Disneyland in California) in 1955 will be explored. The overall aim is to identify large-scale changes that are discernible in economy and culture that can be found in, and are symbolized by, the Disney parks. As with Ritzer's (1993) treatment of McDonald's in relation to McDonaldization, it is not suggested that the Disney parks *caused* these trends, though the parks' success may have hastened the assimilation of Disneyization.

The four trends are:

1. theming
2. dedifferentiation of consumption
3. merchandising
4. emotional labor

This list is probably not exhaustive, any more than McDonaldization's four dimensions can be so regarded. They are meant to be considered as four major trends which are discernible in and have implications for (late) modernity.

THEMING

Theming represents the most obvious dimension of Disneyization. More and more areas of economic life are becoming themed. There is now a veritable themed restaurant industry, which draws on such well-known and accessible cultural themes as rock and other kinds of music, sport, Hollywood and the film industry more generally, and geography and history (Beardsworth and Bryman, 1999). These themes find their expression in chains of themed restaurants, like Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, All Sports Cafe, Harley-Davidson Cafe, Rainforest Cafe, Fashion Cafe, as well as one-off themed eating establishments. Diners are surrounded by sounds and sights that are constitutive of the themed environment, but which are incidental to the act of eating as such, though they are major reasons for such restaurants being sought out. In Britain, themed pubs are increasingly prominent and popular, while in the USA, bars themed on British pubs are big business too. Hotels are increasingly being themed and it is no coincidence that two of the more successful themed restaurant brands—Hard Rock Cafe and Planet Hollywood—are being deployed for such a purpose. Ritzer and Liska (1997) suggest that cruise ships are increasingly becoming themed. In Las Vegas, virtually every new hotel on the "strip" is heavily themed. The famous strip now contains such themes as Ancient Rome (Caesar's), Ancient Egypt (Luxor), ye olde England (Excalibur), the movies (MGM Grand), city life (New York New York), turn-of-the-century high life on the Mediterranean (Monte Carlo), the sea (Treasure Island), and so on. It seems quite likely that this penchant for themed hotels will proliferate though possibly not with the exotic facades that adorn the Las Vegas establishments. Certainly, the theming of hotel rooms as in the Madonna Inn near San Luis Obispo, California, and in the Fantasy Hotel in West Edmonton Mall seems to be becoming increasingly prominent (Eco, 1986; Hopkins, 1990).

Shopping in malls is increasingly being accomplished in themed environments. Mall of America in Minneapolis and West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton, Alberta exemplify this feature . . . Gottdiener (1997) suggests that airports are increasingly becoming themed environments. . . .

Theming accomplished at least two things in this connection. First, it established coherence to the various rides and attractions in Disneyland and the environments in which they were located. Secondly, in the design of rides and attractions, the accent was placed on their theming rather than on the thrill factor, which was the emphasis in traditional amusement parks. Indeed, Walt Disney initially did not plan for roller coaster rides in order to set his park apart from the amusement parks he loathed so much. Gradually, such rides have been incorporated as a result of pressure from younger visitors who found Disney fare too tame. However, when such rides were built they were in heavily themed form, for example, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad (themed on prospecting in the Wild West), Space Mountain (space travel) and Splash Mountain (*Song of the South*). By establishing coherence to rides and by placing an emphasis on the theme rather than on thrills, Walt Disney was able to differentiate Disneyland from the traditional amusement parks that he so disliked. . . .

DEDIFFERENTIATION OF CONSUMPTION

The term "dedifferentiation of consumption" denotes simply the general trend whereby the forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres become interlocked with each other and increasingly difficult to distinguish. For one thing, there has been a tendency for the distinction between shopping and theme parks to be elided. Walt Disney realized at a very early stage that Disney-land had great potential as a vehicle for selling food and various goods. Main Street USA typified this in that its main purpose is not to house attractions but to act as a context for shopping. As Eco puts it: "The Main Street façades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing" (1986: 43). Nowadays, the Disney theme parks are full of shops and restaurants to the extent that many writers argue that their main purpose increasingly is precisely the selling of a variety of goods and food. With many attractions, visitors are forced to go through a shop containing relevant merchandise in order to exit (e.g., a shop containing Star Wars merchandise as one leaves the Star Tours ride in the two American Disney parks and Disneyland Paris). In the EPCOT Center, a Disney World theme park which opened in 1982, there is an area called World Showcase which comprises representations of different nations. But one of the main ways in which the nations and their nationhood is revealed is through eating and shopping. Indeed, the buildings which iconically represent some of the countries do not contain attractions at all (e.g., Britain, Italy), or perhaps contain little more than a film about the country concerned (e.g., Canada, France). However, each "country" has at least one restaurant (some, like France, Mexico and China, have two) and at least one shop. It is not surprising, therefore, that for many commentators EPCOT and indeed the other parks are often portrayed as vehicles for selling goods and food. Thus, the Euro Disneyland share prospectus presented as one of the main management techniques associated with "the Disney theme park concept" the fact that "Disney has learned to optimise the mix of merchandise in stores within its theme parks, which consequently are highly profitable and achieve some of the highest sales per square metre for retail stores in the United States" (page 13). If we add hotels into this equation, the cases for dedifferentiation in the parks is even more compelling. At Disney World the number of hotels has grown enormously since Michael Eisner took the helm at the Walt Disney Company in 1984. In addition to being themed, there has been a clear attempt to ratchet up the number of guests staying in its hotels by emphasizing their advantages over non-Disney ones. For example, Disney guests are able to enter the parks earlier and can therefore get to the main attractions before the arrival of hordes of tourists. They are also able to secure tables for the sought after restaurants (especially the EPCOT ethnic ones) from their hotels rather than having to take a chance on their availability when they turn up at the parks. Also, for some time now Disney has been offering its hotel guests inclusive length-of-stay passes to the parks. It is striking that it was recognized during the days when Euro Disneyland's financial troubles were common knowledge that one of the reasons for its problems was not the number of visitors to the parks

but the fact that they were not spending as much on food, souvenirs and Disney hotels as had been predicted (Bryman, 1995: 77). Thus, we see in the Disney parks a tendency for shopping, eating, hotel accommodation and theme park visiting to become inextricably interwoven. . . .

Las Vegas is possibly a better illustration than the Disney theme parks of Disneyization in the form of dedifferentiation. For a start, the hotels mentioned in the previous section could equally be described, and probably more accurately, as casinos. Each houses a massive casino, although they could equally be described as casinos with hotels attached. But in recent years, dedifferentiation has proceeded apace in Las Vegas. You may enter the Forum shops at Caesar's on the moving walkway but the only exit is to walk through the casino. More than this, in order to attract families and a wider range of clientele (Grossman, 1993), the casino/hotels have either built theme parks (e.g., MGM Grand, Circus Circus) or have incorporated theme park attractions (e.g., Luxor, Stratosphere, New York New York, Treasure Island, Excalibur). In the process, conventional distinctions between casinos, hotels, restaurants, shopping, and theme parks collapse. Crawford has written that "malls routinely entertain, while theme parks function as disguised marketplaces" (1992: 16), but current trends imply that even this comment does not capture the extent of dedifferentiation.

MERCHANDISING

In this discussion, I will use the term "merchandising" simply to refer to the promotion of goods in the form of or bearing copyright images and logos, including such products made under license. This is a realm in which Disney have been pre-eminent. Walt Disney's first animated star was arguably not Mickey Mouse, but Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, around which he and his studio had created a popular series of shorts in 1927. When he tried to negotiate a better financial deal over these shorts, Walt found that it was not he but the distributor that owned the rights to them. As a result, the studio had no rights to Oswald's name and therefore to the small range of merchandise that had begun to appear bearing the character's name and image. Thereafter, he zealously guarded his rights in this regard. A major factor may well have been the revenue-producing capability of merchandise bearing Oswald's image, including a pop up puppet, stencil set, celluloid figures and posters (Tumbusch, 1989: 28).

Merchandise and licensing proliferated, however, in the wake of Mickey's arrival in November 1928 (deCordova, 1994). A year later, Walt Disney Productions was transformed into four mini-companies, one of which dealt with merchandising and licensing. Deals were handled through first of all George Borgfeldt and from 1934 onwards by the flamboyant Kay Kamen. Walt Disney certainly did not create the idea of merchandising or even of merchandising animated cartoon characters. Felix the Cat was the subject of a large range of merchandise in the mid–1920s (Canemaker, 1991). What Walt Disney did realize was its immense profitability. In the years after Mickey's arrival, the company did not make large

sums from its cartoons, because Walt Disney's incessant quest for improvements in the quality of animation cut deeply into the studio's profits. To a very large extent, he was able to finance expensive technical innovation and his unyielding insistence on quality by using profits from merchandise. Klein (1993) has suggested that about half of the studio's profits were attributable to merchandise (see also, Merritt and Kaufman, 1992: 144). Indeed, some writers have suggested that in later years, the design of cartoon characters, in particular their "cuteness," was at least in part motivated by a consideration of their capacity to be turned into merchandise (Bryman, 1995; Forgacs, 1992). It may also account for the changes in Mickey's increasingly less rodent-like appearance over the years (Gould, 1979).

The Disney theme parks have two points of significance in relation to merchandising as a component of Disneyization. Firstly, and most obviously, they provide sites for the selling of the vast array of Disney merchandise that has accumulated over the years: from pens to clothing, from books to sweets and from watches to plush toys. Sales from merchandise are a major contributor to profits from the parks. The parks are carefully designed to maximize the opportunity for and inclination of guests to purchase merchandise. Secondly, they provide their own merchandise. This occurs in a number of ways, including: tee-shirts with the name of the park on them; EPCOT clothing or souvenirs with a suitably attired cartoon character on them, such as a "French" Mickey Mouse purchased in the France pavilion or a sporty Goofy purchased in the Wonders of Life pavilion; merchandise deriving from characters specifically associated with the parks, such as Figment (a character in the Journey into Imagination ride in EPCOT); and a petrified Mickey looking out from the top of the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror (a Disney-MGM Studios attraction) emblazoned on clothing. . . .

Over the years, it has become increasingly apparent that more money can be made from feature films through merchandising and licensing than from box office receipts as such. While hugely successful merchandise bonanzas like those associated with *Star Wars, Jurassic Park* and *The Lion King* are by no means typical, they represent the tip of a lucrative iceberg. Like many movies, television series also often form the basis for successful lines of merchandise and indeed it has sometimes been suggested that they are devised with merchandise and licensing potential very much in mind. There are no guarantees, however. If a movie flops, like *Judge Dredd,* even though based on a popular comic book character and having superficial merchandise potential, the products will either not be developed or will not move out of stores. Also, the merchandising of even fairly successful films like *Flintstones* and *Casper* can be disappointing (Pereira, 1996). . . .

But it would be a mistake, of course, to view merchandising purely in terms of the movies and cartoon characters. The new themed restaurant chains all follow the lead of Hard Rock Cafe of developing extensive lines of merchandise, including the ubiquitous tee-shirt which simultaneously informs where wearers have been on their holidays and acts as literally a walking advertisement for the chain. You do not necessarily have to eat in the establishment in order to purchase the items. Very often, if not invariably, you can enter the shop area without needing to eat the food. . . .

EMOTIONAL LABOR

Ritzer (1993) was somewhat silent about the nature of work under Mc-Donaldization, but it is clear from his view that since it incorporates Scientific management and Fordism, the work tends to be dehumanizing and alienating. More recently, Ritzer (1998) has written about "McJobs," that is, jobs specifically connected to the McDonaldization of society.

McJobs have a number of new characteristics including "many distinctive aspects of the control of these workers" (1998: 63). In particular, Ritzer draws attention to the scripting of interaction in service work. Not only does this process result in "new depths in . . . deskilling" (1998: 64) but also it entails control of the self through emotional labor, which has been defined as the "act of expressing socially desired emotions during service transactions" (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 88–9). . . .

This is revealed in the insistence that workers exhibit cheerfulness and friendliness towards customers as part of the service encounter.

Emotional labor is in many ways exemplified by the Disney theme parks. The behavior of Disney theme park employees is controlled in a number of ways and control through scripted interactions and encouraging emotional labor is one of the key elements (Bryman, 1995: 107–13). The friendliness and helpfulness of Disney theme park employees is renowned and is one of the things that visitors often comment on as something that they liked (Sorkin, 1992: 228). Moreover, anyone with even a passing knowledge of the parks *expects* this kind of behavior. The ever-smiling Disney theme park employee has become a stereotype of modern culture. Their demeanor coupled with the distinctive Disney language is designed among other things to convey the impression that the employees are having fun too and therefore not engaging in real work.

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