

Freedom in 1964 (the highest civilian award given by the American government). And then at 9:35 a.m. on 15 December 1966, Walt, a chain-smoker for most of his life, succumbed to cancer after having his left lung removed the month before. As he lay dying in St. Joseph's Hospital, across the street from his Burbank studio, Walt remained consumed with Disney World. Though he did not live to see it completed, his Florida resort has welcomed nearly a billion people from around the globe since its 1971 opening.

The Disney Formula

To outsiders, the cheerful demeanor of [Disney's] employees, the seemingly inexhaustible repeat business it generates from its customers, the immaculate conditions of park grounds, and more generally, the intricate physical and social order of the business itself appear wondrous.

—John Van Maanen, “The Smile Factory”

Reflecting on the scope and grandeur of his company, Walt remarked, “I hope we never lose sight of one thing—that it was all started by a mouse.”¹² That mouse, which Walt wanted to name Mortimer until his wife suggested the friendlier-sounding Mickey, has become the company's most recognizable icon. For many people Mickey instantly conjures up potent memories: childhood days spent watching the *Mickey Mouse Club* and Disney cartoons; trips to the theme parks; one's first watch emblazoned with the Mouse. Mickey also symbolizes the Disney Company: embodying American notions of the self, bound by self-enforced moral codes, and oozing with plucky optimism. At first a spindly, angular rodent, Mickey gradually became a more rounded, anthropomorphic figure, decked out in shoes and gloves. He quickly enjoyed widespread appeal in his role as the good-natured everyman, particularly in the United States, where his humor was a welcome antidote to the Great Depression's bleakness.¹³ Although the Disney Studio made respected nature documentaries and live-action features, its animated works have remained the most admired and influential. It is also in the animations that the roots of the theme parks are most clearly discerned, particularly in their aesthetic exaggerations and quick transitions from one moment to the next. Likewise, the early Mickey Mouse shorts (1928's *Steamboat Willie* being the first) and the *Silly Symphony* series (started 1929) conjured magical worlds beyond the constraints of time and reason, though never so disordered as to undermine conventional rules and widely shared values.¹⁴

Ever since his early days as a filmmaker, Walt maintained tight control over his company. After completing his first series of *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* cartoons in 1928, Walt tried to negotiate a better deal with distributor Charles Mintz. Instead he learned that their mutual contract had stripped Walt of copyright control, leaving Mintz free to hire Disney artists to produce Oswald himself. Determined this would never happen again, Walt proclaimed: “We’re going to start a new series . . . about a mouse. And this time *we’ll* own the mouse.”¹⁵ From that point on Walt acted as his own distributor, retained ownership of his films and the independence of his studio, held strict copyrights on his company’s creations (including patenting his characters), and had the last word on all projects. His democracy of “commercialized togetherness” had a clear chain of command: “Everybody gets his say. Then I decide which ideas we’ll use.”¹⁶ After a fight with Roy, Walt formed Retlaw (Walter spelled backwards) Enterprises in January 1953, a private company that held the sole lucrative rights to the “Walt Disney” name, which it then licensed to Walt Disney Productions (later to become the Walt Disney Company under Michael Eisner) for merchandising.¹⁷ Walt also formed WED (Walter Elias Disney) Enterprises (now Walt Disney Imagineering, again changed under Eisner) and called the people who worked there “Imagineers.”¹⁸ The term, coined in 1952, combined “imagination” and “engineer” to designate members of Walt’s creative think tank, as well as those possessed of the technical know-how to pull off Disney’s fantastical schemes. Today the Imagineers design and develop Disney’s parks, resorts, and attractions. Although these require vast collaborative efforts, the Imagineers’ work is still largely subsumed under the moniker of Walt Disney. Walt’s oft-told “bee story” reconciled any disparities between such collective endeavors and notions of fairness and credit:

You know, I was stumped one day when a little boy asked, “Do you draw Mickey Mouse?” I had to admit I do not draw anymore. “Then you think up all the jokes and ideas?” “No,” I said, “I don’t do that.” Finally he looked at me and said, “Mr. Disney, just what do you do?” “Well,” I said, “sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the studio to another and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody.” I guess that’s the job I do.¹⁹

But Walt’s contributions should not be minimized or overlooked. Writing a year before Disney’s death, journalist Stephen Birmingham described Walt as a “catalyst,” noting that “everything his organization does is filtered through his eyes, his ears, his taste, his personality, he *is* the one who does create.”²⁰

Although Walt died more than forty years ago, the Disney Company continues his legacy of exercising seemingly unparalleled control over its interests. This has already been noted of the films, and it is also true of the company's publishing ventures. Disney publishes a massive amount of literature (magazines, brochures, and training handbooks) for use by employees, stockholders, and a select public. It also publishes encyclopedias codifying Disney lore, books about its business practices, collections of Walt quotations, and travel guidebooks under its own imprints (Hyperion and Disney Editions). Unapologetically laudatory texts, written for and copyrighted by Disney, are frequently sold as souvenirs at the parks: although their authors enjoy access to vast archives, they must comply with the company's terms of use, including approval of completed manuscripts.²¹ Of course, many sources are written without the assistance or endorsement of Disney, such as behind-the-scenes accounts of its business operations after Michael Eisner became chief executive officer in 1984.²² (Not coincidentally, Disney's legal department simultaneously became "zealously litigious.") There is also abundant information available on the Disney parks—guidebooks, trivia, detailed accounts of the attractions, employee memoirs—some published under Disney's auspices and some not. These vary in credibility, quality, depth of knowledge, and sympathy for Disney. Kevin Yee's fond memoir of working at the parks recounts employee pranks, romances, and mishaps to underscore how Disney's magic prevails, even on 9/11. Meanwhile, Chris Mitchell's tell-all offers tales of employee partying and drug use and the SOP (Sex On Property) Club.²³ More decidedly critical analyses of Disney also range considerably. The exhibition catalog for *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (curated by art historian Karal Ann Marling) helpfully contextualizes the first major showing of Disney concept drawings, photographs, models, and videos. But given the unprecedented access to the Imagineering collections, its essayists were inclined to cast favorable eyes on Disney.²⁴ On the other hand, a predisposition to dislike the company clearly permeates *Inside the Mouse*, by The Project on Disney (a team of three academics and a photo-essayist).

In addition to films and books, Disney markets many other goods and experiences. The popularity and dissemination of any Disney product relies, of course, upon the indoctrination of willing consumers. *The Mickey Mouse Club* series (1955–59) nicely accomplished such by targeting postwar American youth, the first generation to grow up with television. The club's audience was groomed for brand loyalty, trained to recognize its advertisers' logos, and encouraged to perceive technology as fun. And it was easy

to become a club “member”: all one needed was a TV set, then becoming a common fixture in homes across the country. *The Mickey Mouse Club* cleverly intertwined adolescent desires to belong to a larger culture with messages promoting consumerism as a form of good citizenship.²⁵ The club attracted a fairly homogeneous group: young, white, affluent suburbanites, an audience Walt also wanted to cultivate for his parks. But Disney had recognized the power of television even earlier, embracing it while most film producers still fearfully viewed it as unwelcome competition.²⁶ The weekly *Disneyland* series, which premiered on 27 October 1954, featured his park as a “living set for the t.v.”²⁷ The following year, Disneyland’s opening was telecast live coast-to-coast in a ninety-minute special hosted by Art Linkletter, Ronald Reagan, and Bob Cummings. Ironically, Disney employees called this “Black Sunday” due to several misfortunes, including a gas leak that temporarily shut down Fantasyland, and Walt cursing when he thought his microphone was off. But the *Disneyland* series left a lasting imprint on viewers.²⁸ Its format “recapitulated the thematic structure of the park,” with sections devoted to cartoons, nature, science, and frontier tales.²⁹ As Marling observes, “Disneyland was the first made-for-TV place, in which the fictive content of the programming dictated the honest-to-gosh activity of Americans in physical space.” Witnessing the construction of Disneyland as it progressed, viewers became acquainted with the park and had an “emotional stake in its success” even before it opened. Disney’s TV shows appealed to suburbanites aspiring to family unity and upward mobility. The theme parks made their American Dreams seem accessible, exemplifying the social harmony and visual tidiness they had sought in bridge clubs and manicured lawns.³⁰

Walt reputedly disliked advertising, yet he was one of the first to fully apprehend the possibilities of “meshing . . . mass media content, merchandising, and promotion in his 1950s theme park.”³¹ About 25 million viewers saw *The Mickey Mouse Club* each week, while 50 million tuned in to “Disneyland.” Though critics labeled Disney a “sell-out,” Walt ignored them, relishing the opportunity to pitch his products “directly to the audience without any middleman.”³² By establishing an interconnected web of Disney goods and experiences (films, TV shows, music, memorabilia, toys, theme parks, etc.) the company encourages circuits of cooperative and diversified consumption. Such efforts have been intensified to the current day. For example, the Disney Channel and Radio Disney target a specific “tween” demographic, while Disney Cruises (launched in 1998) are aimed at the whole family. Disney even offers its own credit card via Chase. And though it had