

The history of the disney theme park media essay



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The opening of Euro Disney in the spring of 1992 was as characteristically French as it was typically American. The theme park was filled with stars and Disney officials were more than willing to pose for pictures. The opening ceremony was even broadcasted live in many countries which inspired a Dutch journalist to call it the longest commercial ever broadcasted in the history of television[1]. However, mere days after the official opening, striking French farmers blocked the entrance and the anticipated positive reviews in the press remained sparse. Disney's European dream started off as a nightmare in which mainly the French acted as the villains who put 'Meekee[2]' in a corner.

Disney's first theme park, called Disneyland, is located in Anaheim, California and opened in 1955. Its Floridian counterpart DisneyWorld, located in Orlando, opened in 1971. The success of these parks and the success of Tokyo Disneyland which opened in 1983 motivated the company to expand further in order to achieve optimal market domination[3]. The fourth theme park was to be built in Europe. Spain was long in the running as future site, but eventually France was chosen in 1987. The theme park was to be built in the French town Marne-La-Vallée, a town located 32 kilometers outside of Paris. The centrality of this location was deemed perfect, and it was easily accessible by plane, train and car[4]. In addition, the French government also facilitated the decision making process by guaranteeing financial incentives and by extending its transportation network to include the park[5]. These promises perfectly compensated for the northern French climate that initially troubled the Disney planners[6].

After the official implementation of the partnership between Disney and the French government, the Disney theme park was built on 4,700 acres of farmland. Euro Disney, as it was called in 1992, was the biggest amusement park and resort in Europe upon completion. Nevertheless, its opening on April 12, 1992 was not as successful as its grand scale suggested it would be. The coming months further exemplified this as attendance levels, souvenir and food sales, as well as Disney hotels' occupancy rates remained painfully low[7]. Euro Disney was labeled by the entertainment industry as being an ideal case study on how not to open a theme park[8]. Many French critics echoed this argument. Euro Disney was called a 'cultural Chernobyl', and seen as culturally insensitive to European guests[9]. Overall, antagonism towards American popular culture was widespread among French intellectuals. They were supported by a prevalent nationalistic sentiment that promoted French culture in order to protect it from the supposed global hegemony of American culture[10]. This anti-American context was the main problem that troubled Disney's search for acceptance.

The park went nearly bankrupt in 1994 which forced Disney to reevaluate its strategies to counter the French' anti-American mindset. In other words, the company soon realized that it was too focused on American culture instead of European culture, thus the company started to make essential modifications to cater to the local European context[11]. Adaptations based on cultural differences were made on services, attractions, products and practices which eventually reestablished the Disney formula's appeal. The analysis of these adaptations and the context of the problems that predated them is the framework of this paper. Findings based on this analysis support

this paper's thesis statement: cultural hybridization spelled the success of Disneyland Paris.

The first part of the research question that is related to this statement is: to what extent did French and other European responses to the park affect Disney's strategies? These responses are put into context by addressing the acceptance of American popular culture abroad. American popular culture was not easily accepted in France due to a long history of Anti-Americanism and this severely affected Disney's chances of success. This notion provides the foundation for the second part of the research question, namely in how far is cultural resistance towards the Disney theme parks automatic?. The latter of this research question is researched briefly by comparing Disneyland Paris' reception to the reception of the Disney theme parks in Asia. The reception of Tokyo Disneyland was overwhelmingly positive as mentioned earlier, mainly because the Japanese preferred an exact copy of the American model. The reception of Hong Kong Disneyland was also very positive, mostly because of the adaptations Disney made to local tastes and because of its extensive marketing campaigns . All in all, this comparison further proves that the cultural resistance towards the Disney theme parks depends on the larger cultural attitude towards American popular culture.

Studies including Disneyland Paris are often connected to debates regarding global American influence. However, most of these debates focus solely on the economic aspect of the venture as is exemplified by the large number of economic journals that discuss Disney's global expansion. Those journals talk of profits and marketing schemes, but they often neglect to take into account a cultural approach. In recent years, scholars have started to do in-

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depth research on the role that Disney plays in the development of culture, thus putting economics on the sideline. The book 'The Magic Kingdom, Walt Disney and the American Way of Life' by Steven Watts is one of the first books which gives a detailed account of the huge role the Disney company plays within American society. Watts discusses topics ranging from 'Disney and American values' to 'Disney and American identity construction', ultimately drawing the conclusion that "Disney is a major architect of modern American culture"[12]. This premise is frequently used as a foundation for studies dealing with the European Disney park, because Disney's Americanness is seen by some scholars as an obstacle for its reception in Europe. Especially French scholars prefer this standpoint as most of them view Disney's expansion as merely being part of America's cultural imperialism. This standpoint is taken into account in the current academic debate on the European park, but it plays a limited role in discussions. Recent publications on Disneyland Paris focus on the idea that the park has a high entertainment factor, thus it is not solely seen as an entity which spreads American culture or philosophy. Andrew Lainsbury's 'Once Upon an American Dream: the Story of Euro Disneyland' is an excellent example of a book that discusses Disney's professionalism in the entertainment industry rather than its possible ties to cultural imperialism. Other publications such as Kathy Merlock Jackson's 'Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and their Influence' tie in with Lainsbury's thesis as they put emphasis on the fact that Walt Disney invented the American theme park, consequently uniting professional entertainment with culture[13]. The two sides of this academic debate are combined in cultural studies that take into account Europeans' ability to pick and choose from American culture. As <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-disney-theme-park-media-essay/>

a result, drawing the conclusion that Europeans do not passively absorb everything that American culture has to offer. This paper will follow this line of thought by including theories put forward by scholars Rob Kroes, Richard Kuisel, and Richard Pells, who all acknowledge Europeans' skill to adapt American cultural products to fit into local contexts.

To conclude, doing this kind of research on Disneyland Paris is relevant within the American Studies discipline as it provides an interpretation of an American company in multicultural Europe. Moreover, it also illustrates that there are constant tensions between local adaptation and global standardization.

Disney and the French: a difficult relation

Disney's model for theme parks might be new for the French, but they were already accustomed to theme parks in general. Seventy parks could be visited in France before the opening of Euro Disney[14]. However, not all of them were making profit. Zygofolies Park near Nice had to close down and Mirapolis Park and Smurfs Park had to make huge budget reductions in order to stay afloat. The general idea was that the French were not that interested in theme parks or that the parks were not extraordinary enough to impress French guests[15]. Nevertheless, Parc Asterix which opened in 1989 is still open today and it is considered to be the most successful competitor of the Disney park. Many ascribe the park's success to its detailed theming, exciting attractions and its link to French nationalism[16]. Asterix and Obelix are after all French icons. Still, some scholars believe that the existence of Parc Asterix could not have prepared the French for the arrival of a European Disney park as Christian Renaut explains in his article " Disneyland Paris: A <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-disney-theme-park-media-essay/>

Clash of Cultures”[17]He states that few French people had actually traveled to the American parks in California and Florida, hence the majority of French were uninformed about the Disney theme park formula[18]. Disney spokesman Nicolas de Schonen elaborated on this in the Kansas City Star in 1991: “ misunderstandings have arisen with the union because people in Europe do not understand what an American-style resort is”[19].

Renaut certainly has a valid argument, however one should not forget Disney’s marketing expertise. The two American parks had been marketed extensively in France with the help of Disney films, television shows and comics, whereby the comic series ‘ Le Journal Mickey’ played a crucial role[20]. This successful comic series was established as early as 1934 and it portrays all the Disney characters from Mickey Mouse to Daisy Duck, yet it has a very French feel to it[21]. In other words, the characters are foreign, but they are put into a French context. This of course influences the Mickey character itself as he is often shown having more brains than its American counterpart[22], which might suggest why the French find the American Mickey less interesting. Moreover, the first commercials promoting the park were too American in style, something that put off many parents. In a teaser commercial from 1992, the park’s bigness and extravagance was stressed with the help of bombastic music, fast Hollywood-style cuts and a voice-over telling the following: “ a new world of holiday dreams...come and discover the magic...Euro Disney Paris, the most spectacular holiday in Europe!”[23]“. Clearly this was not a commercial that was adapted to European tastes, and its efficiency remains doubtful as these kinds of American oriented commercials could not erase the image that most French had of the Disney

park, namely a piece of land filled with merry-go-rounds, and one or two Mickey's walking around to take pictures with[24]. Surely not something which would spur many return visits.

As for French intellectuals, they felt that they knew more about the Disney parks and the kinds of ideologies that they promote, consequently drawing the conclusion that the European park was part of a grand scheme promoting America's supremacy over Europe[25]. French editor Jean Cau called it " a horror made of cardboards, plastic and appalling colors, a construction of hardened chewing gum[26]". Others called it ' the invasion of American culture[27]' and ' the symbol of the loss of European culture[28]'. Thus, the idea of a Disney park in Europe soon developed into a threat on European culture, more specifically French culture. Numerous intellectuals, journalists and politicians started to express their disagreement, sometimes transforming it into pure loathing. The backdrop to all of this turmoil is of course the relationship between the United States and France. From the moment that the Marquis de La Fayette set foot on American soil the relationship has been one of the love/hate category. Frustrated politicians and French-oriented journalists continue to emphasize this special relation. A recent event dealing with this is the 2003 Iraq war and the disagreement that the United States and France had over their involvement. As the conflict heated up, the American press urged the American public to boycott French products, ultimately relabeling French fries to ' Freedom Fries'. However, the past of the relationship also shows the strength of it, as the French population owes much to the Americans, especially with regards to the post-World War II reconstruction period[29]. I. e. the Marshall Plan was essential

for France to get back up on its feet after it had been severely hurt by the German occupation. Furthermore, this plan aided the spread of American cultural products in France.

Taking the love and hate aspects of the relationship into account it is quickly concluded that the French pay much attention to their identity. The French identity is one which is strongly defended, as throughout the years French generations have created categories such as 'the French', 'Frenchness', and 'the French way of life[30]'. Richard Kuisel elaborates on this 'Frenchness' in much detail in his book 'Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization' since it greatly affects how the French viewed the Americans in the 1990s. They believed that their 'Frenchness' was at risk due to the emerging power, prosperity and prestige of America, hence they were initially very critical of the country[31]. Moreover, Christian Renaut makes clear that the French-American relation also has much to do with pride and jealousy[32]. He explains how on the one hand, the French continue to find it difficult to accept that America's multiculturalism resulting from cultural invasion does not seem to have an impact on America's economy[33]. On the other hand, the Americans envy France for its artistic and cultural legacies, and how those legacies remain attractive despite France's limited attempts to hide its arrogance about them[34]. Taking Renaut's arguments into account, it is not difficult to understand that when the Disney company decided to open a theme park in the country of Claude Monet, Victor Hugo and Voltaire with Mickey Mouse, Goofy and Dopey, many would not welcome them with open arms.

In addition, the fact that the development of Euro Disney took place in the 1980s also hurt the company's chances of success in France. Its American theme parks were successful as well as its Japanese counterpart, yet Disney's animation studio was doing very poorly. The fact that its animation studio has to run successfully is crucial for Disney's reception around the world as the films spread the Disney message. After all, bad films create negative reviews for the Disney company. Both 'The Black Cauldron' (1985) and 'Oliver and Company' (1988) failed in France, as was the case in the rest of the world[35], hence those movies cannot be seen as good promotion material for a theme park. Later successes of 'The Little Mermaid' (1989) and 'Beauty and the Beast' (1991) had little effect on French critics' view on Disney films. The idea that Disney harmed original European fairytales remained too popular in those circles[36]. Very quickly, Ariane Mnouchkine, a successful French theatre director, labeled the Euro Disney park "a cultural Chernobyl[37]". This phrase would be recycled dozens of times by French intellectuals criticizing Disney's European venture.

One of the most vocal critics was French Culture and Education Minister Jack Lang. At a Mexican UNESCO conference in 1981, Lang attacked certain great nations which "have no other morality than that of profit, and seek to impose a uniform culture on the whole world[38]". He called this intellectual and financial imperialism[39]. Later on he labeled Euro Disney as being "an enclave of American leisure industry in France[40]". Still, he did not object to Disney's investment in the French economy and the many jobs it would create. This is confirmed by an article published in Panorama in 1992: "After criticizing the American culture and denouncing its wild imperialism until

1981, the left wing government had but to negotiate with Disney to fight against unemployment and carry on with the development of the Ile-de-France region[41]“.

Fortunately for Disney, not all intellectuals would take part in harshly criticizing the arrival of the park. Joffre Dumazedier, a sociologist, stated in ‘Le Journal du Dimanche’ in 1991: “ at the time of Louis XIV, Europe spoke French. Then England fascinated the 19th century. Today it is up to the Americans, then it will be the Japanese. It is a stupid scare. Who cares Disney is American as long as it is well made[42]“. Basically the key to the project in France had to do with money issues and job opportunities. No government would turn down Disney’s offer, as it had the potential to make a lot of money. In 1995, Right-wing President Jacques Chirac followed up Francois Mitterand. Chirac had a pro-Disneyland mindset as it fit with the right-wing tradition of admiring a sense of enterprise, whatever the cost, in addition to following the American model[43]. Michael Eisner, CEO of the Walt Disney Company, confirms this in his autobiography “ Chirac would prove more sympathetic to our project, but his arrival meant dealing with an entirely new group of officials[44]“.

Overall, the reality of the presence of a Disney theme park near Paris started a wave of criticism, especially from left-wingers. Disney tried to counter this criticism by continuously repeating that a majority of Disney films were based on European fairytales, hence they reasoned that they were paying homage to those classic tales from France, Germany and Denmark[45]. In addition, Disney promoted the strong link France had with the company, since it had been present in the country for many years, covering various

generations. Disney even went as far as showing that Walt Disney himself had drawn inspiration from Tivoli Gardens of Copenhagen in Denmark for the construction of Disneyland in Anaheim, California[46]. Thus, uncovering Disney's European roots. These actions were successful to some extent, but they were not able to stop the negative views towards the park entirely.

To conclude, Disney took into account these initial responses to the park and especially the Imagineering department acted upon French criticism. They designed the looks and feels of the park and tried to incorporate some aspects of European culture. Thus, the Imagineers attempts should be given some credit as they can be considered to be the first who acknowledged Disney's new European context. This raises the question, in how far were the Imagineers successful in creating a European style Disney park?

Grand American designs with European details

The park's architecture is an aspect which is very hard to criticize. The Imagineers knew that they had to design a park which was located in the very land of medieval castles and chateaus[47]. Experience that they had gained from the construction of the American parks and Tokyo park was used to the fullest[48]. One can therefore easily draw the conclusion that the European park is the most beautiful of them all. Popular American attractions such as Splash Mountain, New Orleans Square and Country Bear Jamboree are not included in the park, but this has no effect on its attractiveness. A key aspect of the European park is its landscaping[49]. All themed areas have their own detailed gardens which brings a visitor immediately to the lands portrayed. For example, Fantasyland is filled with French garden architecture. This type of gardening has a mythical and magical feel to it that

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perfectly connects to the fairytales theme of Fantasyland[50]. However, one has to remain critical when it comes to Disney's architectural adaptations that were made to fit the European context. Mostly because one has to look very closely in order to discover European traits.

Victorian America is still represented in Main Street. Adventureland is not a place to pay attention to Europe as it is focused on Caribbean exotism. Best exemplified by the popular attraction Pirates of the Caribbean. Frontier land covers the heroic conquest of the West, also not a topic where 'Europeaness' could be easily inserted. Fantasyland is the best area in the park when it comes to adapting to Europeans contexts[51], but Disney has not succeeded in reaching its full potential. The land's carousel is called 'Lancelot's Carrousel', but the Knights of the Round Table are never referred to. The same applies for attractions such as 'Peter Pan's flight' and the Mad Hatter's Tea Cups'. Literature refers to Alice's Garden labyrinth as the key example of European adaptation by the Disney company[52], but it is based on Disney's version of the story and not Lewis Carroll's. Thus, absolutely nothing has been done to add an extra European layer to the attractions. The only land where one finds some hints of Europeaness of the park is Discovery Land. The Imagineers originally wanted to copy the American version of Tomorrowland with its emphasis on American technology and space adventure[53]. But even the Imagineers agreed that this would be unsuitable for a park located in Europe[54]. Thus, they constructed a land based on Jules Verne and gave it a nineteenth-century look. They included the Nautilus, a movie theatre showing documentaries on Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, created a Jules Verne inspired balloon for the façade of Videopolis, and developed Space Mountain,

a rollercoaster ride themed in Jules Verne style and following a Jules Verne's type of story. The remaining attractions in the land, ' Star Tours', and ' Michael Jackson's Captain EO' completely lack any links with Europe, because they are exact copies of the American versions. Exiting the resort will also not bring guests into European atmospheres as both the Disney village as the hotels are American oriented. The Village's ' Planet Hollywood', and its Buffalo Bill Wild West Show extravaganza are proof of this, as well as the themes of the hotels which can be drawn from their names: Newport Bay Club, Cheyenne Hotel, Santa Fe hotel, New York Hotel, Davy Crockett Ranch and Sequoia Lodge.

As for the castle, the Sleeping Beauty Castle is not an exact copy of the castles in the other parks, yet is it also not typically European. It is absolutely stunning, but it is not more European than its counter parts, since it remains a creation based on fantasy. The idea that it is based on the German Neuschwanstein castle is a poor attempt by Disney to give the castle a European background. However, there is one aspect of the Sleeping Beauty Castle which is very European oriented, and that is the fact that it has a second floor. In the first year of the park, the imagineers came aware of the different reactions Europeans and Americans have towards the Disney castle[55]. Both Europeans and Americans were impressed by its outer design, but Europeans were also interested in its interior design. This is exemplified by the fact that many European visitors ran to the castle's stairs to see what was located on the upper levels.[56]The Imagineers were never aware of the notion that castle interiors were also important, mostly because the American Disney castles are only decorated on the ground level. After

all, castles are not part of the local scenery in America, so why would American visitors be interested in lavish interiors? Intrigued by European visitors' reactions, the imagineers designed ' La Galerie de la Belle au Bois-Dormant' located on the mezzanine level of the castle[57]. This is a ' walk-trough attraction' depicting the story of Sleeping Beauty by means of stained-glass windows, tapestries and illuminated story-books. The attraction ends on the balcony of the castle so that guests have the opportunity to view Fantasy Land from above which hopefully results in feeling like a prince or princess[58].

Despite this European oriented addition to the castle, Disney's architecture in France remains very American in nature. However, other aspects of the park have been ' Europeanized' based on European feedback or at least that is what the Disney company promotes to its guests. These ' Europeanized' aspects will be discussed later on, but first one has to establish the differences between European and American behaviors towards and within Disney parks in order to fully understand the adaptations that were made by the Disney company. Thus, to what extent does European behavior in Disney parks differ from American behavior?

American culture vs. European culture in the Disney park

The park struggled economically in the early years of its existence. Mostly, because Disney forgot to realize that the American visitor is not the same as the European visitor. First of all, the European visitor will not spend his or her money in the same way, most often it is not even spend at all[59]. Secondly, the European visitor does not have a close connection with American Disney culture. For most American families it is normal to be raised with the Mickey <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-disney-theme-park-media-essay/>

Mouse Club, Disney songs and television shows. This is not the case in France and the rest of Europe, because animation celeb