

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

A Theme from the Plain of Shinar

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The computer is playing up at the Dixie Landings Resort and Sheralee is having trouble finding my booking. The reception area here is called The Sassagoula Steamboat Company, and she's trying without success to issue my "boarding pass." I'm not boarding anything, you understand, just attempting to stay a few nights on dry land. But she has a theme to attend to. Dixie Landings advertises itself as a piece of the Old South, a resort which has "recaptured the spirit of life on the lower Mississippi River," and all of its employees are dressed accordingly. Sheralee is wearing a homely floor-length dress circa 1850, and it adds a rather comic dimension to her battle with the database—Scarlett O'Hara takes on The Time Lords, *Gone with the Wind* meets *The Lawnmower Man*.

She finds my reservation at last, and all is well. Sheralee, I discover, is from New York, and she tells me that she doesn't mind the costume—it saves her worrying about what to wear to work every day. Apart from her Yankee accent and the presence of the computer, the only minor incongruity in the Sassagoula Steamboat Company's reconstruction of the Old South is the head of an instantly recognizable mouse carved into the woodwork above each of the reception desks. This is a reminder that the Dixie Landings version of southern hospitality comes, as the blurb puts it, *Disney style*, and large though the resort may be, it's theme is just part of a grander design.

Dixie Landings lies deep in the heart of Disney World, a huge area of central Florida which contains within it twelve or thirteen similar resorts and three major theme parks—Epcot, the Disney/MGM Studios and the Magic Kingdom. Disney World is twice the size of Manhattan Island in New York, and almost certainly attracts more visitors. Each year between thirty and forty million people from every nation under heaven make the journey here to experience reality as interpreted by the Walt Disney Company. They come from North, South, East, and West to feast at Mickey's table.

Mickey Mouse is everywhere at Disney World—on the road signs, printed on shopping bags, silhouetted in the brickwork of the buildings, even on the toilet rolls in the hotels. And his ears are everywhere, being worn by people old enough to know better. Everything here takes place under Mickey's sign, whether it's a stay at Dixie Landings or the Polynesian Resort, or a visit to the Hall of the Presidents, or a ride on a high-tech roller coaster at *Space Mountain*. But for Mickey, read Walt.

Walt Disney's inventiveness and creativity are, of course, legendary. He made animation into an art form, and then went on to do the same for theme parks. In Disneyland—his original park at Anaheim in California, created in the 1950s—he already had a roaring success on his hands, and, from the beginning, it was much more than a carnival or an amusement park in the traditional sense. But for years he'd been dreaming of a completely new concept in entertainment and vacationing—"a total destination resort," an entire community designed for the enjoyment of adults as well as children. The place would be educational as well as entertaining, bringing

Americans into contact with both their heritage and the technologies that would revolutionize their world in the future. His grand scheme required a much larger tract of land than was available in California, a place that would allow full control of the environment “to avoid encroachment by incongruous elements.” He needed, in short, room to theme, and to theme in a more rigorous, efficient, wholesale way than the world had ever seen. He found it in Orlando, Florida.

“It’s going to be a world, a new different kind of world,” Disney declared in 1965 when his extraordinary plans for the place were announced; and thirty years later a world, a vision of reality, it certainly is, with Walt Disney stamped all over it: *Main Street U.S.A.*, *Libertyland*, *Tomorrowland*, *Fantasyland*, *Adventureland*, *Frontierland*, and the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, with its “World Showcase.” The themeing is utterly relentless and, as at Disney’s evocation of a Mississippi River town, by no means confined to the theme parks proper.

Everything at Dixie Landings Resort seems to be organized under Disney’s principle of Southernness—from the design of the buildings and the furnishings in the rooms, to the names of the restaurants and bars and the food on the menus. The Boatwright’s Dining Hall offers “Cajun Cuisine in a unique setting surrounded by shipbuilding artifacts,” and indeed one eats, rather nervously, beneath a half-finished craft suspended above the tables. It is as if work is still in progress, and any minute now those antebellum boatwrights will be back to get on with the job. Over at The Colonel’s Cotton Mill a cotton press powered by a working waterwheel reminds all who snack there of the crop on which the South was built. No hint here, however, of the people who picked it, or the system that enslaved them. Alas, this omission, too, is part of the *Disney style*: unpleasant facts, unattractive features, real moral ugliness, tend to vanish from history when themed in this sort of context. The past must be recast as a place where one would want to eat lunch. For who wants to be reminded of slavery over a burger and fries?

Umberto Eco, in his brilliant collection of essays on America called *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, has written that a fundamental aspect of the appeal of the Disney theme parks is “the pleasure of imitation,” which “as the ancients knew, is one of the most innate in the human spirit.” By means of Disney’s celebrated audio-animatronics, robots convincingly imitate human and animal movement. In the Hall of the Presidents every president of the U.S.A. comes to life before a hushed audience; Lincoln and Clinton make short speeches. Out in the fake jungle wild animals appear and disappear exactly on cue. But, as Eco points out, this is more than mere imitation. It is, at the same time, the creation of something different, a “hyper-reality” compared with which reality will always thereafter be inferior: “A real crocodile can be found in the zoo, and as a rule it is dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands... (it) tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can.”

Hyper-reality and themeing belong together, for where two or three elements are joined together in a theme, there is hyper-reality in the midst. Themeing is the employment of technologies and media of all kinds and in many different combinations to tell a story, create an illusion, convey an experience, sell a product. It’s a brilliant device for marketing things. It offers up everything it touches, the world itself, for consumption, amusement, and distraction. It’s also an indispensable tool for the dissemination of propaganda, propaganda which ensures the maintenance of the

prevailing social reality.

Themeing imitates, but it also recreates and reconstructs. It puts *our* stamp on the world, reconfiguring reality in ways that are pleasing to us. A themed past, as at Liberty Square or the Colonel's Cotton Mill, is entertaining, interesting, and even useful. No ghosts need to be exorcised from here, for it is populated exclusively by happy, helpful people, and by great statesmen, who have only wise words which tell us that we're in the right place and on the right track. In *this* Old South the slaves have simply disappeared. It's safe to eat lunch.

A themed future, likewise poses no threats. No technological Caliban lurks at Epcot. Ecological disasters, nuclear nightmares, economic injustice, and social upheaval have been banished. Here we find technology in its Edenic state, creating a future that gives delight and hurts not. The litter is whisked away in pneumatic tubes. Like the slaves it simply disappears.

One historian has claimed that the Walt Disney Company is now "the premier interpreter of the American experience." The French postmodernist thinker, Jean Baudrillard, goes even further suggesting that the Disney theme park is "the microcosm of the West." One doesn't have to agree altogether with these views to acknowledge, nevertheless, that Disney's impact on twentieth century life has been profound. Themeing has deeply influenced the approach to leisure, education, commerce, and urban planning all around the world.

Malls—shopping centre, as they're called in Britain—are now regularly designed around a theme, be it a nineteenth century village street, or a fairground, or an Italian piazza. Towns and cities, in their drive to attract more investment and tourism, sell themselves by making their unique or individual characteristics ever more visible, noticeable, central to their identity. In contemporary society everything is "showcased." The rich social history of the mining valleys of South Wales is encapsulated at the Rhondda Heritage Park, Carnaby Street *is* swinging London; England begins to look—and feel—like England-land. "Who *doesn't* live in Disney World?" asks Michael Sorkin in his book *Variations on a Theme Park*. It's a good question.

The irony is that much of the time we know we're being shortchanged, we know we're being manipulated, we know we're being sold a crock—and yet we can't seem to get enough of this themed reality. Themeing proceeds apace wherever we look, constantly finding new locations to transform and new subjects to reconstruct. Very occasionally the whole process comes unstuck, particularly when it comes up against something which for a large number of people is still a "live" issue, and which in some sense can be called sacred for them. Last year, when it became known that Disney planned to build a Civil War theme park on one of the most venerated battle sites in Virginia, there was a public outcry, forcing the company to back down. Nevertheless, every day in a thousand other ways the human story is done violence to—sweet, pleasureable violence—for the sake of a theme.

There is no doubt that the practice of themeing as we see it everywhere in the world today is new. Modern technologies of communication and mass reproduction mean that a multisensory theme can be created and sustained in an extraordinarily rigorous and efficient manner. Themeing is now subject to a thoroughly rational, industrial process. But in another sense human societies have *always* indulged in themeing. Creating meaning, imposing form and order on the world, these things seem to be of the very essence of civilization. From the caves of Lascaux in France, to the imperial

triumphal arches of classical Rome, to the royal palaces of Europe, to the graffiti of the urban environment, we human beings have surrounded ourselves with reminders of our own existence, our own perspectives, our own importance. We have named our reality, and tried to make it bear our name. Which leads me to think that the impulse to theme may have its beginnings on the plain of Shinar.

Making haste to put some distance between themselves and their origins, our parents—as the ancient story in the eleventh chapter of Genesis has it—settled on the plain of Shinar, and sharpened their technology. They learned how to fashion bricks and mortar, and, therefore, how to make a solid statement. They feared the world they lived in because of its hugeness, its capacity to make them feel isolated and alone. And they sensed the possibility of immortality through their architecture. “Come,” they said, “let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” They were making a bid to establish their own identity, create their own unity, print their name indelibly on the world. Technique became an expression of autonomy, the lived environment a hymn to themselves. But theirs was an essentially reactionary project. As they built, they looked back over their shoulder from whence they had come. This attempt to reconfigure reality had sprung from their refusal to receive a name.

Our parents’ reconstruction of reality had catastrophic effects for their endeavours, and enduring implications for ours. Instead of communication and solidarity, they were condemned to noncommunication and confusion. Not only did they begin to speak different languages, but communication itself became deeply problematical, whatever language they were speaking. As Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, after this section of Genesis “humanity lives in a deep crisis of language,” a crisis that is ultimately spiritual in nature. This people’s attempts at solidarity and unity led to the scattering which they had sought to avoid. In the final analysis, reality refused to be themed. Their origins did not allow of thematic revision. Humanity was not permitted to make a name for itself without first receiving one.

What Jacques Ellul called “the immense irony of God” revealed in this story appears to be still at work in the frantic themeing of the postmodern world. Themeing is self-consciously a world-making enterprise, the construction of reality. But no one can take it seriously. It’s a universal joke. Themeing is the pouring of meaning onto the world, the loud, brash statement that we exist. But everywhere meaning seems to be slipping away, and our utterances less convincing the more we speak. Despite appearances, in the enchanting parks, malls, and themed environments of our world, no theme emerges to give voice to the dumb, ears to the deaf, and safety to the scattered. Themeing is about naming. But a name is precisely what we do not have. Unless the story that begins with the promise of a name to Abraham in the very next chapter of Genesis opens up any possibilities....

Further reading:

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation Bible Commentary Series*

Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*

Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*