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"Windows to the Past": Disney's America, the Culture Wars, and the Question of Edutainment

Abstract: While much has been written on Disney's America, the theme park the Walt Disney Company wanted to build in Virginia in 1993, the relation of the surrounding controversy to the ongoing Culture Wars in the US has only marginally been touched upon. This article therefore delves deeper into this crucial connection, as well as using these events as a case study to discuss the importance of edutainment, and the role that theme parks play for this similarly often-discussed issue.

Keywords: Disney's America, Walt Disney Company, Culture Wars, edutainment, theme parks

On November 11, 1993, the Walt Disney Company announced that it would build a theme park near the small town of Haymarket, Virginia, 3.5 miles away from the Manassas Battlefield National Park. Fitting to this location, the park, called Disney's America was supposed to be based on several key events of American history, and was slated to open in 1998. Disney had originally picked the location solely based on the fact that it was close to the tourist-attractive Washington D.C. area, and therefore would also not "cannibalize" directly on the markets of its other US theme parks in California and Florida. However, they had not been prepared for the public outrage the project would cause, eventually leading to the cancellation of it less than a year later.

Surprisingly much has therefore been written on this never-built park, both in the news media and academia, yet most of it in the months and years immediately following the announcement. A retrospective view now will make it possible to re-evaluate the context of these events as part of the so-called "Culture Wars." Culture Wars is an umbrella term for "a struggle over national identity—*over the meaning of America*" (Hunter 50, original emphasis)[1] that has shaped intellectual, but also public

1 The term is originally based on the German *Kulturkampf* ("cultural struggle"), describing the persecution of Catholics and other minorities by the German empire under Bismarck that saw their high point in the 1870s, yet the contemporary Culture Wars are rather different in their content–I will come back to this later.

discussion since the 1980s and still does so until today—some of the central issues being gay rights, abortion or the teaching of evolution in schools. The apex of this conflict happened in the early 1990s, and consequently helps to explain the reasons for the controversy Disney's theme park caused. However, this is not the only goal of this article. Besides providing the immediate context of these events, I will also situate Disney's America in a larger debate surrounding heritage and authenticity in the so-called "heritage tourism" that boomed in the 1970s-1990s, but has been popular to this day. Both the Culture Wars, and the heritage boom, are events dealing with public history, leading to one of the central questions of this article: what role do theme parks play in conveying history to the public? Further, I will look at the issue of edutainment—more precisely, whether edutainment is possible at all, whether it is truly feasible to educate and entertain at the same time. If yes, then is the theme park the right form, the right venue for this? Can the theme park be a true teacher of history?

To discuss these questions, I will first outline the concept for Disney's America, then discuss the controversy surrounding it in the context of the Culture Wars, before talking about heritage studies, edutainment, and what all of these developments meant for public history in 1993/94, and most importantly, what they mean for theme parks today.

Disney's America: The Concept

Coming into Disney's America, visitors would have found themselves in an entry area (or so-called "hub") themed to a village during the Civil War—fitting to the location near Manassas battlefield. From this area, called Crossroads USA, visitors would then enter one of nine different "territories"; either by foot or by steam trains circling everything. The park would have then been structured following a historic timeline—starting in the 1860s and then travelling forth and back in time from there. Chronologically, the first territory was Native America (1600 to 1810), a Native American village that would have offered interactive experience such as arts and crafts, representing several tribes. It might have also served as a movie-tie in for Disney's *Pocahontas* that was released in 1995. A main attraction of the territory would have been a Lewis & Clark Expedition raft ride, based on Western exploration. Overlapping in time would have been the President's Square (1750 to 1800), focusing on the War of Independence and the time of the Founding Fathers. The Hall of Presidents, an attraction also found at Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom park in Florida, would have been the square's main draw. The next time frame, skipping 50 years, would have been the Civil War (as in the park's hub), represented by the Civil War Fort (1850 to 1870), and contained a 360° movie theater, as well as

an adjacent field for battle re-enactments. Also belonging to the area, and making up the center of the park would have been a man-made lake called Freedom Bay, with nightly showings of the naval battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac (from the Battle of Hampton Roads), possibly serving as a night-time spectacular. Two territories were supposed to be set between 1870 and 1930: We the People and Enterprise, both representing important aspects of the period of both the Industrial Age and Age of Mass Migrations. We the People, a reproduction of Ellis Island, would have dealt with immigration and the multi-ethnic heritage of the USA, while Enterprise was supposed to represent an American factory town. It focused on American inventions and technological progress, featuring Industrial Revolution, a roller coaster ride through a steel mill. Family Farm and State Fair were also set concurrently, between 1930 and 1945. The farm was supposed to show authentic farm life (with hands-on opportunities such as milking a cow), and aspects of the food production industry. The State Fair, however, would have been more clearly linked to the Depression era, portraying amusement parks like Coney Island, featuring a Ferris wheel, a wooden roller coaster, and a show about the nation's favorite pastime, baseball. The last of the nine territories, Victory Field, was again planned to be overlapping in time, and set during World War II: it represented the military, and specifically, aerial warfare in the form of an airfield with hangars, replicas of famous planes, and an attraction using virtual reality technology for flight simulation (on all of this, see Zenzen 168f; "Disney Drawing Board"). Earlier plans also seem to have featured attractions specifically dealing with slavery and the underground railroad (Zenzen 171), as well as the Vietnam war (Feinsilber), but apparently ended up being shelved when the controversy surrounding the park became more heated (Mehren).

Of the 3,000-acre land Disney had purchased, the theme park was only going to cover a small part of about 100 acres (Wines). Complementing the theme park would have been (possibly Civil War-) themed hotels with about 1,340 guest rooms total, an RV park and campsites, a golf course and a commercial complex with 1.3 million square feet for retail and 630,000 square feet of office space. There were also plans to sell a big part of the land to a residential developer, and donate some of it for schools and a library, as well as leaving 40 percent of the whole area completely green (Zenzen 169). Some sources also report eventual plans for a water park ("Disney Drawing Board").

When the project was canceled on September 28, 1994, the first impulse was to find another location for the park in Virginia, yet that idea was soon abandoned, too. It then almost got a second life as a reworking of Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, CA near Disneyland, but the Knott family refused to sell to Disney. Finally, some of the planned attractions ended up being rethemed and became part of Disney's California Adventure which opened as a "second gate" to Disneyland Resort in Anaheim

in 2001.[2] There were several reasons for the park's cancellation: First of all, the Disney Corporation had internal problems. EuroDisney (now Disneyland Resort Paris) that had just opened in 1992 reportedly lost 900 million dollars in its first year. Secondly Frank Wells, the company president, died in a helicopter crash on April 3, 1994, and consequently, Jeffrey Katzenberg, CEO of Disney's film division, left the company, as CEO Michael Eisner did not promote him to Wells' position. Eisner himself had to undergo emergency bypass surgery in July 1994. Yet, more importantly, the surrounding controversy had also massively hurt the company's image, as Eisner admitted in his autobiography: "Largely through our own missteps, the Walt Disney Co. had been effectively portrayed as an enemy of American history and a plunderer of sacred ground" (337). How it came to this is what I would like to discuss next.

The Controversy

As soon as Disney had announced their plans for a historic theme park in November 1993, they were met with skepticism from the media, such as Michael Wines' article in the *New York Times*, although it took a few weeks for serious opposition to mount. The majority of the Haymarket residents, however, were in favor of Disney's plans; a regional poll taken soon after Disney's announcement showed a 75% support (Vance 1). The reasons for this were obvious enough: Haymarket, and Prince William County in general, had had huge economic problems over the previous years, and struggled with high unemployment rates (Zenzen 170). Most residents had to commute to Washington D.C. to work, many left altogether, businesses closed. Reasons for the economic concerns also included a declining number of tourists to the area. Disney's theme park would have brought about 2,700 new jobs (Zenzen 169), plenty of tourists, and new residential and business development. Unsurprisingly, Virginia state and county representatives were on board with the plans, including Governor elect George Allen (R), and Prince William County Executive James Mullen (Zenzen 169).

2 Rethemed attractions at Disney's California Adventure include the transformation of the State Fair concept into Paradise Pier (it features the wooden roller coaster California Screamin and a ferris wheel), the idea for a World War II flight simulator developed into Soarin over California and the surrounding Condor Flats (recently renamed Grizzly Airfield), the Lewis & Clark River Expedition became Grizzly River Run and Family Farm turned into Bountiful Valley Farm (closed in 2010).

"Retheming" refers to "the transformation of an existing themed space into a new one" (Lukas, "Politics" 281), most often to make the venue relevant to its audience again, it is also often done out of a negative response towards a controversial theme (Lukas "Politics" 282) as in the case of Disney's America (although it only ever existed in concept).

Also not surprisingly, several environmental groups opposed the project—they were concerned about the depletion of natural resources, increasing traffic, zoning issues and lack of infrastructure in the region; these groups included The Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club (Hawkins and Cunningham 359). Disney tried to lessen their concerns by offering to invest in environmentally sound technologies, such as nonpolluting fuels for ride attractions and transportation, recycling measures, and alternatives to pesticides (Hawkins and Cunningham 359). They also suggested decreasing traffic by bussing employees and visitors, and investing in road improvements—(although Disney officials had negotiated a substantial state incentive package of US $163.2 million for measures including said road improvements; Hawkins and Cunningham 356f). This added concern that there would be a substantial burden on the taxpayer, especially because Disney managed to avoid having to pay a 1.00$ per person admissions tax (Hawkins and Cunningham 356).

The most important local environmentalist advocacy group against Disney was the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC). Although originally a rather small group, it was made up of mostly wealthy landowners in the area that rallied other wealthy residents, including the owners of the *Washington Post* and actor Robert Duvall (Zenzen 171). According to historian Joan M. Zenzen, the PEC bought "permanent easements over 77,000 acres of open space to bar development. Disney's announcement threatened this peace and seclusion." (171). They started aggressive lobbying, including sending representatives to the state council, funded by such prominent names as the Mars (as in the candy bar) and du Pont families (Zenzen 174), and adopted a classic NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) stance. Interestingly enough, however, the PEC did and does not officially cover Prince William County where Disney's America was supposed to be built, and overall, local anti-Disney movement came mostly from the wealthier neighboring Fauquier and Loudon counties (Rhodes 35). Yet, they were afraid of urban "sprawl," or "collateral development" (Vance 1), also reaching their counties, and changing the whole area for the worse.

In hindsight, the Piedmont Environmental Council and like-minded preservation groups certainly had rightful concerns, yet "the edge city prediction was vastly overstated... and most of the projected population growth was going to happen with or without Disney's America," according to a statement by Kathleen Seefeldt in 2013, who chaired the Prince William Board of Supervisors back in the early nineties (qtd. in Rhodes 37). Today, the Disney's America site is home to Camp William B. Snyder, a boy scout camp (Meamber 142), the Dominion Valley Country Club, and most importantly, a massive residential area. This has led to several critical voices on why the interest groups had not protested these developments as they had Disney in the 90s (Riley; Rhodes; Meamber)—backing the theory that several of the more affluent residents of the surrounding counties just wanted to control exactly what was built in

their neighborhood. Most were also rather open about this NIMBY stance, as most called for a simple location change for Disney's America, but not its cancellation.

What eventually led to its cancellation was another issue altogether. Two other residents that started to rally against Disney were Nick Kotz, a Pulitzer price-winning journalist, and Mary Lynn Kotz, his wife, a writer and public relations pro (Rhodes 35). It was them who would eventually found an interest group called Protect Historic America (PHA), turning this land-use issue into a full-blown intellectual conflict, and a battleground for the Culture Wars. PHA started by them getting in touch with historian Shelby Foote, and through their combined contacts, more and more well-known historians joined their effort—David McCullough visited in spring 1994, and in May, the group officially got its name. James McPherson, C. Vann Woodward, and John Hope Franklin also joined, as did over 150 other American academic historians. Their central grapple with Disney's America was officially still its location, not only because it would be near the Manassas battlefield, but in the vicinity of over 18 Civil War battlefields and a total of 64 historic sites—an area that is still referred to as the Cradle of American Democracy (Hawkins and Cunningham 357). These ties to not only the Civil War, but also the foundations of the USA were continuously stressed by the project's opposition, referring for example to the fact that the park would have been "just 35 miles from the White House" (Kotz and Abramson).[3] Yet the location-focused rhetoric eventually evolved into a "sacred soil" argument (Wallace, *Mickey Mouse* 168) rooted in the ideas of American civil religion. C. Vann Woodward, a co-chairman of PHA, had argued that "[t]his part of northern Virginia has soaked up more of the blood, sweat, and tears of American history than any other area of the country.... It has bred more of the founding fathers, inspired more soaring hopes and ideals, and witnessed more triumphs and failures, victories, and lost causes than any other place in the country" (qtd. in Kotz and Abramson). James McPherson, writing for the OAH newsletter in August 1994, also backed his view: "The ambience necessary for the imagination to re-create and the mind to understand the battles in which thousands of men gave their lives in a war that shaped the destiny of the American people would be destroyed forever.... It is for us the living to be dedicated to the task of preventing that desecration, so the world will not forget what they did there" (9). These statements made more than clear that the preservationist efforts of this land in Virginia by far exceeded environmentalist concerns. Even Pulitzer-Prize winning historian Richard Ketchum, one of the founders of PHA, admitted that "'the 'location' business is a bit

3 The fact that the site is 35 miles from the White House is true, yet getting there still means a 45 minute travel by car on the free way from Haymarket to Washington D.C.'s National Mall; hardly anything that should normally be of concern to preservationist issues, or a classic NIMBY argumentation—it just put fuel to the fire of the ideological side of the argument.

of NIMBY"" (qtd. in Mehren), yet this did not seem to stop him from joining, as other issues more important were at stake for him and the other historians. The "sacred soil" argument however, was by far not something that all of the PHA members or historians in general backed—many opposed the ideological implications behind it, among them, Mike Wallace, John Bodnar, or Linda Shopes. Yet the other issue, and the reasons for most of the historians that opposed Disney's America, was the fear of Disney misrepresenting, and distorting American history, and this fear of "Disneyfication" is what I want to look at next.

Disneyfied History and the Culture Wars

Disneyfication[4] (not to be mixed up with Disneyization) is a term often used to describe the process of simplification of an idea, to make it more mass-appealing, or family-friendly; used more negatively it implies the censorship, "sanitization" or dumbing-down of something, going back to Disney's treatment of fairy tales in its animated movies. While the term has become more wide-spread than just its use in connection to Disney's products, it was precisely this that PHA's members were mostly afraid of—the disneyfied version of history, and that the historic theme park would indeed solely reflect *Disney's* America. As Michael Eisner admitted, the name was problematic to begin with, as it "implied ownership of the country's history, which only antagonized our critics.... That was unfortunate because we were never interested in a park that merely reflected a Disneyesque view of history" (320). Indeed, Eisner had said early on that they were not shying away from more controversial issues: the "'painful, disturbing, and agonizing' stories of the enslavement of the blacks, the massacre of the natives, the divisions of Vietnam—all will be dealt with" (qtd. in Feinsilber). Disney Senior Vice President Bob Weis also stated that the park would show the Civil War "with all its racial conflict," that it could "make you [the visitor] a Civil War soldier," even "make you feel what it was like to be a slave" (qtd. in Zenzen 171). Unsurprisingly though, it was precisely these statements that caused the most outrage with opponents. As Zenzen has pointed out, Disney most likely referred to the use of virtual reality technology (171),[5]

4 While Disneyfication is the most often-used term for the processes described here and the reason I am using it, the depiction of history by Disney has also been referred to as "Distory" by Stephen Fjellman or "Mickey Mouse History" by Mike Wallace.

5 In the early 1990s, Virtual Reality was increasingly popular and believed to be affordable and widely used by 1994; Japanese entertainment company Nintendo brought the Virtual Boy game console to the market in 1995, yet it was a colossal flop. Disney opened a small virtual reality-based indoor theme park called DisneyQuest at Walt Disney World in 1998. While the technology was impressive back then, it is largely underwhelming today and VR technology is still awaiting its real breakthrough.

but it simply seemed outrageous to most that Disney would even touch upon such issues. A rather grotesque liberal political cartoon in the *Buffalo News* by Tom Toles showed a happy Goofy running in the place of the "burning girl" in the famous Vietnam War picture, and from the other side of the political spectrum, neo-conservative William Kristol—the son of Getrude Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol[6]—feared that Disney would be too progressive: "If you're going to have a schlocky version of American history, it should at least be a schlocky, patriotic, and heroic version.... [I]t will be sort of pseudo-sophisticated and politically correct, [with] suitable bows to all oppressed groups" (qtd. in Wallace, "Serious Fun" 85). These strong reactions from both political sides stress exactly how much was at stake in the controversy over Disney's America, and how it evolved from a local land-use issue to a nationwide conflict in a matter of months, as the theme park became a battleground for the Culture Wars.

In his recent book on the Culture Wars, *A War for the Soul of America*, Andrew Hartman traces their origins back to the 1960s. As he argues, the history of America "is largely a history of debates about the idea of America" (2), and when the changes of the sixties started not one, but several discussions about the nation's core values, even proposing an altogether "New America," it created a bigger rift than ever before in the nation's culture and its politics. As early as the beginning of the 1970s emerged a conservative longing to bring back the once-great America of the 1950s and before, and by the 1980s, this longing evolved into a full-blown neo-conservative movement, as exemplified by the Reagan presidency. And so, in the 1980s and 1990s, several conflicts that were soon referred to as the "Culture Wars," following James Davison Hunter's book of the same title in 1991, began to dominate most of the US intellectual—and propagated by the media—public life. As Hunter points out, the culture conflicts that were originally fought along mostly clear-cut religious and political lines, had at this point changed significantly and now were based on a much more general "matter of moral authority" (42), cutting "*across* the old lines of conflict, making the distinctions that long divided Americans... virtually irrelevant" (43, original emphasis). Therefore, the world views clashing in these conflicts were no longer "coherent, clearly articulated, [or] sharply differentiated" but rather just "*polarizing impulses* or *tendencies*" (Hunter 43, original emphasis). Consequently, unlikely alliances were formed over certain divisive issues—making it possible that both a liberal political cartoonist such as Tom Toles and a neo-conservative like William Kristol could both oppose Disney's plans because they did not agree with the company's presentations of history, even though they had different issues with them.

6 Gertrude Himmelfarb was an important player during the 1980s part of the history wars; a traditionalist scholar, she opposed the development of the discipline of cultural history. Irving Kristol has sometimes been referred to as "the godfather of neoconservatism."

During the early 90s, the most important battles of these Culture Wars were fought on a history front. The two most resonating of these dealt with the National History Standards, and the proposed Enola Gay exhibit for the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. For the sake of length, and because both of these incidents have been covered elsewhere in great detail (Nash et. al., Linenthal et. al., Hartman), I will not discuss them here in more depth.[7] Yet both are excellent examples of what matters in all of these conflicts: the wish to reflect on American history through a more differentiated, more politically left lens than before, and a (neo-)conservative backlash against even the attempt to do so. The National History Standards ended up being published and put into practice in schools, at least in a revised version in 1996, after they had been under public scrutiny since Lynne Cheney's editorial on October 20, 1994, that had decried them as too "politically correct." The Enola Gay exhibit however also underwent several extreme script revisions, but ended up being officially cancelled on January 30, 1995, and even led to the resignation of museum director Martin Harwit the following May. All of this needs to be kept in mind when looking at the Disney's America controversy, as the three events unfolded simultaneously—when Disney announced the theme park on November 11, 1993, planning for the Enola Gay exhibit was well under way, and the National History Standards were also being drafted. On September 17, 1994, Disney's America was protested on the National Mall, and only two months later, on November 23, the Enola Gay arrived under similar protest at the Air & Space museum. Ultimately, both projects were cancelled only within four months after each other. As Joan Zenzen has aptly put it: "Some historians supported Protect Historic America because they were skeptical about how Disney would interpret and present the past.... As custodians of the nation's history, American historians were especially sensitive to its presentation because of recent attacks on the profession" (178).

Historic Theming and the Heritage Boom

This circumstance explains why there suddenly was such uproar about the construction of a historic theme park—while the proposed location certainly had drawn special attention to it, such a public discussion of the content and depiction of historic themes had previously been unheard of. Theme parks all over the world use historic theming,[8] and Disneyland is of course one of them, so it was wrong that some of the

7 For a quick overview on at least the controversy surrounding the National History Standards, in addition to the more substantial accounts of Nash and Linenthal (see Works Cited), I recommend Gary Nash's "Reflections on the National History Standards" that can be found here: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mlassite/discussions261/nash.html.

8 Theming is "the use of an overarching theme... to create a holistic and integrated spatial organization of a consumer venue" (Lukas "Themed Space" 1).

media coverage, such as Michael Wines writing for the *New York Times*, claimed that "there has never been anything like it in Mickey Mouse's empire or anywhere else."[9] While there has been criticism from academia towards some of the historic depiction in Disneyland and other Disney theme parks, such as the American Adventure pavilion in Epcot (the second theme park in Walt Disney World, opened in 1982), there had never been any kind of controversy—especially even before a park or an attraction had even been built—that would compare to Disney's America.

While the Culture Wars climate certainly served as a catalyst for the public outrage, the reasons for Disney's interest in building such an explicitly historic theme park in the early 1990s can be traced back to something different, though related. Since the 1970s, and especially the 80s and early 90s, the tourism industry has seen a so-called "heritage boom," an increasing number of tourist attractions that offer the visitor insights into a country's heritage, and its historic and cultural memory. This phenomenon could especially be observed in the UK and the US in the 1980s, and has therefore been credited to a renewed interest in these ideas under the conservative administrations of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Light 146)—to give an example, the number of museums in England alone doubled between 1971 and 1987 (Urry and Larsen 135). The development of neo-conservatism, however, can itself be traced back to the growing disillusionment of the public in the early 1970s, after the harrowing 1960s that saw such events as the assassination of JFK, the Vietnam War, and was then topped off by the Watergate affair. All of this sparked a longing for a seemingly better past, a nostalgia for the "good old times."

Another reason for this "heritage boom" identified by, among others, John Urry, was the wish to experience more differentiated forms of tourism, a sort of post-mass tourism (Urry and Larsen 51f), and a new "quest for authenticity" in tourism (MacCannell), all identified as a consequence of Post-Fordism, and generally, postmodernity.[10]

Heritage attractions include sites such as museums, memorials, restored houses of historic significance (incl. the homes of people with historic relevance, such as Monticello or Mount Vernon), the participation in or spectatorship of reenactments, living history museums (such as Colonial Williamsburg), and also, theme parks, although

9 Which is also why he had been corrected immediately by a reader, Andrew Zolot, who pointed out in a letter to the editor, that there had been Freedomland, a theme park dealing explicitly with American history, that lasted from 1960–64 in the Bronx, but became a victim of the competition by the 1964–65 New York World's Fair. This is of course only one example of a historical theme park dealing with American history.

10 Filippo Carlà has also written on the connection between postmodernity and the so-called "postmodern time regime" as well as a link to Vanessa Agnew's "Affective turn" within history. See Carlà, forthcoming.

they are often left out or only briefly mentioned by scholars dealing with heritage studies. The increasing number of these was both a reason for and a symptom of the Culture War-period. Yet how they were seen by the public and especially, academia, was sometimes radically different. For example, Colonial Williamsburg or Mount Vernon are generally deemed much more "authentic" than theme parks, while in fact they have increasingly used tools similar to those as Disney employs in their theme parks to educate and entertain their visitors. Laurie A. Meamber, a marketing scholar, has compared all three sites (using Epcot's "American Adventure" as an example for the Disney parks), as well as Monticello, and concluded that all of them rely on the concepts of both Disneyfication and Disneyization. Disneyization, a term coined by Alan Bryman, follows George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization (1993)[11] and means that more and more of our world—or at least of our consumer venues—are beginning to resemble Disney's theme parks. The tools of Disneyization are the use of theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, performative labor, and control and surveillance. Both Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon use these methods to convey history, such as employing actors to portray historic figures (performative labor generally means requiring to show emotion towards the customer, but can also extend to actual acting as part of the job description), and selling themed merchandise. Additionally, they also present history through the lens of patriotism, a fact that sometimes leads to certain omissions from the text, much as is the case with Disney's representations of history. The attractions also use a mixture of "authentic" and inauthentic, recreated, exhibition pieces, as well as audio-animatronics, further disneyfying the experience. The same developments can also be seen in newer heritage attractions such as the Boston Tea Party Ship & Museum that opened in 2012 and tells its (hi)story via actors, holographs, a multi-sensory movie, as well as involving visitors by letting them throw tea packets into the Boston harbor. Meamber concluded that the idea of Disney's America is "now reflected through the operation of historical sites such as those [discussed here]" (143). This is an interesting idea, as it suggests that although Disney's America was never built, other sites have taken its place that serve a similar purpose, and for the most part, also present their visitors with a similar take on American history.

The Technologies of Edutainment

The realization that all heritage sites increasingly use similar tools, warrants a look at what these technologies are and what they contribute to the visitor's experience.

11 This of course refers to George Ritzer's seminal work "The McDonaldization of Society," originally published in 1993 and since revised eight times and translated into several languages.

Disney uses the term "Imagineering"—a portmanteau for "imagination" and "engineering"—for the practice of designing and developing its theme parks around the world. The term has increasingly found use at other heritage attractions as well. Besides theming, a term which most overtly focuses on the architecture and design of a space, imagineering also encompasses the use of several technologies to tell a story. Besides the classic arts of film-making or music, these can include the use of audio-animatronics to simulate humans or animals; touch screens, virtual reality, and other kinds of interactive information technology; different kinds of vehicles for actual or simulated transport; and many more such tools, often state-of-the-art. The goal of all of these is the immersion of the visitor into the venue and the story or information it tries to convey. Noel B. Salazar sums it up as follows: "A perfectly imagineered attraction makes you feel like you are on a journey that transports you to a different place or time and completely engulfs you in a new world. It makes a story convincing by engaging all senses and moving peoples' emotions within a fantasy environment in which, paradoxically, the fantasy feels completely real" (49).[12]

Disney's America would have also made extensive use of all of these techniques. As Peter Rummell, then chairman of Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI), explained in his contribution to the OAH newsletter on the project: "Employing all the tools available to us—filmmaking, animation, music, interactive media, live interpretation, art, and technology—we will bring the American experience to life in the three-dimensional forum of a park and help visitors imagine what it must have been like at certain moment's in our nation's history" (10). Yet many people, and especially the members of PHA and other academics, were—and are—skeptical towards the use of such technologies when conveying the darker periods of history. As mentioned before, Disney's plans of trying to convey first-hand experiences of slavery or the Vietnam war, upset many—although it remains unclear in what form that would have actually been done, as the plans were apparently scrapped early (Mehren) and are therefore missing from the concept outlines that are available to the public today. Historian Linda Shopes noted that while such a simulated experience could not only never be truly authentic, it could however give people a false sense of authenticity: "While no Luddite, I wonder if the much-vaunted Disney wizardry does as much harm as good: cannot simulations lead participants to a facile, if not arrogant, view because they've experienced a recreated version of an event, they know it?" I think that this an overstatement, as I believe that, while people do indeed employ a suspension of disbelief in theme parks, they still do so willingly and knowingly, even most children, and are not rendered as passive and impressionable as many academics make them out to be. Yet similar

12 This practice has also been described as "time travelling" in connection to historic theming by archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf (2009), but it would exceed the scope of this essay to go into more detail here.

concerns also exist on the producers' side of theme parks and other themed environments, and this has led to a rather obvious lack of themed and immersive spaces that actually use theming to convey darker and more harrowing issues or time periods—what has sometimes been called "dark theming." This is interesting, as other popular culture media such as movies often, and unquestioningly deal with harrowing historical events, while theme parks do not—which "suggests that the technology of theming itself is often the inciter of controversy" (Lukas, "Politics" 276). Scott Lukas has suggested that this might be because of the "more active role" (Lukas, "Politics" 278) visitors take in theme parks vs. watching a movie. Yet, this "dark theming" was in fact still common back in the days of Coney Island, but it was virtually eliminated with the emergence of Disneyland (Lukas, "Pushing" 50f). The obvious exceptions to the rule are museums, as well as reenactments—which leads to the main reason why theme parks usually do not deal with such issues: they fear offending, and in turn, losing customers, and therefore revenue (Lukas, "Pushing" 54). While we will never find out if Disney had dared step over that line, it was, somewhat ironically, opposition from academia and not the general public (and potential visitors) that made them reconsider in the first place. And so it led to a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy when criticism was voiced based on this assumption, as for example by Wallace ("Serious Fun" 87).

Besides these concerns, edutainment, the notion that education can be entertaining (as well as entertainment educational), is something that is generally wildly discussed among scholars. Not coincidentally, the conflict over the topic is again epitomic to the times of the Culture Wars, as Ronald Walters points out: "on one side, all appear to assume, there is entertainment, on the other there is history and serious scholarship. Public historians, filmmakers, museum curators, and others have done fine work in recent years to erase that distinction, or at least to make it less severe, but it stands at the core of the Disney debate as a sort of 'two cultures' argument for the 1990s." It points further to the rift that also happened within academia, based on the questions of *who* should be allowed to teach history, and *how* it should be taught. Even James McPherson, a member of the PHA, pointed out that "[n]o license is required to practice history in the United States," and that "[m]ost professional historians do not oppose such simulations [at living history attractions such as Colonial Williamsburg] if they are done with accuracy and sensitivity to the complexities and ambiguities of historical reality" (1). Yet many feared that these complexities would be lost in such "simulations" and that the result would become a mere "synthetic history," as David McCullough called it (qtd. in Rich), or that the past could never fully be recreated and would therefore only present an incomplete picture (Confino).

Yet, two well-known historians, James Oliver Horton and Eric Foner, saw Disney's America as an opportunity rather than a threat. "For Horton, the promise of Disney using its command of technology to do good history in an entertaining way was enough to gain his critical support" (Zenzen 179). He admitted that most people

learned their history in national parks, museums, and theme parks, noting that to "maximize the success of democracy, 'we need to educate our people and we need to do that in a variety of places. We can't count on the schools or the universities or even formal mainstream traditional museums to do the education… alone'" and that "if we want to educate people… then we have to use a little imagination to make [history] engaging," as ultimately, "good education is really entertaining" (qtd. in Zenzen 180). Both Horton and Foner became official historical consultants for Disney's America.[13] While some members of PHA, such as William Styron, believed that they were "disgracing themselves" (qtd. in Appelo), and selling out—Styron even said that Foner had "whored himself to Disney" (qtd. in Appelo)—they were ultimately serving public history, acting on the belief that "edutainment" was not just a buzzword, but actually possible. They were and are certainly not alone with their opinion, as can be seen, for example, in several academic accounts discussing Disney's America, such as the contributions of both Mike Wallace and Richard Francaviglia to a special issue of *The Public Historian* in 1995. Yet what keeps being discussed by them and others is again the notion of "authenticity" and the idea that "theme parks are not museums, and we shouldn't expect anything like the coverage and complexity demanded of public historical sites" (Wallace, "Serious Fun" 88). This is of course right—and yet, it might be wrong to compare them in the first place. While they are related media of edutainment, their underlying messages and ideas follow entirely different rules, which I will discuss in the following.

Truth and Myth

The perceived dichotomy of education and entertainment has been eroded by the postmodern dissolution of high and low culture, and by the questioning of the idea of one historic truth, most notably by Hayden White. These ideas of meta-histories and the development of cultural history as a field are at the core of the Culture Wars, making the idea of edutainment one central argument of the conflict, as it ultimately allows for multiple voices in the distribution of knowledge. This is echoed by many of the scholars dealing with Disney's America, and heritage tourism in general after 2000, when, it seems, the Culture Wars had shifted to different fronts, as well as away from the question of "who" to more of a "how"—as can be seen in such conflicts as

13 It is interesting to note that Foner, a leftist radical, and Horton, an African-American, and scholar of African-American history, would both support the rather conservative Disney. Yet this can be seen as yet another example of the Culture Wars shifting fronts and unlikely alliances, as well as a growing awareness of the significance of public history, that Horton viewed as a democratic effort.

the "War on Christmas"[14] and discussions over internet privacy.[15] Effi Gazi's claim, for example, that the "distinction between a scientific history exclusively promoting the truth and a non-scientific one viewing the past through distorted lenses is erroneous," or Meamber's statement that "it is difficult for any presentation of history to be truthful, in the sense of providing a complete and accurate account (or accounts). There are certain voices that are privileged, others that are silent, and often it is the records, stories, and myths that provide evidence as to what happened" (140). This note of "myths" is what brings me to my final argument: while both museums and theme parks belong to the realm of edutainment venues, I would claim that their cultural functions are rather different from each other. As Robert A. Baron has argued:

> The museum experience and the theme park experience have divergent but related aims. Museums exist to make the unknown known; theme parks recreate a world in which we can verify and internalize our own values. In the theme park the observer has an opportunity to become a player in a cultural or historical version of mythic events or mythic experience—what we tend to call legends.... Unlike museums, they [theme parks] exist—not for fact—but for their mythic ethos, and like myth, they must simulate a version of reality that is both appealing and significant.

The continuing fear and discussion over whether theme parks' disneyfied presentation of history is harmful to the education of people might therefore be void, or at least misdirected, as theme parks ultimately deal with the mythic, or folkloristic side of history, and present it through this unique point of view. As argued before, all heritage attractions including museums continue relying on the same techniques, yet this does not mean that their goals are indistinguishable from each other. While museums still firmly base their presentation of history on academic research and "fact," and living history sites probably fall somewhere in between, theme parks remain at the other end of the spectrum, representing cultural myths. This is made unmistakably clear in Peter Rummell's explanation of Disney's America's message:

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14 The "War on Christmas," is an ongoing conflict between Christians in the US, Canada, and to a lesser extent, the UK, and their critique on their respective governments, as well as companies that avoid association with Christmas as a holiday explicitly related to Christianity, in an effort to be sensitive towards multiple cultural and religious backgrounds. An example would be to use the general phrasing "Happy Holidays" instead of saying "Merry Christmas."

15 This refers to the ongoing public discussions about government agencies such as the NSA or the FBI gaining access to private internet data in large quantities in order to pursue crime and especially, terrorism.

> Like any presentation, Disney's America will have a point of view. Based on experts' counsel, the creative team has identified some themes to build on America's persistent resistance to injustice, its abilities to meet challenges and conquer the future, and the conviction that ordinary men and women can accomplish extraordinary things. The park will not whitewash history or ignore the blemishes. But neither will we apologize for the belief that, even with America's mistakes, the American story is profoundly positive and uplifting. (10)

A folkloristic or mythic presentation of America does not necessarily mean completely excluding all negative aspects of the nation's history, but it alters its underlying message. This also explains the design of Disney's America and the choice of the nine "territories"—searching for "complete," and "authentic" representations of history, one will find much to demur. Yet in regards to which historic events have been pivotal in the shaping of the American idea, its cultural memory, one can find all that is expected, such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, or World War II. Such a focus does however not rob the historical theme park of its status as a purveyor, or even teacher, of history, as I agree with Ann-Louise Shapiro that "history, memory, myth, and fantasy... [are] different, co-extensive kinds of history-telling" (2)—ultimately, myth and historic "fact" may be just two sides of the same coin.

Conclusion: Seeking a Dialogue

I am not trying to say that a mythic representation of history is sufficient when educating the public, yet, it should also not be disregarded as unnecessary or even dangerous. The myth and folklore aspects of history that can be found in theme parks, as well as in movies and television shows and other media of popular culture, should be seen as an addition to what is taught in schools and universities, to other academic texts, and to museums, and other heritage history attractions, as well as "classic" historic sites. This is also what Disney had in mind, as Peter Rummell claimed: "Enthused by what they see, hear, and touch, we believe many visitors to Disney's America will seek to explore further—through books, through museums, through visits to historic sites" (10). Bob Weis, who was in charge of the creative development of the park, also claimed that it would be "an ideal complement to visiting Washington museums, monuments and national treasures" (qtd. in Littaye). Disney had also agreed to fund money for a new visitor's center at Manassas Battlefield Park, as well as to promote the National Park Service's work inside Disney's America In addition to that, of course, a collaboration between academic history and theme parks, as James Oliver Horton and Eric Foner offered, remains valuable within the context of Disney's mythic presentation. Foner had in fact consulted with Disney even before the announcement for Disney's America, when he helped rewrite the script for the Hall of Presidents at the

Magic Kingdom park in Orlando, which had re-opened in October 1993. In hindsight, of course, the changes might have already foreshadowed Disney's announcement of Disney's America a month later. Probably not coincidentally, the often-criticized "American Adventure" attraction at Epcot was also revised earlier that year. These attractions and Disney parks in general still contribute to public history immensely, so much that both Mike Wallace (*Mickey Mouse* 134) and Richard Francaviglia (71) have acknowledged Walt Disney as a de facto public historian. Had Disney's America been built, Disney would have taken on an even bigger role in public history, yet as it is, it contributed greatly to opening up the debate about the importance of it. As Cary Carson, who worked for Colonial Williamsburg, noted: "The Disney Company's sudden appearance on the borders of our history museum kingdom was the best thing to happen to American history since [Roots author] Alex Haley. It challenged our monopoly, it rattled our complacency, and it mocked our claims to entertain and educate the general public. Overnight, Disney redrew the line that defines the boundaries of popular history" (61).[16] Since then, a great many scholars, including Carson, have argued in favor of a collaboration between academic and public history, among them Richard Francaviglia, J. Quaid Loebbecke, Effi Gazi, Ann-Louise Shapiro, Ludmilla Jordanova, and Filippo Carlà, stressing the importance of opening a dialogue. I wholeheartedly agree with them, and propose that academia should not only do that, but also embrace the idea that theme parks do not hurt or diminish their work, but complement it, by engaging millions of visitors yearly with historical presentations. As Peter Rummell summed it up: "Disney's America will open another window on the past, not block the existing view" (10). With currently more than 400 amusement parks and attractions in North America alone, there sure are a lot of windows.

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16 Coincidentally, the here praised Alex Haley would later work with Disney to develop an African-themed pavilion for Epcot, which also never came to fruition.

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