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## **The Unreal Thing: Faux Heritage at Disney**

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Almost everyone understands that fantasy is integral to the thematic elements in a Disney amusement park. Less understood, especially among people who have never visited one of these parks, is that Disney themes are often historical. Occasionally such themes relate to the heritage of the company itself, but in many cases they refer to our broader cultural heritage. Disney has appropriated genuine historical references and integrated these within fictional proprietary narratives, to create a blend of real and false (or *faux*) heritage that has become the core of its brand identity.

### **Corporate Heritage at Disney**

As the Disney parks grow older, thematic elements increasingly refer to the history of the company and the foundational role of Walt Disney. This is especially notable at the original Disneyland in California and the adjacent Disney California Adventure expansion. A statue of the man standing alongside his most famous character, Mickey Mouse, has a place of honor at the center of Disneyland. The World of Color extravaganza at California Adventure, which is an outdoor light and video show that substitutes for the evening fireworks at many other parks, is

essentially a documentary about the life and legacy of Walt Disney. Vintage photographs and memorabilia are displayed throughout the lobby of the Disneyland Hotel. Elements of Disney heritage often appear in the theme or design of products offered in retail stores, especially characters from the Disney archives.

Disney also deliberately uses milestones in its corporate history as promotional opportunities. During the past year, the original Disneyland celebrated its 60th birthday, for which a special Diamond Anniversary logo was created. This was displayed throughout the park and incorporated into the design of multiple retail and restaurant offerings, ranging from emblematic suitcases to plastic lighted diamonds that were added to premium cocktails.

### **Cultural Heritage at Disney**

Historical references unrelated to its corporate history also appear at Disneyland. Sometimes these are representations of real events or people, such as the animatronic figure of Abraham Lincoln that anchors the Great Moments show. More often these are elements of design or narrative that are incorporated into the imaginary themes of structures or attractions.

Historical elements are both pronounced and ubiquitous in Disney parks. When arriving at the gates of Disneyland, you immediately see a railroad with steam powered locomotives reminiscent of the nineteenth century. You enter the gates and proceed down Main Street, which is a reproduction of a midwestern American town circa 1900. Guests can ride into the park on a variety of vehicles including a horse-drawn streetcar and a replica of an antique fire engine.

At the end is a traffic circle, which serves as a central hub with different themed neighborhoods radiating outward. Here you will also find the focal point of the entire park, a castle devoted to the fairytale princess Sleeping Beauty. This is a stylized interpretation of medieval castles found throughout Europe, with inspiration also provided by Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, a neo-gothic and Romanesque revival style palace built during the 1880s.

Directly ahead is Fantasyland, with rides hidden within or adjacent to buildings that resemble a historic European village (such as the King Arthur Carrousel and Snow White's Scary Adventures). To the left is Frontierland, with attractions that include references to the midwestern and southwestern United States during the nineteenth century (Big Thunder Mountain and Mark Twain Riverboat). Also to the left is Adventureland, which includes rides with themes related to historic exploration (Jungle Cruise and Indiana Jones Adventure). Beyond that is New Orleans Square and Critter Country, with historical references to the American southern states and the Caribbean region (Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean).



The only original neighborhood that was not developed with a historical theme is Tomorrowland, which is focused on space exploration. However, even this was subsequently re-positioned with themes that are vaguely historical. The futuristic design elements used in 1955 had become distinctly obsolete four decades later, but Disney executives were concerned about the cost of constantly updating the area to maintain pace with advancing technology in the real world. The solution was to develop a retrospective theme set in a specific period that need not change, with an internal viewpoint from the past toward the future. This became a playful interpretation of science fiction movies from the 1950s.

Historical themes and design elements are also ubiquitous at the adjacent park Disney California Adventure. Guests enter along Buena Vista Street, a replica of a Hollywood neighborhood from the 1920s, which includes an old-fashioned streetcar ride. One of the most popular new additions here is the *Frozen* Live attraction, which recreates the blockbuster animated movie as a Broadway-style stage musical. It should be apparent to anyone who has seen the film that the costumes and settings in *Frozen* are historical.



To the right is the Grizzly Peak neighborhood, with design elements reminiscent of a national park, including a vintage Rambler station wagon parked outside the retail store. To the left is the Tower of Terror ride, with a theme that combines a fictional historic hotel (supposedly abandoned after an elevator accident in 1939) with a video introduction by Rod Serling from the *Twilight Zone* television show (circa 1960). Beyond that is Cars Land, a reproduction of the fictional American southwestern town Radiator Springs, from the animated movie *Cars*. This features a pronounced nostalgic theme, including vintage automobile design elements from the 1950s and 1960s, and ubiquitous references to the legendary Route 66 highway.



At the rear of Disney California Adventure is the Paradise Pier neighborhood, which is a replica of a seaside amusement park at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the design elements include images of Mickey Mouse and his friends, the theme emphasizes a historical period as much as the Disney characters. The architecture and signage are Victorian, the main attractions are a wooden roller coaster and Ferris wheel, the boardwalk includes carnival games and arcades, and the food options include corn dogs. Heritage co-branding is evident in a billboard for Coca-Cola, which features tourists in Victorian clothing visiting a seaside boardwalk with the classic slogan ‘Delicious and Refreshing.’

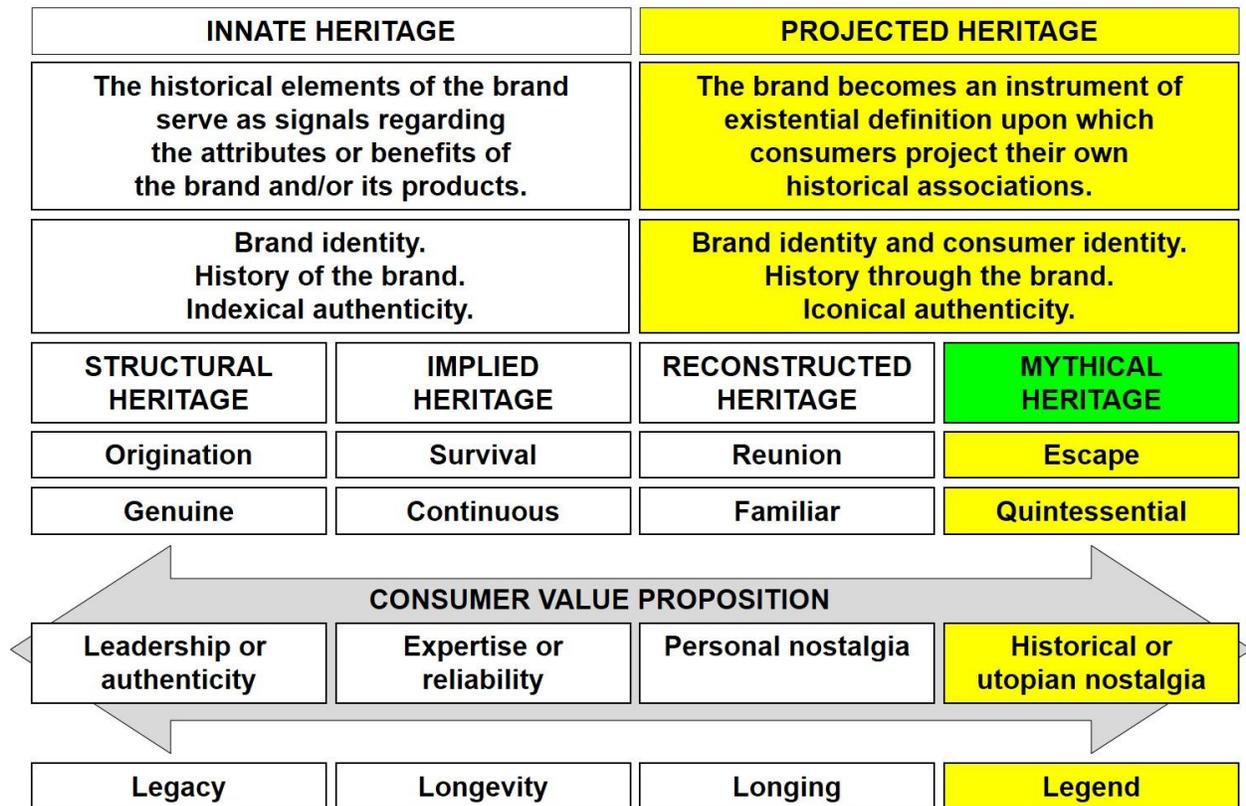


Without going into excessive detail, it should also be apparent to visitors that historical themes abound in other Disney parks. The most obvious examples are the fairytale princess castles, which serve as focal points at every Disney park globally. Historical themes are also quite evident in Disney hotel and restaurant venues, especially throughout the extensive lodging system in Florida.

### **Brand Heritage**

Brand heritage is an emerging topic within the marketing discipline, which suggests that the consumer appeal of products and services offered by older companies may be enhanced by the

historical characters of their brands. A few years ago, I developed a theoretical model for brand heritage in collaboration with John Balmer at Brunel University in London and based on prior work by the pioneering social psychologist George Herbert Mead, which was published in the journal *Corporate Communications*. This suggested that the phenomenon of brand heritage has several dimensions.



Adapted from Bradford Hudson and John Balmer (2013) *Corporate Communications* 18(3), page 352

In the ‘innate heritage’ dimension, the historical elements of the brand serve as signals regarding the attributes or benefits of the brand itself. Communications in this dimension often refer to company founders or moments of origination (supporting claims of leadership or authenticity) or to the continuity and survival of the company (supporting claims of expertise or reliability). At Disneyland, innate heritage is exemplified by the banners celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. Innate heritage can be activated through the use of artifacts (such as the Disney memorabilia displayed at the Disneyland Hotel) or media archives (such as the video interview of Walt Disney that appears in the World of Color show). Authenticity is validated by historical documents or objects that could otherwise be presented as exhibits in a legal proceeding (also called ‘indexical’ authenticity). This all seems fairly straightforward.

The ‘projected heritage’ dimension is more nuanced and complex. In psychology, the term ‘projection’ refers to the idea that we perceive beliefs or feelings in other people, which they do not have, because we subconsciously cannot admit to having such beliefs or feelings

ourselves. In a branding context, consumers perceive attributes in the company or product, which may or may not be present, because they subconsciously perceive or want to perceive similar attributes in themselves.

Mead proposed that people develop a sense of personal identity through a process of 'symbolic interaction' in which they are constantly comparing and contrasting themselves against other people or objects. He also suggested that the process is inherently historical, because people compare themselves (and others) in the present to themselves (and others) in the past, to define and understand their own growth over time.

Hudson and Balmer took this one step further to suggest that corporate brands are symbols that consumers employ for the same type of interaction. In the 'projected heritage' dimension, the brand becomes an instrument of existential definition upon which consumers project their own historical associations. Consumers engage with the historical elements of the brand not only to define the identity of the company, but also to define their own identities. We also suggested that historical references of any type could be used as symbols to activate associations in the mind, whether or not they have any legitimate connection to a brand, provided that consumers consider such associations to be meaningful.

Our typology suggests two subsidiary dimensions for projected heritage. In the 'reconstructed heritage' sub-dimension, consumers project associations onto the brand from their own lived histories. In other words, they acquire branded products or experiences for the purpose of activating memories about their own pasts. These memories must somehow relate to the brand, and may involve memories about its products, but the real purpose is to reminisce about past events or feelings in the surrounding milieu. Reconstructed heritage can be activated by images or narratives that are familiar.

At Disneyland, reconstructed heritage is exemplified by a special button that is given to anyone who visited (or claims to have visited) Disneyland as a child during its inaugural year 1955. The button becomes an instrument for self-activation and perpetuation of feelings about a formative event in the real childhood of the person who wears it. This is personal nostalgia. The memories are real.

This brings us to the other subsidiary dimension of projected heritage. In the 'mythical heritage' sub-dimension, consumers project associations about imagined histories onto the brand. Such associations may refer to real historical events in which the consumer did not participate, or to narratives inspired by history that are entirely fictional. The former can be considered historical or vicarious nostalgia, while the latter has been called 'utopian nostalgia'. Either way, these past moments did not actually occur in the lived experiences of the consumers involved. The memories are unreal.

Mythical heritage cannot be activated by images or narratives that are familiar, because the consumer has no personal familiarity. The operative characteristic in a mythical symbol must be its archetypal or quintessential nature (also called 'iconical' authenticity). In other words, the symbol must capture the essence of an idea so perfectly that it demands our intellectual or aesthetic respect. It may not be real, but it is true.

At Disneyland, mythical heritage is exemplified by the historical elements throughout the Fantasyland neighborhood. This is why Walt Disney chose the castle of Sleeping Beauty as the focal point of Disneyland, why a fairytale castle is prominently featured in every Disney location globally, and why the image of a castle is one of the most commonly used Disney corporate logos.

By the way, many of the historical elements at Disney can be categorized as either reconstructed heritage or mythical heritage, depending on the observer. At the California Adventure Park, this is illustrated by the antique Rambler station wagon displayed at Grizzly Peak. A parent or grandparent may experience personal nostalgia, a teenager may experience historical nostalgia, and a child may experience utopian nostalgia when looking at the same automobile.

### **Faux Heritage**

Although the historical references at Disney may have genuine antecedents, they constitute *faux* (or false) heritage because they are either presented out of historical context (such as a medieval European castle located in modern California) or within a larger historical narrative that is entirely fictional (such as the story of Sleeping Beauty). The purpose is not to illustrate historical events or phenomena in an academic sense, but rather to entertain and amuse. This is something quite different from a historical attraction such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, which uses reproductions or interpretations to create experiences that aspire to scientific validity.

Arbiters of high culture are often dismissive of Disney theme parks. Critics have suggested that Disney disintegrates historical reality into tidbits, mixes them with simplistic and sentimental fabrications from commercial culture, and re-assembles them into a vulgar and counterfeit pastiche, which is promoted to idiotic and undiscerning masses, by American executives who are unsophisticated and avaricious. This was especially notable in media coverage about the opening of EuroDisney (now Disneyland Paris) and the planning for the Disney America theme park in Virginia (subsequently abandoned). In contrast, defenders of Disney consider these attitudes to be arrogant, elitist, ethnocentric and cynical.

Such criticism also misses the point of historical appropriation. The purpose is not to deceive or defraud. Walt Disney was a film director who envisioned Disneyland as a three-dimensional

environment that would allow guests to step inside his movies. He was re-purposing historical tidbits as visual and intellectual cues in elaborate sets akin to the decoration of Hollywood sound stages. Today the company assumes that every visitor will realize they are interacting with an explicitly contrived world. Indeed most Disney visitors are knowing and enthusiastic collaborators in this process. The goal is not to reproduce or critique reality, but rather to escape from it.

### **The Essence of the Disney Brand**

Much has been written about the meaning of Disney. Perhaps the most common idea, voiced both by independent observers and the company itself, is that Disney offers a celebration of childhood and the child in each of us. Another idea often discussed is that Disney is able to create and capture 'magic' through imagination and illusion. These sentiments undoubtedly have validity, and they are consistent with the ideas discussed above. Let me suggest, however, that such appraisals are incomplete.

Disney is also inherently and profoundly *historical*. The most successful Disney movies have always included historical elements and the parks are enabled by an omnipresent sense of the past. Indeed many of the thematic elements refer to a specific moment in history. When, you may ask? Once upon a time.

Even its most futuristic themes incorporate historical symbols, as evidenced by design elements in the *Star Wars* attractions, which Disney is relying upon to capture the imagination of the next generation. Nothing illustrates this more powerfully than the Jedi lightsaber, which is essentially a sword and represents a type of weapon that has not been used on real battlefields for over a century. The action may unfold in space, but as stated in the opening frame of the original film, the fictional narrative occurs 'a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.' It is quite apparent why the heirs of Walt Disney chose to acquire the *Star Wars* movie franchise from George Lucas. These two brands fit together perfectly.

Walt Disney knew instinctively that to lure people into worlds of fantasy, he needed to have them momentarily disconnect themselves from the real world. And yet he also understood that his audiences would be disoriented and confused unless his narratives contained recognizable touchpoints. The key was to suspend disbelief, rather than destroy belief and thereby cast his viewers adrift perceptually and intellectually. The technique of leading people backward into the vague reality of another time was an effective way to balance novelty and familiarity.

When our theoretical model for brand heritage is placed against the conceptual backdrop of historical imagery, it becomes clear that the core of the Disney brand is mythical heritage. The value proposition for consumers is an intellectual and emotional escape from the monotony or

anxiety of their normal existence into a utopian fantasy world set in a mythical 'golden age' of yesteryear.

## **Abstract**

Almost everyone understands that fantasy is integral to the thematic elements in a Disney amusement park. Less understood, especially among people who have never visited one of these parks, is that Disney themes are often historical. Occasionally such themes relate to the heritage of the company itself, but in many cases they refer to our broader cultural heritage. Disney has appropriated genuine historical references and integrated these within fictional proprietary narratives, to create a blend of real and false (or *faux*) heritage that has become the core of its brand identity. This article describes the historical thematic elements at Disneyland in California, provides an overview of a prior theoretical model for the concept of brand heritage in the discipline of marketing, and explains how Disney exemplifies the mythical heritage dimension in that model.

## **About the Research**

This article is based on field research conducted by the author at Disneyland and Disney California Adventure in Anaheim, California during two site visits in 2016. It is also informed by several prior visits to Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. A variety of primary and secondary sources were consulted to develop the historical background of the company including the books *Disney A to Z* (Disney, 2006) and *Walt Disney Imagineering* (Disney, 2010). Analysis of the concept of brand heritage is based on prior scholarship by the author and his colleagues including Bradford Hudson and John Balmer, 'Corporate Heritage Brands: Mead's Theory of the Past,' *Corporate Communications* (2013). It should be noted that major construction is now underway at Disneyland, with multiple changes either confirmed or speculated, which could affect historical theme elements. This includes the creation of a distinct neighborhood for *Star Wars* attractions, subsequent to the recent acquisition of Lucasfilm. As some *Star Wars* thematic elements have already been added to Tomorrowland, its retrospective science fiction theme is uncertain going forward. It was also recently announced that the Tower of Terror attraction would be rebuilt, with the existing technology being adapted for a new theme derived from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie.

## **Images**

All photographs and diagrams were provided by the author and reproduced with his permission.



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