

Disneyworld Company

Jean Baudrillard

In the early 80s, when the metallurgical industry in the Lorraine region entered its final crisis, the public powers had the idea to make up for this collapse by creating a European leisure zone, an "intelligent" theme park which could jumpstart the economy of the region. This park was called Smurfland. The managing director of the dead metallurgy naturally became the manager of the theme park, and the unemployed workers were rehired as "smurfmen" in the context of this new Smurfland. Unfortunately, the park itself, for several reasons, had to be closed, and the former factory workers turned "smurfmen" once again found themselves on the dole. It is a somber destiny which, after making them the real victims of the job market, transformed them into the ghostly workers of leisure time, and finally turned them into the unemployed of both.

But Smurfland was only a miniature universe. The Disney enterprise is much bigger. To illustrate, it should be known that Disney "Unlimited," having taken over one of the major US television networks, is about to purchase 42nd Street in New York, the "hot" section of 42nd Street, to transform it into an erotic theme park, with the intention of changing hardly anything of the street itself. The idea would be simply to transform, in situ, one of the high centers of pornography into a branch of Disney World. Transforming the pornographers and the prostitutes, like the factory workers in Smurfland, into extras [figurants] in their own world, metamorphosed into identical figures, museumified, disneyfied. By the way, do you know how General Schwarzkopf, the great Gulf War strategist, celebrated his victory? He had a huge party at Disney World. These festivities in the palace of the imaginary were a worthy conclusion to such a virtual war.

But the Disney enterprise goes beyond the imaginary. Disney, the precursor, the grand initiator of the imaginary as virtual reality, is now in the process of capturing all the real world to integrate it into its synthetic universe, in the form of a vast "reality show" where reality itself becomes a spectacle [vient se donner en spectacle], where the real becomes a theme park. The transfusion of the real is like a blood transfusion, except that here it is a transfusion of real blood into the exsanguine universe of virtuality. After the prostitution of the imaginary, here is now the hallucination of the real in its ideal and simplified version.

At Disney World in Orlando, they are even building an identical replica of the Los Angeles Disneyland, as a sort of historical attraction to the second degree, a simulacrum to the second power. It is the same thing that CNN did with the Gulf War: a prototypical event which did not take place, because it took place in real time, in CNN's instantaneous mode. Today, Disney could easily revisit the Gulf War as a worldwide show. The Red Army choirs have already celebrated Christmas at Euro Disney. Everything is possible, and everything is recyclable in the polymorphous universe of virtuality. Everything can be bought over. There is no reason why Disney would not take over the human genome, which, by the way, is already being resequenced, to turn it into a genetic show. In the end [au fond], they would cryogenize the entire planet, just like Walt Disney himself who decided to be cryogenized in a nitrogen solution, waiting for some kind of resurrection in the real world. But there is no real world anymore, not even for Walt Disney. If one day he wakes up, he'll no doubt have the biggest surprise of his life. Meanwhile, from the bottom of his nitrogen solution he continues to colonize the world - both the imaginary and the real - in the spectral universe of virtual reality, inside which we all have become extras [figurants]. The difference is that when we put on our digital suits, plug in our sensorial captors, or press the keys of our virtual reality arcade, we enter live spectrality whereas Disney, the genial anticipator, has entered the virtual reality of death.

The New World Order is in a Disney mode. But Disney is not alone in this mode of cannibalistic attraction. We saw Benetton with his commercial campaigns, trying to recuperate the human drama of the news (AIDS, Bosnia, poverty, apartheid) by transfusing reality into a New Mediatic Figuration (a place where suffering and commiseration end in a mode of interactive resonance). The virtual takes over the real as it appears, and then replicates it without any modification [le recrache tel quel], in a pret-a-porter (ready-to-wear) fashion.

If this operation can be so successful in creating a universal fascination with only a tint of moral disapproval, it is because reality itself, the world itself, with its frenzy of cloning has already been transformed into an interactive performance, some kind of Lunapark for ideologies, technologies, works, knowledge, death, and even destruction. All this is likely to be cloned and resurrected in a juvenile museum of Imagination or a virtual museum of Information.

Similarly, it is useless to keep searching for computer viruses since we are all caught in a viral chain of networks anyway. Information itself has become viral; perhaps not sexually transmissible yet, but much more powerful through its numerical propagation.

And so it does not take much work for Disney to scoop up reality, such as it is. "Spectacular Inc.," as Guy Debord would say. But we are no longer in a society of spectacle, which itself has become a spectacular concept. It is no longer the contagion of spectacle that alters reality, but rather the contagion of virtuality that erases the spectacle. Disneyland still belonged to the order of the spectacle and of folklore, with its effects of entertainment [distraction] and distancing [distance]. Disney World and its tentacular extension is a generalized metastasis, a cloning of the world and of our mental universe, not in the imaginary but in a viral and virtual mode. We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras [figurants interactifs]; we are the meek lyophilized members of this huge "reality show." It is no longer a spectacular logic of alienation but a spectral logic of disincarnation; no longer a fantastic logic of diversion, but a corpuscular logic of transfusion and transubstantiation of all our cells; an enterprise of radical deterrence of the world from the inside and no longer from outside, similar to the quasi-nostalgic universe of capitalistic reality today. Being an extra [figurant] in virtual reality is no longer being an actor or a spectator. It is to be out of the scene [hors-scène], to be obscene.

Disney wins at yet another level. It is not only interested in erasing the real by turning it into a three-dimensional virtual image with no depth, but it also seeks to erase time by synchronizing all the periods, all the cultures, in a single traveling motion, by juxtaposing them in a single scenario. Thus, it marks the beginning of real, punctual and unidimensional time, which is also without depth. No present, no past, no future, but an immediate synchronism of all the places and all the periods in a single atemporal virtuality. Lapse or collapse of time: that's properly speaking what the fourth dimension [la quatrième dimension] is about. It is the dimension of the virtual, of real time; a dimension which, far from adding to the others, erases them all. And so it has been said that, in a century or in a millennium, gladiator movies will be watched as if they were authentic Roman movies, dating back to the era of the Roman empire, as real documentaries on Ancient Rome; that in the John Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, a pastiche of a Pompeian villa, will be confused, in an anachronistic manner, with a villa of the third century B.C. (including the pieces inside from Rembrandt, Fra Angelico, everything confused in a single crush of time); that the celebration of the French Revolution in Los Angeles in 1989 will retrospectively be confused with the real revolutionary event. Disney realizes de facto such an atemporal utopia by producing all the events, past or future, on simultaneous screens, and by inexorably mixing all the sequences as they would or will appear to a different civilization than ours. But it is already ours. It is more and more difficult for us to imagine the real, History, the depth of time, or three-dimensional space, just as before it was difficult, from our real world perspective, to imagine a virtual universe or the fourth dimension [la quatrième dimension].