

The Visual Imagery of the Disney World: Between Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Postmodern cities are dreamed, dreamlike places that are not intended to house the individual, but rather to distract society. In this way and in the manner of Augé, they are a “non-place”, making them a place of transit and enjoyment through symbols and their own experience. The noise, the lights, and the succession of dark and luminous spaces, distract the visitor, making him wander from one side to the other, without a predetermined course. It will be necessary, in turn, to associate all these representative symbols of Postmodern ideology with the visual materialization itself, in order to meet the basic objective of these constructions, which is to create a city as an image of Postmodern culture and society.

Disney World is generally understood as a mere amusement park with the appearance of a fantastic city, however, its meaning goes further. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard considers the utopia of the Postmodern city to be, in fact, Disney World. In this sense, it does not represent the simple fantasy of a theme park since it cannot be false, it cannot be a lie because it is the model of a real idea, it is an idealized model, an image of society itself.

The aim of this article is to explore how society accepts the manipulation of Disney World through the different visual elements contained in it. But not only that, also the similarity and similarities of that world with American society itself and how Disney World exemplifies the heart of the American Way of Life, this being not only the exemplification of the American way of life, but also of how they should live, since this place is the reflection and image of their society.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Postmodernism, Aesthetics, Art Theory, Art Practice, Critical Theory.

Introduction

The interest in architecture as a sign opened up new possibilities, but curiously assumes the traditional position between the viewer and the object. It is also important to consider an approach that examines architecture in terms of urban experience as an environment. This refers not so much to tradition or discipline, but to a number of authors who put forward similar ideas that still go further and whose writings have often been used by historians and theorists. What they have in common is the concern for architecture as an experience of the user, inhabitant, not that of the architect¹.

One extraordinary example of how postmodern cities can be represented is the creation of themed environments². It is an ironic architecture represented with a strong

personality, not only in particular terms, but history and changing societies in equal measure. Thus, utopic cities, where individuals feel protected by society as a whole and an ideal environment around them, make them live in a lie, as if they were not living in the real world.

It could be said that the Postmodern city is represented by itself, since it functions as a sort of showcase for light, colour, and the cultural game played by its own architecture. During Postmodernity, cultural monuments are built in which form is the basis for tourists, rather than traditional forms.³

Visual elements in Postmodern Cities

Postmodern architecture is understood as the culmination of a social and technological transformation. In this way, you will move to a

¹ Rampley, Matthew. *Exploring Visual Culture. Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005, p. 103

² Gottdiener, Mark and Budd, Leslie. *Key concepts in urban studies*. Wiltshire: SAGE, 2005.

³ Reyner Banham. Los Angeles. *The architecture of four ecologies*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

new city understood by means of expression of the society that had inhabited the buildings of the Modern Movement and the International Style. In this sense, in postmodern cities the experience of the subject in the urban environment is more important than architectural language itself. Postmodernity seeks to accommodate all artistic expression that had previously been rejected during the Modern Movement for its rigid theoretical basis. Now, the "anything goes" is promoted in favour of creativity and artistic diversity since what is truly important is the experience of the subject.

The nature of the postmodern city does not intend to solve the urban, architectural and social problems as the Modern Movement wanted to do, but rather wanted to give a new meaning to the city. In this way, we can speak of a 'Postmodern carnality' moving away from functionality and seeking a reaction of the inhabitant to this new idea of city. A 'fictional city' will be created in the style of *La Société du Spectacle* (1967) by Guy Debord⁴, where images and visual culture will play a fundamental role in understanding the relationship between the individual and the surrounding urban space. Hence, the Modern utopia disappears, with the city now becoming a labyrinth of lights, signs and icons of the history of art reconverted as an architectural and urban attraction.

Urban spaces are created far from the historic centres, built deprived of history and memory. The person, therefore, cannot find a relationship between these cities, familiarity, and daily life, being detached from these new disproportionate constructions, with no personality. Society is bewildered in front of these future urban landscapes being just a mere observer of the city. They will no longer recognise their own city because of the modifications that it has suffered along the years. City Centres will be now rehabilitated as an attraction for tourists, it is an ideal city but not real as it is just a copy of the first city. Therefore, the inhabitant will lose the centrality of the city being forced to live on the suburbs trying to disguise the City Centre as a Thematic Park for tourists, infested with museums, leisure centres and hotels besides the proper historic centre with its spotless heritage.

In this way, the subject would participate actively in the architecture-urbanism correlation. However, and as will be demonstrated with the evolution of Modernity into Postmodernity, this utopian idea of city as an integrating element will not work because the individual does not seem to know how to interpret this language and pretends to take over it in a way that does not had been thought.

For the inhabitant to experience an urban reality, there must be an interaction with the surrounding space. Therefore, this subject must also establish a relationship with respect to the architecture of the place and its configuration in the city. Thus, the urban model presented as assimilation or systematic copying favors this interaction with the individual⁵. Time and space are presented as elementary issues when creating an urban space. In this way, we can speak of urban space as something temporary since it corresponds to memory, to the experiences previously lived by the society. For the same reason, spatial models are elements constructed by memory⁶. However, the individual is baffled by the postmodern urban landscape, thus making him a mere spectator of the city.

Urban models will be presented as assimilation or systematic copying favouring this interaction with the individual. This new city model is based on the copy in the simulacrum of reality itself. It is now eliminated the attempt to create its own architecture of the place, which confers identity to the city and the promotion of urban memory of society who inhabit is eliminated here. Thus, for the individual to experience an urban reality, there must be an interaction with the surrounding space. Therefore, this subject must also establish a relationship with respect to the architecture of the place and configuring it in the city.

Fredric Jameson defends the theories of assimilation of previous styles such as pastiche, something typical of the postmodern condition itself. Thus, during postmodernity, characteristic elements of other historical, artistic and cultural moments will be collected, to be interpreted as the reflection of contemporary society.

"The pastiche implies the imitation or, better still, the patchwork of other styles and, in particular, of their mannerisms and stylistic

⁴ Debord, Guy. *La sociedad del espectáculo*, Ediciones Naufragio, 1995.

⁵ González Cárdenas, María Margarita, Salazar Ferro, Camilo y Urrea Uyabán, Tatiana. "Re-correr la ciudad", *URBS Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 4, 2014, no 1, pp. 139-157, p. 145

⁶ Tudoras, Laura Eugenia, "Propuesta para una lectura postmoderna de la ciudad", *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*, vol. 13, 2006, pp. 129-141, p. 130

tensions. As different as they are, all these styles are comparable in the following: each of them is completely unmistakable; once you learn it, you are unlikely to mistake it for someone else."⁷

Therefore, pastiche demonstrates that stylistic and aesthetic innovation is no longer possible, dedicating itself entirely to imitating previous styles, combining them in such a way that they appear totally new, but at the same time recognizable. In this way, postmodernity seeks to enhance the message of those 'dead' styles, as Jameson describes them⁸.

Postmodernity advocates in this sense for a return of the previous aesthetic, making an amalgam of all kinds of styles that does not surprise the new postmodern consumer society at all, thus completely destroying the 'trans-aesthetic claims' of the previous moment; the Modern Movement⁹. For Jameson, the purpose of architecture and the postmodern city is to expand our own senses to new spatial dimensions, almost impossible¹⁰.

The city is now understood as a shopping centre, in which every symbol refers to consumption and leisure as a theme park. It corresponds in this sense with an amnesic space, ephemeral and dependent on the consumer society, losing its category of place as an anthropological space. We understand the consumption of architecture as distraction and leisure and so the architecture acts as a discourse in visual culture leaving aside technical facts and going into the philosophical path¹¹. The customer can pretend and simulate, being embroiled in an experience that is outside the modern context. This theory implies that themed environments work so well due to the fact that the public acknowledges that it is an artificial and ephemeral environment, saturated with metaphors. The visitors particularly enjoy this atmosphere when they recognize the created experience and the general way in which it is made. Some observers focused on the creation of themed environments as an example of the most important aspects of postmodernism in cities and regions¹².

Rem Koolhaas¹³ calls this phenomenon *junkspace*, an urban space built as a conglomeration of ideas, concepts and places. This space aims to please the individual through feigned and exaggerated elements: neon, casinos, and constructions that mix architectural elements of all ages with the intention of creating a new architectural style. All urban imaginary is given by the experience and history of the city and society, being in turn a composition formed by 'evocations and dreams'¹⁴.

As a result, *pastiche* shows that stylistic innovation is no longer possible and so the only way is trying to imitate previous styles, mixing them in a way that would look totally new for us, but perfectly recognizable at the same time. It is precisely what Fredric Jameson (2009) relates to the 'death of the subject', in terms of the new impersonal subjectivity that is now orientated towards a new aesthetic, organized around banal media entities¹⁵. These entities brought a brand-new changing and contradictory aesthetic experience that primarily seeks to faithfully represent contemporary society.

At this point, we can observe how the 'death of the subject' relates, together with the addressability that postmodern cities have on the individual, forcing him to live in a world prefixed with a completely changing and ephemeral aesthetic to which the subject must adapt by himself. A clear example of these partnerships is Disney World – an utopian and idyllic place where any contemporary subject is represented.

The creation of utopic environments: Disney World

We can talk about cities as spaces with a visual spectacle intended for society and the individual. These have to do with different artistic and cultural forms such as 'narrative languages, film shooting, literary creation and travel itineraries'¹⁶.

The decentralization of the person as an individual to make way for an architecture focused on capitalism, the image and the signs, can generate uncertainty and fear for those who

⁷ Jameson, Fredric. *El giro cultural: escritos seleccionados sobre el posmodernismo 1983-1998*, Buenos Aires, Manantial, 2002. p. 19

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 22

⁹ *Ibid* p. 136

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 27

¹¹ Rampley, Matthew., *op.cit.*, p. 103

¹² Gottdiener, Mark, and Budd, Leslie, *op.cit.*, p. 124

¹³ Koolhaas, Rem. *Junkspace*. *October*, 100, 2002, 175-190.

¹⁴ Carbonell, Carlos, 'Las ciudades como escenarios de la ensoñación', *Turismo y Sociedad*, Universidad Externado de Colombia, pp. 29- 39, 30

¹⁵ Jameson, Fredric, *op. cit.*, p. 208

¹⁶ Carbonell, Carlos, 'Las ciudades como escenarios de la ensoñación', *Turismo y Sociedad*, Universidad Externado de Colombia, pp. 29- 39, 30

inhabit it and relate to it. This fear is caused not only by physical violence - something innate in all societies - but also by the loss of space-time coordinates, the creation of new spaces, where the person still does not understand how to relate since there is no desire for familiarity¹⁷. This is why the need arises to embark on spaces that are friendly to the individual and society, where they can relate and feel safe.

In a strict sense, we call utopia a non-existent place where we do not find any kind of problem, be it political or social¹⁸. According to this idea, Postmodern architecture questions the architectural utopia of the International Style where Modern architects pretended to create a rigid architectural order dictated by the structural rationality of the human condition. In this way, they believed that the structural planning of the space would lead society to a model behaviour¹⁹.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard develops the theme of utopia in his work *The Fatal Strategies*²⁰. According to Baudrillard, utopia is no longer something unrealizable, thanks to simulacra, and more specifically to hyper-reality, utopia can be found in various forms, but he exemplifies it in American society as a mode of simulation, one more form of hyperreality.

Baudrillard exemplifies this utopia in a way as 'real' as Disney World is. It cannot be false, it cannot be a lie, since it is the model of an idea²¹. It is an idealized model, parallel to the one that really exists, to the hyperreal, to the simulated. For Vázquez Rocca, there is the success of Disney World; the real appearance of an invented world. Not only that, but the similarity and similarities of that world with American society itself. In this way, Disney World would be the exemplification of the American way of life but trying at the same time to hide its defects, idealizing it in order to empower the 'real' country²².

It is precisely this idea of Disney World, a peaceful universe where nothing bad can happen, is created. This is the society of the spectacle - copying and improving the society in which we live, the society in which we believe. The creation of this process is encouraged by the emergence

of a Post-modern architecture that meets the needs of the people as social masses, hence creating cities that are not so, but that create their own reality. The value of the image in this respect has gone beyond the basic scope of reproducing reality. Thus, our society is now ruled by these forms and images, which are conceived away from their own model²³.

We are once again facing the deception of a society and a mass culture that deceives our common sense but does not deceive the sensitive senses. In this way, they make a utopian idea real in terms of simulation. They make us dream of an ideal world, which we can achieve, but that at the same time we could never reach. Thus, the new interiority of the city is exemplified through leisure venues since people walk through the complex or the shopping center without any sense other than to analyze and observe what is presented to us there; premises, shops, cafes, restaurants or people moving from one place to another without any kind of direction. In this way, these places become the new cities, urban networks under roof with the aim of housing the masses and facilitating their activity.

People particularly enjoy the experiences that come to something they recognize from their collective imagination and fantasies. Experiences of some other place can be created by a *virtual capital* that consumers derive from the media such as film and especially, television. One way that Disney creates its magic is using precisely these stereotypes which people respond without thinking, although no one has lived in the past, everyone knows how it looks like. Fred Beckenstein, senior designer of Euro Disney said in an interview: 'We do not try to design what really existed in 1900, but we are designing what people think they remember what existed'. In other words, for theme parks to work, their issues must be consistent with the knowledge of consumers.²⁴

Thematic settings work so well because people know they are in artificial settings saturated with metaphors: they enjoy conjuring up compelling fabrications, especially when they

¹⁷ Juaristi, Joseba. "El aire de la ciudad postmoderna: Identidad, espacio público, cultura y miedo", *La ciudad y el miedo: VII Coloquio de Geografía Urbana*, pp. 269-288, 272

¹⁸ Morente, José Julián, *Lo utópico y la utopía*, Barcelona, Integral, 1984, 103

¹⁹ Arenas, Luis, *Fanstasmas de la vida Moderna. Ampliaciones y quiebras del sujeto en la ciudad contemporánea*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2011

²⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *Las estrategias fatales*, Anagrama Colección Barcelona: Argumentos, 1991.

²¹ Perry, Nicholas. *Hyperreality and global culture*, Londres, Routledge, 1998, 79

²² Vázquez Rocca, Adolfo. "Baudrillard; Cultura, simulacro y régimen de mortandad en el Sistema de los objetos", *Eikasia: revista de filosofía*, no9, 2007, pp. 73 - 89, 81

²³ Ayllón, Manuel. *Arquitecturas. Papeles críticos sobre el oficio más viejo del mundo*. Madrid: Editorial Noesis, 1996

²⁴ Holtorf, Cornelius. *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture*, Altamira Press: Oxford, 2005.

recognize the experience created and the general way it is done. People enjoy the feeling that they are somewhere else in another time more than reality. The authenticity of this experience is supported by what is known as emotional realism. Gaynor Bagnall argues in 1996 that emotional realism is promoted by a desire for a genuine, fact-based experience. But people neither look for historical veracity in thematic environments nor do they care about their lack. They simply enjoy sensual stimulation and experience imaginary spaces²⁵.

The Disney heritage is clearly not real, but it has the virtue that much of the public loves it. People are not fooled into believing that these worlds are alternative to reality. They don't lead to believe that there are more periods than the present. Instead of insisting that themed environments provide illusions and hyperreality, it is more appropriate, therefore, to see them as 'quasifications' (according to sociologists Alan Beardsworth and Alan Bryman): they invite the visitor to experience it like if they were something else. The customer can pretend and simulate, being embroiled in an experience that is outside the modern context. According to this theory, themed environments work so well because people know that it actually is an artificial environment saturated with metaphors: they enjoy it especially when they recognize the created experience and the general way in which it is made²⁶. In fact, the relationship that is built between the visitor and the theme park becomes more than an experience, since the visitor becomes one more character in this Disney world²⁷.

Disney World mixes various themes and sources of inspiration in its aesthetics, these are futuristic, ethnic, fantasy and adventurous, among others, which suggests a conglomeration of anthropological ideas, in line with the plurality of American culture, or the Kitsch postmodern aesthetic. In this way, there are four different groups: fantasy, adventure, futuristic, and national-cultural²⁸.

The fantasy environment will use idealized versions and recreations of cliché in the popular imagination and culture, here characters such as

Mickey Mouse, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty would enter. Also attractions such as The Enchanted Mansion or Victorian houses as an example of architecture. In the case of adventure, we find Pirates of the Caribbean and Jungle Cruise, also more recently with Star Wars, which also joins the futuristic environment. With regard to the fourth component, the cultural one, Disney World represents different countries and civilizations such as 'Mexico, Norway, China, Germany, Italy, the United States, Japan, Morocco, France, the United Kingdom, and Canada Cruise'²⁹. In this way, Disney mixes well-known monuments from these sites and takes over them to represent them in a Disney way, thus finding examples of Aztec pyramid, the Eiffel Tower, Katsura Palace, the Venice campanile, the Temple of Heaven, and a Rocky Mountain landscape³⁰.

In Disney World there are three different subgroups or spaces within this particular world, these are Magic Kingdom, Epcot Center and Disney-MGM studios. These three belong to different spaces, well differentiated by their architectural style, aesthetics and predominant colors, being in turn separated by fences between them, leaving clear the delimitation between these three underworlds within the Disney fantasy³¹.

The aesthetics and architecture are always taken care of so as not to intimidate the individual. For example, at Disney World there are no skyscrapers as there would be in a normal city. On the contrary, the colors of the buildings and the shapes of the houses have a friendly and proportionate taste, making the visitor feel in harmony and at rest, despite the large number of people around them³².

On many occasions, this architecture of the Disney Park does not evoke a specific place or monument, but rather, shows an idea. One of these ideas represents the so-called Main Street of Middle America. It follows, in this way, the model of any existing Main Street in each town of the American nation: the houses of average height, the grocery store, other types of business, the Town Hall, the courthouse... all following an architectural style from the mid-19th century, in red brick and in aesthetic harmony³³. The reason

²⁵ *Ibidem*

²⁶ Holtorf, Cornelius. *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture*, Altamira Press: Oxford, 2005.

²⁷ Scalera, Marisa, *You're on stage at Disney World: An Analysis of Main Street, USA in the Magic Kingdom*, The University of Georgia, 2002.

²⁸ Berleand, Arnold, "The Critical Aesthetics of Disney World", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11 (2): 171-180, 2008, p. 173-175

²⁹ *Ibidem*

³⁰ *Ibidem*

³¹ Berleand, Arnold, *Op. cit.*, p. 176

³² *Ibidem*

³³ Scalera, Marisa, *Op. cit.*, p.5-7

why this is the representation that has been wanted to give to this Disney architecture is the relationship of tranquility and familiarity that the society feels towards it, also patriotism and the American, and the sense of community that unites each city in particular and the American nation in general.

This Main Street is represented in the Magic Kingdom part of the park, which was inaugurated in 1917 and that comes to represent the idea of cities in the Midwest of the country at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The inspiration for this representation has been taken from real places: Marceline in Missouri and Fort Collins in Colorado³⁴, but always adapting them to the Disney world and without having an explicit reference to any specific place because it does not pretend to be a specific place, but a fantastic and imaginary world.

Disney World also represents the epitome of consumer culture, very much in line, again, with the idea of American culture. Everything is designed for consumption within the park itself. From the cultural representations of the different countries that we have seen previously, to science or technology represented in the form of attractions. Furthermore, the Victorian friendly houses are actually restaurants or supermarkets³⁵.

Disney theme parks have themselves created distinctive signs within postmodern language. In this way they have managed to become an archetype or prototype of the language in which not only Disney is defined, but also all things related to it in a certain way. In this way 'Disneyland is defined in the Webster's New World Dictionary as 'a place or condition of unreality, fantasy, incongruity, etc.'³⁶. In this sense, Disney stops being a movie franchise or a park, to be an idea in itself.

The main idea of Disney is to create a place invented as a stage, but which in turn is kind to the visitor so that an immediate relationship is established between them. Therefore 'Disney World is neither a 'real' place, nor a simulation of a real place, but the simulation of a symbol and is therefore intended not for 'real' life, but for a temporary escape from real life'³⁷.

In this sense, Disney World does not represent the simple fantasy of a theme park as it cannot be false, it cannot be a lie because it is the model of a real idea, it is an idealized model, an image of society itself³⁸. For Baudrillard, the mass society is unable to resist the manipulation of the media. However, the media does not intend to oppress or repress society, but rather this society remains passive, accepting the manipulation as lawful. American society emerges in this sense as a cultural leader who drags the rest of the world, understanding this culture through television and film. Thus, society accepts the manipulation of Disney World; is a closed, limited and ideal community where nothing bad can happen. In this sense not only we accept this world, but also take it as an idealized model of society, parallel to the one that actually exists. The quality of the images copied from reality that come before us, becomes sometimes better than reality itself. In a normal city the walker can find beggars, thieves or any type of danger, however, this cannot happen in Disney World³⁹.

The value of the image in this respect has gone beyond that reproducing reality. Thus, our society is governed by the forms and images, away from the own model⁴⁰. The process of creating successful places is only incidentally about property development. It is much more like running a theatre, with continually changing attractions to draw people in and keep them entertained⁴¹. This involves the display of the images, raising them to a new way of decoration or ornament, detail or sign is now overstating to the maximum⁴², endowing with artistic and architectural category elements that previously lacked.

In contrast to this, we found a new way of representation that goes beyond the idealization set forth above as it is the critique of society through a grotesque and inhumane world. In this sense we have Banksy's Dismaland, an ephemeral city that presents itself as criticism of Disney World and its imaginary family and social happiness. The architecture that Banksy represents has to do with a postapocalyptic Disney World where the pure universe and clean architecture have gone giving way to a partially

³⁴ *Ibidem*

³⁵ Berleand, Arnold, *Op. cit.*, p. 176

³⁶ Scalera, Marisa, *Op. cit.*, p. 18

³⁷ Scalera, Marisa, *Op. cit.*, p. 11

³⁸ Perry, Nicholas. *Hyperreality and global culture (Social Futures)*. London: Routledge, 1998.

³⁹ Scalera, Marisa, *Op. cit.*, p. 20

⁴⁰ Ayllón, Manuel. *Arquitecturas. Papeles críticos sobre el oficio más viejo del mundo*. Madrid: Editorial Noesis, 1996.

⁴¹ Hall, Peter. *Cities of tomorrow*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 350

⁴² Françalanci, Ernesto. *Estética de los objetos*, La balsa de la Medusa: Madrid, 2010.

destroyed and blackened place where characters become grotesque, and attractions are a mere skeleton of the original constructions. Dismaland represents an entirely Postmodern image, to the point of *post-Postmodernism*, overcoming all the prejudices of contemporary society and taking it to a further step. It becomes a banal criticism of what it represents, exposing its signs to the maximum exponent; the grotesque element as a new aesthetic category. Hence, with this representation he seeks to identify contemporary society where individuals participate without realising it.

Conclusion

The architecture of postmodernity is characterized by the use of symbols that give meaning to artistic elements. However, it can also provide a banal, everyday life element of artistic category. Thus, surface and random elements found in a contemporary city in postmodernity are understood not only as artistic elements but also taken as representative elements of society itself.

The new cultural expression will bring a new and contradictory changing aesthetic experience that seeks to represent contemporary society.

That is where the idea of Disney World, a peaceful universe where nothing bad can happen, is born. This is the *Society of the Spectacle* that Debord described, the one that copies and improves society to try to make it better. In order to do so, postmodern architecture emerges to meet the needs of these individuals as social mass, creating cities that in reality do not comply with the requirements to be a real living and urban space, inventing their own reality.

This new perception of the visual imaginary, the iconography of Disney World looking at both social practice and theory, results in a different perception of previous researches, where the main focus has been on philosophical terms but leaving the practice of the society aside. As a result of this new conception of city and architecture in combination with social studies and anthropological approaches, we, as active participants, face timeless, amnesiac spaces with ephemeral aesthetics that trap the visitor into a new dimension. Nothing else makes sense, only what is around these spaces makes sense. It is an absence and meaninglessness in daily life terms, but truly necessary for the people in order to disconnect and escape from the obligations of the everyday experience state.

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